

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2017

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel mike, and as he preached, he moved briskly about the platform, jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, getting wound up in the cord and nearly tripping before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks, a little girl in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, "If he gets loose, will he hurt us?"ⁱ Ah, here's hoping not.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and if you have not noticed, our theme is hope, taken from the *Letter of Paul to the Romans* and by metaphor from the *Gospel of Matthew*, where the hope of the world is imagined and born into the created order and into our hearts as well. The child that is born is called by several names: "Immanuel," or God with us, and "Jesus," from the Hebrew "Joshua," God saves. He was the one long awaited for by the Jewish people of his day, so too, he takes on the title of "Messiah," or the chosen one. By whatever name we know or call him, he also is the hope of the world, just like the words of the hymn that repeats the resurrection message, "For the love poured out. For the price of freedom. Let the whole earth sing. Hear the praises rising. We stand in awe. Of what You've done for us. At the cross. [You are] The hope of the world."

This is *a* hope, from a religious point of view. But it is not *the* hope, what most of us are considering daily in our thoughts and prayers. A Facebook friend of mine just lost her partner of twenty years to a long bout with cancer; I'm sure her hopes and dreams were different than yours or mine in the past few days. What did she hope for? I'm guessing relief from pain, that the world were different, that she wished to have had more time to spend with her beloved, that there would be a peaceful end, that they will see each other again in the life to come. All of which goes to show us that hope can be situational and personal. I wondered what type of poetry pours from the heart at the time of death. There are entire websites dedicated to hope upon our demise, or the end of the lives that surround us. Here is one poem about life and death and wishes and hopes from the webpage

Tears Fall Gently:

Tears fall gently, like the rain
quietly refreshing my soul
relinquishing all of my pain

Tears fall gently, like the dew
rejuvenating my spirit
with lingering memories of you

Tears fall gently, like a watery mist
releasing all of hearts sorrow
your blessed presence will be missed

Tears fall gently, without any warning
cleansing my mind of despair
from a troubled heart in mourning

Tears spurt quickly, like drops of fruit juice
freshly squeezed nectar from my eyes
my fractured heart is clearly of no use

Tears pour down, like a raging storm
washing away disillusioned thoughts
while blankets of hope keep me warm

Tears fall blown away, like in a typhoon
my life hangs on by a thread
darkness covers this heart with gloom

Tears no longer fall, as bright daylight suddenly appears
God comforts me with....love, wiping away all of my tears.ⁱⁱ

Yet hope does not ring only the death knell. Hope comes in many forms and formats. Recently I came across the Top Ten Things That People Want, and I was quite surprised. Here is the list (from 2014):

- *Having love in their lives*
- *Being healthy*
- *Having high paying jobs*
- *Looking better*
- *Losing weight and toning their bodies*
- *Learning new things*
- *Living longer with their families*
- *Being safe from perceived and real hurt, harm, and danger*
- *Being comfortable*
- *Having more pleasure to satisfy their appetite and desiresⁱⁱⁱ*

One would think that, given this list, we'd all be a lot happier, healthier, and comfortable, since these are what are primo when it comes to what we want for and in our lives. I'm good with all of them, but I think that probably only being healthy and being safe from perceived and real hurt, harm, and danger enter my thoughts and prayers on a daily basis. How about you? What makes your list?

Perhaps you need some inspiration, or someone/something to give you hope. Preacher Don Follis, in an article called *10 Great Ways to Give People Hope*^{iv} (why are there always 10? I don't know....), tells preachers that their congregants need to feed on the following list in order to aspire to greater and better things: In other words, we as pastors need to be preaching about Acceptance, Love, Appreciation,

Approval, Connection, Comfort, Encouragement, Respect, Protection, and Support. Of course, some of these speak to me more (comfort, encouragement, respect) than others (protection, approval). I would hope (there's that word again!) that my preaching, my presence, my years of experience would be of comfort to you should you need it. I would hope that the words I speak, my example of never asking that you do anything I would not do myself would encourage you. I would hope that the way I address you and demonstrate to you that I value who you are would make you feel respected. On the other hand, I'm not sure I can protect anyone well (including myself), and none of you needs to be assured of my approval (you already have it).

Of course, from a religious perspective, we might ask or ponder, "What would Jesus do?" How does his life, and his living Word in action today, give us what we need and bring us out of despair into light? "Writer Peter Scazzero is right in saying, 'Jesus modeled incarnating love when He took on flesh, entered our world and walked in our shoes. His love compelled Him to cross two worlds, heaven and earth, and live among us. In order for us to love others as Jesus did, we too need to cross into other people's worlds, enter life in their shoes, while holding on to our own world as well.'

[The theologian] Tertullian writes in *Apology* that the heathens said of the believers, 'See how they love one another.' Love compelled Jesus, and love remains the most compelling force in life. Cross over into someone else's world with real love. What you have to give may be the encouragement for which they have long been hoping."^v

So that is what we have been missing up to this point, isn't it? Love - - it is what most people are hoping for, if you ask me. There are all sorts and conditions of love. The ancient Greeks spoke of three: Eros (erotic love), Philios (brotherly love) and Agape (community love, the highest form of love, charity). The 19c. poet Christina Rossetti spoke of this agape kind of love in her poem (which has been set to music and is in many hymnals) called "Love Came Down at Christmas." Perhaps you are familiar with it. Published in 1885, it proclaims

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love shall be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.^{vi}

Is this what we hope for this Christmas, what we plead for, what we wish to gift to one another, what we want Christmas to signify? Hopefully so, yes...hopefully so.

I leave you today with the lyrics from the song *My Grown-up Christmas List*, made popular by the country singer Amy Grant. It is one of my favorites (perhaps one of yours also). It reads

"Grown-Up Christmas List"

Do you remember me
I sat upon your knee
I wrote to you with childhood fantasies
Well I'm all grown-up now
And still need help somehow
I'm not a child
But my heart still can dream
So here's my lifelong wish
My grown-up Christmas list
Not for myself
But for a world in need

No more lives torn apart
That wars would never start
And time would heal all hearts
Everyone would have a friend
And right would always win
And love would never end
This is my grown-up Christmas list

As children we believed
The grandest sight to see
Was something lovely
Wrapped beneath our tree
Well heaven surely knows
That packages and bows
Can never heal a hurting human soul

No more lives torn apart
That wars would never start
And time would heal all hearts
Everyone would have a friend
And right would always win
And love would never end
This is my grown-up Christmas list

What is this illusion called
The innocence of youth
Maybe only in our blind belief
Can we ever find the truth^{vii}

No more lives torn apart
That wars would never start
And time would heal all hearts

Everyone would have a friend
And right would always win
And love would never end
This is my grown-up Christmas list

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in God, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.javacasa.com/humor/sermon.htm>

ⁱⁱ Hamilton, Derek. *Tears Fall Gently* (2016) at https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems/about/death_hope_poems

ⁱⁱⁱ Tomkins, Rosalind. "What do you Want" at <http://blogs.tallahassee.com/community/2014/01/08/life-lesson-top-ten-things-that-most-people-want/>

^{iv} <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-how-to/146122-ten-great-ways-to-give-people-hope.html>

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/l/c/lcamdown.htm>

^{vii} <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/amygrant/grownupchristmaslist.html>