

## “With Hopes Pinned on God Alone”

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*First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN*

### **FIRST READING: Isaiah 63:15-17; 64:1-9**

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

### **SECOND READING: Isaiah 63:15-17; 64:1-9**

<sup>15</sup>Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. <sup>16</sup>For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. <sup>17</sup>Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage. <sup>18</sup>Your holy people took possession for a little while; but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. <sup>19</sup>We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—<sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup>From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. <sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

The first Sunday of Advent is a Sunday dedicated to “hope.”

Like most words, hope can carry a lot of different meanings. But in the world of Scripture, hope has a very specific content. In short, “hope” means having your heart and mind and body yearning for a future that only God can create.

It's as simple—and as complex—as that.

Because how does one know that our hopes are not just psychological pipe-dreams, magical thinking and building air castles? How do we know that hope is not just wish-fulfillment at work in us—the idea that because we want something really strongly, of course, we will hope for it.

Those are interesting questions to me, the psychology of hope. Human beings have a tendency toward either hope or despair, and in our experience, I suppose they are always somewhat mingled.

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Man never is, but always to be, blest.”

Alexander Pope wrote that in 1733, and he put to words the fact that we all know that we have hoped for things that have not happened—or not happened yet. So, we can wonder if hoping is just a way we try to avoid harsh reality. You may have noticed that “Man never is blest” is Pope's sentence cut down to its simplest.

Today, however, I don't think I will change anyone's opinion on whether to include “hope” in your list of human thoughts or emotions. I suspect that we will all keep hoping, and we will all question whether we ought to or not.

So, today what really interests me is the fact that some ancient peoples not only hoped, apparently in virtually the same way that humans always have and apparently always will, but they also hoped—in God.

They, in fact, lived and faced life “with their hopes pinned on God alone,” and that seems to me to be a very specific, very risky, but also very honest, way to live and to hope.

Because to pin one’s hopes on someone that one cannot see—that seems to me to either be the worst form of self-deception or pretending or fantasy wish-fulfillment, OR, and this is a big “OR” it requires courage and a way of “leaning forward” into life that intrigues and, to be honest, both mystifies and scares me a little.

I mean, it’s one thing to hope that our parents will come through as Santa Claus on Christmas morning, but surely everyone would and should shudder at the idea of going so far as to hope that there really is a Santa Claus, despite the letter from Francis Pharcellus Church to Virginia O’Hanlon some years ago in 1897. Although many would argue that “Church” (ironically enough as his last name) did get the better of the argument on that score. So is hoping in God, whom we cannot see, like hoping in Santa Claus? Isaiah, for his part today, would say, “absolutely NOT.”

But Biblical faith does go way out on a limb and argues that there is indeed Someone out there at work on human history, guiding and shaping and creating it, not out of human striving but out of divine love.

And, yes, that thought has always taxed people’s ability to believe, and we are not the first people to face that dilemma. Paul says about Abraham,

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Abraham obviously lived with the “impossibility of hope,” we might dare to name it. He looked at his own body and at his dear wife Sarah and could only draw one conclusion on the “wish fulfillment” front. If this is something Abraham dreamed up, it is time to wake up, grow up and give it up.

But the other possibility, that human life is impinged upon by hope—namely that there is Another at work in human history, this is the risky and challenging assertion of all Abrahamic faith: that there is a hope that is pinned on the God of hope alone, and this “hope” means having your heart and mind and body yearning for a future of promise that only God can create.

And the decision about whether religion, or at least of faith as it comes down to us from the children of Abraham is identified most clearly by this: It creates an outrageous hope in human beings who know too much to be naïve about the real world and about human beings—and this hope grips them, anyway.

The most basic experience of biblical faith is the fact that an all but inexplicable hope flames up in us, even as we see with our eyes all that should, by all odds, prevent this hope from being fulfilled.

Today we again hear this centuries-old claim that one both can and should place one’s hope in this God of hope, who promises to create a future that we did not dream up. In fact, we probably don’t even want it, when we first meet it, but finally this hope does something seemingly impossible in us. It changes what we most want, and then creates a yearning to see and experience and witness and join this hope that comes from God alone.

Here is what tells me that Isaiah isn’t just wishing upon a star. Because the future that the prophets claims that the God of hope is creating is not a fulfillment of human expectations but a contradiction of them. Rather than encouraging our self-centeredness, which is the core of most human hoping, the God of hope evokes a self-transcendence, a yearning for a world and way of life that is not my natural inclination.

My inclination is to seek a world that caters to my desires and my whims.

The God of hope seeks to lift my desires to a higher plane, and to dare to believe—trust with my very being—that there is a reality of love, of mercy, of justice, of compassion that is greater, more

powerful and more joy-giving, more human-affirming than all the dreams that human desires in and of themselves could ever create.

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

This is biblical hope, Abrahamic hope—for two reasons. On the one hand, it is being said at the very same time that Isaiah can describe the actual, on the ground, current state of Jerusalem this way:

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her— but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.

Ouch! Double ouch! There is going to be hope in this place? We may think we are mature and sophisticated because we are no longer naïve about how rough and harsh the human world can be, but Isaiah more than matches us in maturity. He lived through horrendous times, too, more than 40 years of it, at least. So, he is not dreaming. He has heard a hope that comes from a difference source, a hope from God alone:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Who would hope for such things left to ourselves? Blessing the whole world, a little child shall lead them, nations shall not learn war, any more. With human beings the tendency is to want the blessing for ourselves, for only the most powerful and self-confident to lead and to win whatever wars necessary to survive or advance the causes we think most right.

And here is the other mark of biblical hope. Not only would we humans never hope for such things on our own, it is also clear, even to the people like Abraham, that no one on earth will ever be able to make such visions of hope become reality.

These visions require that Someone other than ourselves alone be at work in human history, and in a completely unexpected and transforming way. In ways that call our egos into check, not expand them with visions of our own greatness.

And yet, when we hear the words of this hope, even if they sound strange and impossible, people with crystal clear knowledge about human beings were gripped by this hope. And even I, a natural skeptic, when I hear these words, I know they are more than just fantasy, or wishful thinking. This is real hope—and I know it. My life has been gripped by an outrageous, all but inexplicable hope that I never dreamed of, and if you search your own heart and mind and body, I believe yours has been, too. And that is largely the reason any of us keep on keeping on as much as we do, especially as Christians.

So, here we find ourselves as human beings in an unexpected situation, as far as our human desires are concerned. The most natural thing in the world is for me to want God to be Santa Claus, to give me what I want. I grow impatient when God does not do what I ask—only to then be met by the words of the God who shows me a very different hope right and calls me to trust in it more than what I set out to want and to have.

I am invited to take a blessing that falls on the whole world, a salvation that included sinners and a world in which I am not the center and my normal ways of "winning" are off the table.

And yet I want this hope.

Which finally means that I want this God, this God of hope, this hidden God, Isaiah calls him.

"I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him."

“Truly, you are a God who **hides** himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.”

This God of hope is about the creation of hope, a future that is above us and beyond us, but is altogether “for” us. It affirms life, and yet it resists our egos, while winning our hearts and minds and bodies.

And we come to pin more and more of our hopes on this “odd God,” who does not play ego games. God, in fact, is only going to get one thing out of all this hope. It is not much of a prize. God gets us.

Indeed, rather than dominate us with a divine ego, this God hides so that we may seek God and learn to trust the hope that this God creates. We will never lay hands on this God or turn this God into a genie or an idol. This God is the God of freedom and of self-forgetful love, the God of joy who finds genuine and deep joy in loving and in blessing, all without an ego rush.

This God does not say, “Look at me, look at me!” Instead this God, evokes a hunger and a longing and yearning in us for love and then draws us gently but relentlessly toward a hope that is above hope, a love that is above love, a future that is beyond our most far-reaching dreams.

And our hopes become increasingly drawn out into a hope that we know is not possible with us alone—no, all faith remains like Abraham’s. We know that it is not possible in the world of human achievement. We are clear on that, but we hope for it, anyway, because a vision of love has caught us and inspired us.

And it goes so far, that we hope against hope, even when it does come when we think it should, in the ways we think it should. But with a hope that is not our own doing, we also begin to realize that it will not come by our own doing or on any time schedule but its own.

And so our own personal hope becomes as outrageous in its boldness as the outrageous hope that has gripped us.

“But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself. we transgressed,” Isaiah laments to God. Did you really expect us to turn into better people without you, God??!! Our only hope is in you!!

This is more than most nice, neat religious sentimentality can stand. God is righteous, so we are supposed to be. And if we fail to be, it’s just our own fault.

But neither the psalm reading and Isaiah are religious sentimentalists. They are people who pin their hopes on God, in good and in bad, when we are most in tune with God and when God feels distant, when we feel the most holy and when we feel utterly and hopelessly sinful. The whole meaning of hope, that in every way imaginable our hopes are pinned on the God of hope, whose compassion is greater than any we would ever dare conceive or affirm, whose love is greater than our sins, even though our sins strike deep at the heart of the God of hope.

No, in hope, against hope, we hope in the God of hope, and we yearn for a future that only this God can create.

If people say it is impossible, we can readily agree. We are, to say it again, always with Abraham. The human hope of creating, of ourselves, this outrageous hope is dead and gone.

But Abraham had a son, and the power of the hope inspired by the God of hope still rises up in human hearts, even though this hope is not our original dream or desire. It rises up despite the fact that we cannot lay claim to this God’s presence and anchor our own egos in this God’s ego, as if God is simply here to prove that God is greater and better than anyone else. No, the God of hope seeks hope for everyone, even those who are sinners, even those I want to call my enemies. God’s hope includes those, especially those, who are sinners, weak and seemingly hopeless.

For the God of hope also yearns in God’s own heart for this future that only God can create, all so that God can bless us and bring us home.

And this God promises to do just that, and without use of worldly power, has set about to do just that. And the fact that we are met with hope, despite all the reasons to abandon it, and this hope speaks to the real world of all us sinners, and to the real me and you—well, that is a reminder that hope will not let us go, for the God of hope will not let us go, either.

This is the hope on which Christmas is founded. Hope for the world we know, despite ourselves, with our hopes pinned on the God of hope, and the God of hope alone.

Dear friends, trust the God who has gripped your life with outrageous hope. Trust this God and this hope, come what may. All the prophets say so. Abraham and Moses and Mary and all the apostles say so. And if you listen, even with your knees knocking and your voice trembling and your sins still showing, you’ll still hear it. Your own heart says so.

So, then trust in God. Be at peace. Take heart. Rejoice. Hear the Good News. The hope that even you and I find it hard to believe—that hope is real, and so is the God creating it. Amen.