



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



The Gift of Hope

Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

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Scholars tell us that the prophet Isaiah was born around the year 765 BC. In 740, the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah began to preach. His words became immortal as he was one of Israel's greatest preachers.

Isaiah preached a message of hope. He was preaching to a people torn by conflict. He was preaching to a people whose lives and histories were torn by constant conflict and war. They sought hope and he spoke of a day when one would come and:

*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.*

He preached that there would come a time when there would be peace, no more war. His words were words of hope.

People of Isaiah's era were longing for a Messiah. They would wait around 740 years for the coming of the Messiah. To give you an idea of just how long this is, Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, 515 years ago. A long, long time.

Yet, the people waited. They lived through many years of hardship. More war. Feast and famine. Generation after generation of people listened and heard the words of Isaiah and had hope that one day the Messiah would come.

And 2000 years since the Messiah came and people still wait in anticipation of the second coming of the Messiah, the day when the words of Isaiah ring true and *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

We pray for and long for peace. And we do so with hope.

This day is the first Sunday in Advent, a time of preparation of Christmas. The season of Advent, and Christmas is a season when we remember that our one true hope in life is in Jesus Christ.

There is so much that can be said about hope. I just want to share two aspects of hope that are important to me.

Hope comes in the form of a promise. It is a promise that God never forsakes us.

Often we look at the Bible through a microscope to parse the meaning of words and phrases. At times, obviously, this is important.

But sometimes we need to step back and view the Bible in a wide sweeping vision.

The Bible tells a story of three big covenants between God and God's people.

There is the first major covenant between God and Abraham. It is simply a statement, "I will be your God and you will be my people." It is that simple; these are God's chosen people and God's choosing them is a promise by God to them.

The second major covenant revolved around Moses. God's chosen people are invited to live godly lives by following God's commandments. The promise is a mutual covenant.

The third major covenant is the final covenant with the coming of Jesus freeing people from sin and death. The promise of the Messiah and the promise of Eternal Hope is granted.

St. Paul writes in Romans 5, "*Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*" For Paul, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is what drives our hope.

Hope is a promise God makes to us.

Secondly, hope is not passive. Having hope is not the same as making a wish.

We make wishes all the time. We make a wish before we blow out the candles on our birthday cakes.

We make a wish and throw a coin into a wishing well. Most of these wishes are trite and soon forgotten. We don't act on them, we simply make our wish and move on. Hope is not like that.

In the Bible, the divine promise of hope does not ask us to sit down and wait passively for it to come about, as if by magic. Before speaking to Abraham about the fullness of life offered to him, God says, "Leave your country and your home for the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). To enter into God's promise, Abraham is called to make of his life a pilgrimage, to undergo a new beginning.

Luke writes a marvelous passage in Acts of the Apostles that speaks to this as well.

The apostles had spent a year or three with Jesus and listened to virtually every sermon he gave, witnessed every miracle, and met virtually everyone he met.

They had suffered through his arrest and crucifixion.

They celebrated with his resurrection and being with him as the Risen Christ.

Then, in Acts of the Apostles he ascends to Heaven. He is lifted up into the sky. They stand and watch. And watch. And watch.

Finally, Luke says it, two men in white robes come to the apostles address them:

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward Heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into Heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into Heaven."

It is the quintessential, statement. Why are you just standing there? If you are going to bring the message of Jesus into the world, if you are going to live out the promise, live out the hope that you have been given, you need to stop looking at the sky and DO something.

Perhaps hope can best be seen in a story.

A while back *Parade* magazine had the story of self-made millionaire Eugene Lang, who greatly changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem. Mr. Lang had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth-graders. What could he say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school? Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart.

"Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." At that moment the lives of these students changed. For the first time they had hope. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school.

They had been given a promise; but it was not a passive promise. They couldn't just stand there looking at the sky; they needed to move.

We begin the Season of Advent and we cherish the gift of hope.