

## I. Intro

### A. Did you hear about the zoo that mounted a special exhibit during the Xmas season?

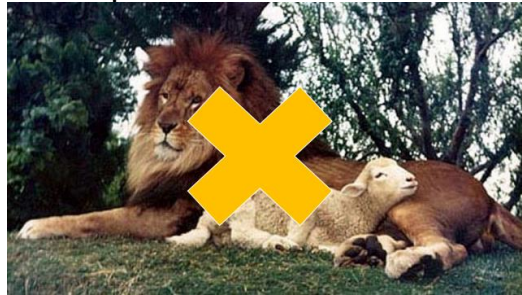


*They put a lion and a lamb in the same cage together. This unusual pairing brought visitors by the thousands. A reporter asked the zoo director if having such different animals in one cage presented any problems.*

*"Not really," the zookeeper replied. "Of course, we have to put in a new lamb every couple of days."*

### B. The prophet Isaiah points us to a beautiful scene of hope and peace, but the realities of violence and evil and sin keep breaking into our lives

1. Right now some of you may be saying, much like pastor Cindy did last week in her sermon, "Well thank you, Isaiah, for that lovely image ... now can we get back to real life? I'm running out of 'lambs' to put in my cage."
2. I don't know about you, but I confess I have often struggled to feel hopeful in the last several months



## II. Plenty of reasons for hope to feel quenched this year

### A. For some, it's hardships and losses lately in personal life

1. Maybe a debilitating accident, or a stroke, or that ugly C-word (cancer)
2. It may be an excruciatingly slow recovery from surgery ... or an extended illness that keeps them functioning at reduced capacities

3. Sometimes a friend or loved one has made bad decisions or lifestyle choices that leave us very discouraged about their future
4. For some of you right here, it's the death of someone who was very close to you, especially if that person died far too young
5. In fact, sometimes Christmas reopens a grief wound for someone who should be with us at Christmas but isn't

**B.** As a pastor here, I'm happy to tell you that the state of this congregation does not make me feel hopeless! There's a lot of health and vitality going on here ... **But for some people, the context of church life beyond our congregation does make them lose hope**

1. After painful splits and departures in recent years over issues of sexuality and the Bible, I think MCUSA is about half the size that it was when it formed 15 years ago
2. And unfortunately our own conference is not immune ... the number of our congregations has also dropped by 43% since 1990

**C.** For many many people, what threatens their hope is not their personal hardships or changes in the broader church **but events in the world today ...**

1. The spiraling violence in Syria, Yemen, the Congo and many other places around the world
2. The alarming evidence of climate change that is already hurting poor and vulnerable communities
3. A cheapening of the value of human life, both the unborn and those already with us
4. And clearly affecting many of us right here are the recent elections in our divided country, revealing millions of people who were silently resentful before or who are angry and despairing now
5. And let us not forget the large swath of neighbors of color here in Elkhart County who are more than discouraged ... they fear for their very lives & safety

**D. So it's easy for many to ask, "Why should I feel hopeful this Christmas?"**

1. Why indeed?
2. After reflecting over our texts from Isaiah 11 and Romans 15, I want to share with you 5 sources of hope I find in this Advent season

### **III. Sources of Advent hope this year**

#### **A. The promise of a perfect world on the way**

Some years ago in the Drexel, MO *Star*, John Gratten gave a description of what it would be like

Text: Isa. 11:1-10; Rom. 15:4-13

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to live in a perfect world. Here are a few of his thoughts:

- In a perfect world ... persons would feel as good at 50 as they did at 17, and they would actually be as smart at 50 as they thought they were at 17
- In a perfect world ... pro baseball players would complain about teachers being paid contracts worth millions of dollars
- In a perfect world ... potato chips might have calories, but if you ate them with dip, the calories would be neutralized

1. A perfect world ... that's what the prophet Isaiah looked forward to as part of his Messianic vision from God

2. It is the testimony of both the Old and New Testaments that one day we will live in a perfect world

a) The Hebrew Bible looks forward to the reign of the coming Messiah; the Christian Bible ends with the promise of his return

b) When we are tempted to wallow in hopelessness, our Advent Scriptures call us to take those promises seriously –

God tells us that this bleak-looking world is not all there is!

God calls us to look toward not only the coming of Christmas, but also a world in which God's kingdom will come ...

a world in which people will live in peace & harmony together & Jesus Christ will reign over all

c) THAT is our 1<sup>st</sup> and ultimate source of hope!

## B. Scripture itself

1. *Reread Rom. 15:4* ... Scripture is given to us to give us hope

2. Despite all the Xmas hoopla & the pressure to "be of good cheer" all the time, we all know there will also be down times, even around Xmas ... The Bible serves as God's ever-ready pick-me-up for the times when we're down

3. Often I find that the times I'm discouraged and stay discouraged for a while are also the times when I've gotten away from reading God's Word regularly

4. Sometimes all it takes to turn me around back toward hope is a quick refresher of Bible verses describing what God has done, how much God loves me, & the good things God has in mind for me & for the whole world

## c. Christmas music & seasonal programs

1. *Tell story of being surprised by God at Epcot about 15 years ago:*

a) Powerful amazing worship experience @ "Candlelight Processional" Xmas program at Walt Disney World ...

Text: Isa. 11:1-10; Rom. 15:4-13

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- b) Brother-in-law sang in mass choir of hundreds ... full professional orchestra ... some specifically religious words about Jesus, including hearing Christmas passages from Luke & Matthew
- c) I was moved to tears w/ grand renditions of "O Come All Ye Faithful", "Silent Night" and the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's Messiah
- d) Sitting there in a world-famous mecca for secular entertainment, I did not expect to have a genuine worship experience ... but joy & spontaneous praise to an awesome God just flooded my soul
- e) I found hope and peace returning to my stressed mind and heart thru this one program, more than thru anything else in our time at Disney

2. Though Advent is still a time of waiting, longing & preparation, the great music of the season does draw us forward to regain hope ... it heightens our anticipation of this great event that changed history

3. I encourage you to do the reflecting & repentance to which Advent calls all of us: BUT also let some Christmas music bring hope into your weary mind and heart ...

- a) It may be at home or in the car
- b) Attend a special concert at one of the local schools or at Goshen College
- c) Show up early to church next Sunday to hear a Xmas prelude by our Waterford orchestra ... & then don't forget to come back Sunday evening, or you might miss out on "Sheep in heavenly peace"!

#### **D. A God who keeps leading & unifying God's church**

1. One of the greatest prayers in the Bible is in *Rom. 15:5-6* ... listen to this as my prayer for you

2. These verses remind us that we worship a God of steadfastness & encouragement

3. Also remind us that God desires harmony & unity for God's church ... a harmony & unity of Spirit & commitment, that doesn't depend on everyone believing and feeling the same things

- a) Just this week I joined some of our local Mennonite pastors in hearing a stirring call from Michael Gulker, an ordained Mennonite leader who is president of the Colossian Forum in Grand Rapids
- b) The Colossian Forum is a nondenominational organization whose mission is to help Christian communities transform divisive cultural issues into catalysts for authentic spiritual growth
- c) They have helped people young & old, from churches, schools and colleges, to create worship-filled spaces for Christ-honoring conversation on divisive topics such as human origins and sexuality ... some of the very things that make cynics among us feel hopeless
- d) I found myself getting excited, and yes maybe even a tad hopeful,

when I think about the prospect of church being a place that doesn't run from divisive topics but actually sees them as catalysts for spiritual growth

e) ... a place where maintaining deep, authentic relationships between people with opposing views is valued more highly than the need to "solve" wicked problems that the church has failed to solve for decades now

#### 4. Does this seem like an impossible pipe dream to you?

a) There are testimonies of young adults who had given up on church until conversations like this thru Colossian Forum revived their hope that an authentic, relevant church was not a fairy tale.

b) If it seems impossible to us that church could be a place that transforms the polarization of our times, I think it's only because we have allowed our imaginations to be captured ... We've surrendered our imaginations to a popular culture and media that tell us "If I win, you have to lose; and winners and losers can't be friends."

c) When somehow there is harmony in God's church, not only do its members feel hope, but by the church's very existence it gives hope to the world

d) I would love to see us at Waterford pursue some Colossian Forum activities that would move us toward a unity in Christ that is more than uniformity ... and more than mere tolerance of each other

### E. God made us outsiders into insiders

#### 1. Most of us take Christmas for granted, but you know what? We don't deserve Christmas!

a) God loved us so much that God went to extraordinary lengths through Jesus Christ to reach us Gentiles ... we who were not part of God's original special people

b) That became clearer when I read Rom. 15:7-12 in The Message ... please hear it in this paraphrase:

7-13 So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it! Jesus, staying true to God's purposes, reached out in a special way to the Jewish insiders so that the old ancestral promises would come true for them. As a result, the non-Jewish outsiders have been able to experience mercy and to show appreciation to God. Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do! For instance:

*Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn-sing; I'll sing to your name!*

And this one:

*Outsiders and insiders, rejoice together!*

And again:

*People of all nations, celebrate God! All colors and races, give hearty praise!*

And Isaiah's word:

*There's the root of our ancestor Jesse, breaking through the earth and growing tree tall,  
tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope!*

Text: Isa. 11:1-10; Rom. 15:4-13

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Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

2. Christmas comes around every year but we take it for granted, as if it were our right ...

- a) We assume everyone gets something in their stocking, so we jokingly ask people if Santa will leave them just a lump of coal
- b) But God didn't have to send us a baby King ... a Savior

3. We don't deserve Christmas!

- a) We are not entitled to Christmas at all, (the best pleas of Kohls and amazon.com notwithstanding)
- b) The good news is that, despite how we clutter up Christmas with crass commercialism and centuries of cultural traditions, God gives it to us anyway!

#### IV. To conclude

**A.** As soon as you leave church today and check your smartphone, TV or newspaper, **our junky jaded world will assault you with bad news**

**B. Does hope seem hard to come by? Remember these 5 hopeful things:**

1. God has a perfect world in mind. What we see isn't what we'll eventually get.
2. The Bible was given to us precisely to give us hope. This resources is always available to us.
3. The beautiful Xmas music we've inherited over the centuries is God's gift to us. It has power to lift hearts and instill hope, if we make space for it.
4. God is working toward a harmonious and unified church. God will not abandon God's church.
5. Xmas comes only by God's grace, even though we may think Xmas celebrations and Xmas presents are our birthright.
  - a) But let's remember that Jesus gave up his celestial birthright.
  - b) He did it so that by his birth, life, death & resurrection we might be made right with God

**C. Friends, if that doesn't give you hope, I don't know what will! Let me close with the words of Rom. 15:13 again as a prayer**

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

Amen.