

*Advent Devotions
2018*

*Written for the congregation of
Antioch Baptist Church*



Hope Flowing from Trust

This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.¹⁰ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence.¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.¹³ So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."¹⁴ So make yourself an ark of cypress^[c] wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out...²² Noah did everything just as God commanded him. Genesis 6:9-14&22

Do-over! How many times can you remember playing kickball as a child and someone completing strike three and shouting "do-over!" I remember thinking, "Is that a real thing?" But as a child, if you can have a ghost-man holding down third base when you're short a couple of players, then "do-overs" seem reasonable. But as adults, do-overs seem less reasonable. We get stuck, hopeless, and down-and-out because we believe our chance for do-overs are long gone. But the truth is, we do not serve a one-shot-Savior.

Imagine being Noah about to start the biggest do-over of all time. God had given him the task of starting the human and animal population all over again. He had two choices: Trust and obey or doubt and do nothing. But like the lyrics of the Crystal Lewis song, "God's been good to me, oh God's always been good", Noah chose to trust because God is good. Out of that trust was born hope. Hope in the face of an unimaginable task; hope in the plan that God had set before him; hope that the animals would come; hope that when the waters rose, so would the ark.

Isn't it ironic that the two greatest do-overs in human history basically took place primarily in barns? Noah's was the immense floating menagerie but our second rescue, the one that would be for once and all time, also took place in a barn of sorts, perhaps a lean-to on the side of a house or even a cave that had been repurposed for housing livestock, either way, there was a manger and a miracle and a rescue, not from water this time, but from sin.

Do-overs still happen when God's people humble themselves. When we recognize that we are small and God is big and capable of doing "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" therein we will find our hope. When we trust and obey as Noah, Mary and Joseph did, we will find that miracles do happen in impossible circumstance for in the words of the Angel to Mary "nothing is impossible for God". Your do-over is waiting; hold onto hope.

Prayer: Holy God, help us to learn from your rescues. You have proven again and again that you are good. May we humble ourselves, trust and obey and then hold out hope that your offer of forgiveness and do-over is for us all. Amen

Hope in the Waiting Place

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. Isaiah 64:1-4 (NIV)

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

Sarah had waited. She had endured the whispers, the stares, and the disappointments. She had waited for a child, the sign of God's favor. She was meant to be part of a partnership that would birth generations of "God's people"; blessed generations of the covenant between God and Abraham, but here she was...barren. It's not as if God hadn't promised. He said it would happen. She had laughed, and God had made it clear that this was no joke and that she would bear a child. But now Sarah was in the waiting place. She held tightly to God's promise in her heart and all the while her arms were empty of a child. Have you ever been there? Dr. Seuss, apparently, knew this place well when he wrote:

The Waiting Place

Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come,
or a plane to go or the mail to come,
or the rain to go or the phone to ring,
or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting.

So many of us have been in the "Waiting Place". Sometimes it turns into the "Giving Up Place" or the "I Know Better Than God Place" or even "The Scared Place". But like Sarah, perhaps God has put us in the waiting place to make it clear that his goodness is not on anyone's timeline but his own. While we wait we hope. We hope for our own kind of miracle, or perhaps for a rescue. And while we hope we cling to that scripture that says: "*But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*"

And somehow, along the way, the more we hope, the more we trust and the more we wait, and IF we do not give up...we are renewed. We are given strength for the journey and for the waiting. We are given wisdom and we learn painful patience, and it is then that the answers come, the wait ends, a promise is fulfilled or a prayer is answered. Perhaps not in the way that we would have imagined but according to God's perfect plan. The wait gives us strength for what is to come. It gives us appreciation for what we have been given and it gives us a message of God's goodness for those who are still in "The Waiting Place".

Prayer: Jesus our souls wait in hope for you. Help us to gain wisdom and endurance in this sometimes-painful place so that we might have the strength to serve you better. Amen

Hope Is Alive

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

*2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,*

the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;*

*4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*

*He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*

*5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*

Life is not always fair. That is something that most of our parents taught us from a very young age. There will always be people who for whatever reason don't like us, bully us and belittle us. There will always be the very poor among us. There will always be people who exploit others for their own selfish gain. But here the prophet says that the Messiah is coming to turn all of that on its head. He will bring about righteousness for the needy and give decisions for the poor. With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

The Messiah has come! His long awaited judgment was fulfilled in Jesus. When we think about his teaching, his healing and his rebukes, we find him as an advocate for love, and advocate for the poor, a voice of patience for some and with his lips he eviscerated the argument of the hard hearted by a call to examine their own sin and then cast the first stone; to ask if their neighbor could look differently from themselves personally, and to lay out the clear motives of the underhanded leadership at the time. His words brought hope alive to the masses. It was relatable and achievable; hope was on the way!

That same message of hope is alive in us when we use Jesus as our example. When we love who he loved; when we advocate for the poor and needy; when we refuse to judge others for the speck in their eye when we have a plank in our own; and when we recognize our enemy is our neighbor, then Christ is alive in us and his ministry of hope continues.

Prayer: Wonderful Savior, may your hope be alive in me today as I seek to love, unite and serve amongst your people. Amen.

Hope is Binding

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Ruth 1:16

"The raven, or crow, was an essential part of the Vikings' navigation equipment. These land-lubbing birds were carried aboard to help the ship's navigator determine where the closest land lay when weather prevented sighting the shore. In cases of poor visibility, a crow was released and the navigator plotted a course corresponding to the bird's flight path because the crow invariably headed towards land."ⁱⁱ

The story of Ruth is the story of us. We are Ruth and we are Naomi. Within us all is the capacity for unbridled hope and devotion AND for unseeing, all encompassing bitterness. Ruth and Naomi had literally lost everything: their husbands, their livelihoods and their homes to war and famine.

In the midst of it all, Ruth does not give up and if you take the time to read the whole story you will find that Ruth practically drags Naomi kicking and grieving to hope and home. She just takes one right step forward and then the next, one step toward hope and then another. Had she been looking out for herself alone, perhaps Ruth would have picked one of a plethora of easier choices, but she had made Naomi her people. She had bound her life to that of her mother-in-law. Ruth was Naomi's Raven when she could not imagine a future with any kind of happiness. She was the raven that brought Naomi to her land and their kinsman-redeemer.

Who are your people? If God is our true God, are his people our people? Are we the Ravens pointing others to the solid ground of Christ? When the going gets tough are we Orpah, Ruth or Naomi? Hunger, want, war and famine are never more apparent than when placed in stark contrast to the celebrations of the Christmas season. Christmas is a time to bind. When we bind ourselves to one another and our hope to Christ, then our only choice is to take the next right step, to make the next unselfish choice that brings hope to the hurting all around us. What is that next step toward hope than you need take to pull yourself and others onward to Jesus?

Prayer: Jesus please help me to be a raven of hope, pointing the hurting and lost to you. Amen

A Thrill of Hope

¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain,²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. Romans 6:19a

If ever there were “A Little Hymn That Could” it would be “Oh Holy Night”. The priest of a church in France asked a local man, not particularly well known for his faith but more for his poetry Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure, to write a poem for Christmas Mass for his local Parish. Not a particularly religious man, Placide took some time to consider the request. As he rode on a stagecoach to Paris, he began to ponder the story of the Christ Child in Luke and tried to imagine himself as a witness to this miraculous event. By the time he reached Paris, he had completed the poem, but thought it should be set to music. He asked his friend Adolphe Charles Adams to compose the music and within three weeks “Oh Holy Night” was born and became an instant hit...until it wasn't.

Later after Placide declared himself to be a socialist and after discovering that the composer was a Jew, the Catholic Church banned the hymn. But although banned, the common people still sang their beloved hymn and an American writer John Sullivan Dwight brought the song to the states believing the verse "Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother; and in his name all oppression shall cease." spoke to his heart and beliefs on slavery, and published it in his magazine from whence it caught fire in America during the Civil War.

Years later on “Christmas Eve 1906, Reginald Fessenden--a 33-year-old university professor and former chief chemist for Thomas Edison--did something long thought impossible. Using a new type of generator, Fessenden spoke into a microphone and, for the first time in history, a man's voice was broadcast over the airwaves: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed," he began in a clear, strong voice, hoping he was reaching across the distances he supposed he would.

Shocked radio operators on ships and astonished wireless owners at newspapers sat slack-jawed as their normal, coded impulses, heard over tiny speakers, were interrupted by a professor reading from the gospel of Luke.

Fessenden was probably unaware of the sensation he was causing on ships and in offices; he couldn't have known that men and women were rushing to their wireless units to catch this Christmas Eve miracle. After finishing his recitation of the birth of Christ, Fessenden picked up his violin and played "O Holy Night," the first song ever sent through the air via radio waves. When the carol ended, so did the broadcast--but not before music had found a new medium that would take it around the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The words of this powerful hymn would not be put to shame, but rather serve as proof that God can use anyone, regardless of time, politics, religious views or even geography to bring about his glory. When we consider the “Thrill of Hope” that arises

from the Christmas story, how can we not share it? We have this hope within us...let us share it this season.

Prayer: Jesus, may we never lose the thrill of hope that we get from hearing the story of your miraculous birth and life. Amen

ⁱ Isaiah 40:31 NIV

ⁱⁱ <http://www.oldsaltblog.com/2014/07/crows-nests-part-2-floki-ravens-and-fighting-tops/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-nativity-story/the-amazing-story-of-o-holy-night.aspx>