

Advent Week 1: HOPE

In the first week of Advent we focus on theme of hope. We can both imagine and appreciate the hopeful expectation held by Israel for the coming of the Messiah while we also express our own hopeful expectation generated by faith in the Messiah who came at Christmas.

Hope is a consistent feature in Scripture, particularly hope for a Savior. As early as Genesis 3:15 God promised that a descendant of Adam and Eve (a human) would be stricken by the serpent but also crush the serpent. The bloody heel of this Savior would fall onto the head of the serpent. This one to come would do what Adam and Eve could not do, resist and defeat the enemy. This hopeful message was surely welcomed by those first fallen humans who felt the extent of the consequences of their sin yet found the promise of redemption by their loving creator.

Hope for a savior is further found in the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12. When God calls Abraham, God pronounces some particular blessings for Abraham's family but also a universal blessing in Genesis 12:3 when God promises that all families would be blessed through Abraham and his descendants. The universal curses of Genesis 3 would be addressed through universal blessings hoped for in Abraham's children, Israel.

Israel's hope would often be challenged and sometimes nearly abandoned. In Egypt, they hoped for a deliverer but doubted their delivering God in the wilderness journey from Egypt to the promised land. In Israel, they hoped for a conquering king and asked God for a monarchy only to find that their kings were often unfaithful and unsuccessful. Even David failed from time to time and suffered for it. When Israel's hope in God waned, they would turn to idols for help and place their hope in them rather than Yahweh. Ultimately this only brought destruction to all of Israel.

Finally, in defeat and exile, Israel's hope was renewed through the prophets who proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. Their message was that hope was not lost even in the midst of judgement of defeat because God will fulfill his promises. In Isaiah 11:1-10, the Davidic kingdom is compared to a tree that had been cut down. Only a stump remained but from that stump a living shoot would arise. Isaiah also proclaimed that this Messiah was for the weak and the wounded: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3). The messiah would saved restore the fire to smoldering wicks and bind up the wounds of bruised reeds. Thus, he was coming not after Israel became strong and victorious but in order to make Israel strong and victorious.

This hope is that which many Jews held onto in Jesus' day. They were expecting a greater father than Adam, a great ancestor that Abraham, a greater deliverer than Moses, a greater king than David, and

greater prophets that Isaiah and Jeremiah. This is the idea behind Peter's proclamation that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16). The coming of Jesus fulfilled the hopeful expectation of Israel.

Yet hope is still part of the life of believers today. We do not hope for Christ to be born, we believe by faith that he has already come. Yet we do have confident hope that the work Jesus set out to do when he came will be completed in us. We also hopefully expect him to come again to make the world as it should be forevermore. What we hope for is different than that of Israel but the source of our hope is the same. We hope in God.

Advent reminds us that we do not hope in vain. The hopefully expectation of Israel was finally fulfilled through the people passed through deserts, war, defeat, and exile until that day. Yet the hope to which they were called was not to taunt them but to encourage them not to give up their trust in God. Our hope is also challenged in the midst of difficult times and places. In spite of what we see happening all around we must not let go of the hope we have through faith. God has demonstrated that he is faithful.

Therefore, let us be a hopeful people. As we see the candle of hope flicker this advent season, let the flame of hope be reignited in us. It's not uncommon for the people of God to find themselves in places of hardship and suffering. Here the enemy will challenge our hope and try to replace it with fear, wrath, or despair. Remember you have a reason to hope, you have a reason to be confident, you have a reason to trust the promises made so long ago. Let the Christmas season remind you of the hope which you are also called to possess.