A Season of Hope
Pastor Jon Haakana

Each Advent, we gather around the wreath and remember that God came to us as a child. This first week we light the candle of Hope as we reflect on Christ as the only hope for our world. Just as one small candle begins our journey of Advent, a small flicker of hope can change the world around us.

Today we begin a series of messages leading up to the celebration of Christmas and the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ to earth. We are going to look at the 4 themes of Advent as represented by the 4 candles of the Advent wreath: hope, preparation, joy and love. Today we focus on hope. The word hope is very much like the word love - it is such an overly and misused word, so much so that I fear it has lost any value and significance. We say, “I wish I had a new car. I wish this (point to stomach) was smaller. I wish I were taller. I wish I would win the lottery.”

In our Gospel reading today we look to Holy Week and the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The people had anticipated the arrival of the promised Messiah for generations. As they hoped Jesus would be the One they had longed for, their expectations fell short because He was not the material Savior they had hoped for. They wanted a King, Jesus came as a suffering servant.

Genuine Christian hope does not focus on the temporary but rather on the eternal. It does not rely on the physical or material, but rather the spiritual. It is seeing promise or the glass half full.

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, “Eighteen to nothing -- we're behind.” "Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

Sometimes in life we simply need new perspectives, or gentle reminders that there is hope for better days ahead – that true hope depends on much more than this world and our circumstance alone, it depends on the focus and reason for our hope.

I. This Advent season is a season of hope for us because Christian hope is not based on circumstance, or a feeling, or fate, but upon a person. Jesus is the reason we have hope.

Without Jesus, all of mankind would be completely hopeless in escaping the consequences of our sin. All of mankind is guilty before God. “And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everyone else?” Romans 3:20 (The Message)
God gave hope to everyone that He would provide a path to Himself. “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

Immanuel means “God with us”. God himself was going to step into the world to provide the payment for the hopelessness of man. The birth of Jesus brought light into darkness. “The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.” Matthew 4:16

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” John 8:12 (NIV)

Darkness is the absence of light. We would not understand light if we didn’t understand darkness. Hopelessness is the absence of hope. We would never understand hope if we didn’t understand our desperate need for God. What are you hoping in? Good works? Doing enough?

As Vice President, George Bush represented the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest.

There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.

II. Jesus is the way we receive hope. Jesus is not only our reason for hope, but he is also our path to hope. It is through Jesus that our hope in God is realized. Jesus is God’s answer to our hopelessness.

“By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us – set us right with him, make us fit for him – we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand – out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.” Romans 5:1-2 (The Message)

God offered Jesus to us when we were completely separated from God. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this; while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8 (NIV)

It was in sacrificing Jesus that God gave us hope of peace with Him. Our hope in Jesus is secure because He is our lifeline to God. “This hope is like a firm and steady anchor...
for our souls. In fact, hope reaches behind the curtain and into the most holy place. Jesus has gone there ahead of us, and he is our high priest forever……” Hebrews 6:19-20 (Contemporary English Version) The curtain represents the wall between God and man. But through Jesus that wall was eliminated and we are able to have peace with God.

Pastor John Piper puts it this way:
If we only knew it, every one of us is stranded on an ice face in Greenland, and the wind is blowing fiercely. Our position is so precarious that even if we inhale too deeply our weight will shift and we will plunge to our destruction. God comes to us and says in that moment, “I will save you, and protect you from the storm. But there is a condition.” Your heart sinks. You know you can’t meet conditions. Your face is flat against the ice. Your fingernails are dug in. You can feel yourself giving way. You know that if all you do is move your lips you’re going to fall. You know that there is nothing you can do for God! Then he speaks the gospel command: “My requirement,” he says, “is that you hope in me.” Now I ask, is this not good news? What could be easier than to hope in God when all else is giving way? And that is all he requires. That’s the gospel.

III. Genuine Christian hope is also bold – not passive. Authentic Christian hope is daring. Hope is like fuel for courageous living. Hope has little to do with the passive wishing for ordinary things and everything to do with radical faith-filled action.

Consider for just a moment the kind of life that Jesus lived during His earthly ministry. Jesus taught those in need of instruction, fed those who were hungry, healed the sick, defended the weak, consoled the oppressed, served humanity, won souls, was an intercessor on our behalf – to name but a few!

The Christian life is a life of action! Genuine Christian hope does not wait for tomorrow to see what may become of those in need. Authentic Christian hope seeks opportunities to bring hope to those who are lost in hopeless circumstances.

From *Parade* magazine comes the story of self-made millionaire Eugene Land, who greatly changed the lives of a sixth-grade class in East Harlem in New York City. 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? He wondered how he could get these predominantly black and Puerto Rican children even to look at him. 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.

Conclusion:
So today, where is your hope? Do you trust Jesus, the true meaning of Christmas to provide your way to God? Are you resting in him for your eternal life and your rescue from the sins of this life?
As a follower of God, are you placing your trust and hope in Jesus? Are you experiencing true hope in the only Son of God during the hard times of life? Today, you can begin to experience the true meaning of Christmas by placing your hope in Jesus, “The Hope of Christmas.”

And finally on this first Sunday of Advent when we light the first candle on our wreath, the candle of hope, I invite you to look for opportunities to bring hope to the hopeless. It may start as a meal, or a gift, or a random act of kindness, but it can become an introduction to only the source of lasting and eternal hope for them – Jesus Christ, our Lord. In His name, Amen.