

# I Believe in the Sun: Hope for Tomorrow

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Good morning. Today's scripture reading is taken from the book of Isaiah and the book of Mark. The first reading is Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 through 11.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling, in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all the people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry out. And I said, what shall I cry? All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

[ 1 : 1 1 ]     The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up. Do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God.

See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd.

He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young. And the second reading is from the book of Mark, chapter 1, verses 1 through 8.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.

[ 2 : 1 7 ]     A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, confessing their sins. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

And this was his message. After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

This is a word of our Lord. Thank you, God. So let's pray together. Almighty and gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift that is today.

The ability to be together. The ability to pour our hearts in worship. Singing to you. Praying to you. Hearing your word. And our Lord, with our hearts open, we pray that you will fall fresh on us.

[ 3 : 28 ] That you will give each heart what you know it needs. That we will go into the world as people who bear your hope. Those people who share your light. And that the world may see and be drawn to you.

In Jesus' name we pray and ask. Amen. So week one of Advent. And we are talking about, specifically today, the idea of hope.

So now that we have entered into what is officially the Christmas season, that means some other things have started. So how many of you have already encountered your first Grinch this Christmas?

Yeah? A few. A few. We've all hit that grumpy, Grinchy person already, right? Person doesn't feel like they in the spirit at all. That you are coming and you're bringing what bit of joy you have.

And you're already starting to feel that little something stirring in your spirit. And here they come and they're just kind of bringing that mood with them. Kind of just wanting to step on whatever it is you got going.

[ 4 : 35 ] Now, the thing about those Grinchy people is as you try to reflect the light of God into the world, thing is they might be sapping some of what you're bringing to the table.

Right? So if I was to ask you, compared to this Grinchy person, you know, what do you think your level of Christmas is right now? Do you think it's high?

Like on a scale of 1 to 10, would you put yourself up there? Or is it a little lower? Now, hopefully some of y'all that were here last night, you should be flying, right? But I'm not looking, I'm not seeing a lot of faces out here that suggest that we are on fire with the Christmas spirit.

Now, here's the thing about this. If your hope level is really low, if your Christmas spirit is all that high, you may be that Grinchy person. Don't all do that to me.

Y'all know that's true. You know, it's easy for us to spot it on other people. The question is, you know, what do we actually bring into the table? And that's why we need to take this journey.

[ 5 : 40 ] You see, this series called I Believe Even When is important for us. Because this world we live in, of course, is really good for robbing us of those feelings.

We look around our world, we see situation after situation. We have, of course, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the war that's happening in Israel. You've got a situation in the Congo that no one is talking about.

All of these global crises that are getting to us, not to mention the economic things that are closer to home, the political tone that wears on us so heavy. We see so much happening in terms of our local news with gun violence and other challenges.

It's easy to get beat down. And notice, those are all the external things. Think about what's happening in your own individual walk. You don't have to recall too hard.

You don't have to think with a whole lot of energy with the challenges that are immediately before you. You think about job things. Think about relationship things.

[ 6 : 41 ] Think about financial things. It's not hard at all. And the world can steal that joy. The world can steal that peace. The world can steal the thing we're talking about today, which is our hope.

And our challenge is, as we said, not to turn into them Grinchy people. Because those of us who profess Christ should be the exact opposite of that.

But the hard part is, is with the stuff that we already talked about during prayer time. Those things that we know in our news and we see happening in our social feeds. It's easy for us to slide into that place.

So what we need to make sure of is that we don't become those people. Like I said, if your level is real low right now, you're not feeling very hopeful.

You're not feeling that sense that's supposed to come with this time of year. That's why we're talking about this thing. You see, this idea of hope, especially for disciples of Jesus, can be tricky business.

[ 7 : 51 ] Because it's easy to profess hope. It's easy to say that. It's easy to say it and doing the best we can even mean it, right? Because for many of us, what we'll say is, well, yes, God is there.

And God is God. Therefore, I have hope. And that's not a wrong statement. I think the challenge for us is how do we make that much more real in our lives?

Because we can say those words. But the challenge is, are they making any sort of difference in how you move through your day? Because that's where we need to get to.

You see, in the scriptures we read, we kind of find our problem. Because that passage in Isaiah that you heard Amy read for us today, talks about comfort.

Comfort my people. Now, what most folk don't get about that is you may not be aware of that historical context, right? Isaiah is writing to the nation of Israel. Now, if you can, put yourself in the shoes of somebody who would have been a part of that nation at the time.

[ 8 : 57 ] They had seen their country literally overrun by a foreign power. That their capital had been destroyed. Their temple had been destroyed.

And many of the people were literally paraded across the desert back to the homeland of that conquering power and forced to live there in exile.

Many of you have heard in your Bible studies about the exile. That's what we're talking about. And that's who that's written for. And if you're a person in this, remember, you've been raised on the stories of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.

You've been raised on the stories of God sending the plagues and liberating people from slavery. You've been raised on the stories of conquering the promised land because we are God's people.

That's your history. That's your faith. And yet, here you are in this foreign land, subject to the powers of these other people who don't believe what you believe. Where's your hope now?

[ 10 : 10 ] And yet, the message from God is comfort. Comfort, comfort my people. Talk to Jerusalem, meaning the nation of Israel. Talk to Jerusalem and tell them that their penalty is paid.

And you hear the rest of it, how it says, you know, God is moving. God is coming. This is over. Your God is at work.

In other words, it's time for you to get back in touch with the source of hope. Think about what we heard in Mark.

You see, the nation of Israel at that time was in also a pretty challenging place. Now, the thing about Mark is Mark is the gospel writer who writes first.

And where we are here is, remember, as Jesus is born, that there had been this time period that we called the silent period.

[ 11 : 07 ] That we don't really have any record of God moving in the same way that we saw in the Old Testament, between the end of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus.

And that period is about 400 years. Now, that doesn't mean anything didn't happen. But I want you to think about what happens to people when you don't have that kind of interaction, when you're not getting those kinds of messages.

And all of a sudden, you're just dealing with problem after problem, thing after thing. And it feels like God is just nowhere to be found, nowhere to be heard. And then you've got all these fools running around like fake prophets and people who believe they're the Messiah and all this stuff popping up.

And you can see it's not true. And the question becomes, where's your hope now? And into that, God sends John the Baptist.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Says, God is moving. God is here. Remember, when John is sending this message, Jesus is here.

[ 12 : 14 ] He's just not in his public ministry yet. But the people, where's your heart? How jaded, how cynical, how devoid of hope might you be if that was your reality?

You know, maybe you can't even hear what John is saying. And see, the thing is, as we hear those messages, whether it's Isaiah, whether it's Mark, doesn't that sound kind of familiar?

We think about where we are right now. With all this stuff weighing so heavily on people's hearts and minds. We get to this point where we think that, well, I'm not hearing a whole lot.

I'm not seeing a whole lot. And all this craziness that's happening out in the world. It's like, where are you, God? How am I supposed to be holding on to a hope in the middle of this?

And that's what we're talking about. You see, as people who can easily fall into this jaded place, this cynical place, this grinchy, if I might be so bold, place, we've got to remember what hope really is.

[ 13 : 33 ] See, the problem for many of us is we get hope wrong, as I said. We kind of say, well, God is there, and I believe in God, and therefore, I must have hope.

That's kind of how it works. But when you look at your life, you're not reflecting hope. You're not like living as a person with real hope.

See, here's the difference between what I just said and the hope that I believe God wants us to really have. The hope that God truly promises. It goes beyond this sense of knowing God is real, which most of us, hopefully most of us in this room, and most of us online get, that God is real.

But here's the piece that's usually missing. You can believe that God is real, but there's this missing ingredient. There's two, really.

The first is this idea of knowing that God is real, but do you really trust that God is who God says God will be? Okay?

[ 14 : 41 ] I want you to hear that again. It's one thing to know that God is there, but do you really trust that God will be who God promised God would be when you're having a low time?

Because if you don't do that, it's like knowing you can call, say, a helpline for your health insurance or tech support or something like that.

You know they're there. Right? But when you need them and you call them, are you really expecting them to deliver? See, when you fall into that jaded place like many of us have, you don't expect a whole lot of really great return on that.

You don't want to be in that kind of place with your God, do you? Because if you really believe that God is who he says he is, then when all this stuff is going on around you, why don't you believe that God's going to be who God says he is?

Because when you lay them down next to each other, that's the disconnect. Because if you have the one, it seems odd that you don't have the other.

[ 16 : 05 ] I'm going to take it even further than that. Not only do you trust that God is who God said he would be, but do you really expect when you put your prayer out there, God, my friend is sick.

I really want you to heal my friend. Okay, perfectly valid prayer. And you put that out there for God to hear.

And you trust that the almighty sovereign creator of the universe has heard what you've had to say. Now, here's the piece that's really hard for a lot of folks. Do you really expect God to do something?

Really expect God to do something? Because I encounter a lot of people who pray. But they don't pray with this thing that we talk about in church called expectation.

Now, this idea, like I said, if you call for help, you expect somebody to pick up the phone, and you expect them to have the answer to your question, and when they tell you what to do, you expect it to work.

[ 17 : 21 ] Right? That's expectation. I said last night, I was telling folk, sometimes now, when we live in 2023, we got this funky thing that happens.

Right? Because I know everybody here loves to get robocalls. Right? Everybody just loves them. Get them all the time, don't you? And the thing that's happened is that there's a segment of the population.

I'm assuming nobody in here. Right? But a segment of the population. That because robocalls become so common, what happens is, is when their phone rings, they look at their phone.

And if it says unknown collar, you're not picking up the phone. Now, there's also this thing that even when there are some names on that phone, you still ain't picking up the phone.

Because this is the real world in 2023. So don't y'all pretend that y'all don't know what I'm talking about. The thing that happens is put yourself on the other side of that.

[ 18 : 26 ] Because what happens now is, for a lot of folks, if you do dial some numbers, and you call somebody, you kind of live in this place where you may not even expect them to answer anymore.

Right? Because they're doing exactly what you know you do. But the reason why I say that is I want you to think about that in terms of your prayer. So if you call up Jesus, you really think he's going to pick up the phone?

Not only that, do you think he will pick up the phone and have the answer to your question? Are you expecting it? Right?

I want you to catch the difference. It sounds real subtle, but I know you get what I'm saying. The idea that when you punch them numbers in, when you speak the words of your prayer, that you understand that there is somebody who is going to receive those words, and not only receive it, but respond based on them.

See, if you're not in that place, if you just kind of let the words of a prayer sort of fall out of your mouth, and don't think that somebody's there, somebody's actually going to hear them.

[ 19 : 50 ] Not only don't think that somebody's going to hear them, but the person that's going to hear them actually has the ability to do something about them. Not only has the ability to do something about them, but has promised you that they will do something about them.

Not only has promised you that they will do something about them, but will actually do something about them. Because if that's your reality, then how do you not look at this world, no matter what's happening in this world, and live devoid of hope?

Because if that is your God, someone who actually picks up the phone and comes when you call and does what you request, then why does the world weigh so heavy on your heart?

How has the world taken your trust in that from you? Because that's what it means to live without hope.

But if God is who God says he is, and your story is one of knowing that God has responded to you just in accordance with what God has always said, and you can look back, and time after time, Jesus has shown up and done the right thing.

[ 21 : 27 ] Maybe not exactly what you asked for, but done the right thing. And even if the right thing wasn't what you wanted, God at least brought you through the difficult time.

And if that's your story, why then, when you wake up today, or when you wake up tomorrow, you are so weighed down with this sense of cynical, well, you know, the world's just going straight to hell.

What happened to your hope? Do you really think that God has just gotten out of that business despite everything we just said?

Because people who understand that, people who embrace that, walk in hope.

We live in hope. It's this idea of not just knowledge, but trust and expectation. Because when you know that God will move, that's powerful.

[ 22 : 44 ] Now, it may not be exactly what you wanted God to do, but you know God will do something. And knowing that is the missing ingredient.

That's the secret sauce in hope. See, friends, this idea of this sermon series and the song on which it is based speaks so powerfully to that.

I believe even when. Notice, it's not just I believe. It's I believe even when. And so, I want you to consider this.

This whole idea, this line comes from a poem that was found scratched into a wall in a cave. Literally scratched into a wall in a cave.

Jewish people were hiding in that cave to hide from the Nazis during World War II. They literally lived in that cave for months.

[ 23 : 54 ] That cave was outfitted with everything they needed to survive. They had a kitchen, they had sleeping quarters, they had everything. But they had to figure out how to survive. Because they knew that if they spent too much time up on the streets in their city, they'd end up in a concentration camp.

And so, they literally lived underground until it was safe. We actually don't know what happened to the group that lived there. They may have been found out, they may have survived.

We don't know who the author of the poem is. But the line that we were singing today, I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.

Now, those of you who are science geeks and remember your basic elementary school science, no, the sun is always shining. That's not the issue. The literal translation of the line is this.

I believe in the sun even though it be dark. Think about living in a cave for four months. I believe in the sun even though it be dark.

[ 25 : 10 ] That's what this is about. So whatever's happening in your life, whatever you see happening in the world, can you believe, can you hope even when?

can you hope even when the doctors told you that thing? Can you hope even when the boss calls you into her office?

Can you hope even when there's that name on the caller ID on the phone that you know is going to put you in a particular place and a conversation you don't want to have is coming?

Can you hope even when? Because that's what Jesus is calling us to.

That's what God has already shown us God does. That our hope is real because it's not based on the world. It's based on God.

[ 26 : 18 ] You see that image? You see it on your bulletin and you can see it up here. It's that idea that no matter what's happening in your world if you can look up and you see that star most people who lived during the time the star was active had no idea what it meant but we know there was a group who did.

And think about what it means to us. It means that God has done something incredible. That God is moving in our world even if we don't quite get it.

And because of that I will have hope. Because of that I will do my part like those folks who saw that star and literally crossed a desert to honor the one the star was there for.

will you hope even when? Because God has shown you that you have reason to.

Amen and amen. Almighty God we thank you that you are the source of our hope. That we can trust you. We can trust you to be exactly who you promised us you would be.

[ 27 : 41 ] That we can trust you and expect you to move. That when our circumstances feel so overwhelming when people will treat us in a particular kind of way when news will make us feel that there is no reason to hang on we will be a people of hope.

We will hope even when. That sometimes it's easy for us to let go and to be jaded. it's easy for us to be cynical and for us to turn into those folks we're snapping at each other and treating people so poorly because we have just been so weighed down.

But Lord we know that we will feel the things that come with our circumstances but our feelings are not the same as our hope. Our feelings are not the same as our peace.

Our feelings are not the same as our joy. So let us live as people of hope today. People who will bear witness in a world that is so lacking hope that we have a reason and we know the reason for our hope and it has nothing to do with things.

It has everything to do with you. In Jesus most holy name we pray. Amen. Amen and amen.

[ 29 : 08 ] That's a personal favorite of mine that particular song especially the line in it that says God gives us the healing embrace that our hearts always hunger for.

If you are one of those folks that find yourself devoid of hope or longing for a new source or need to get your level raised know where the source of that comes from.

That healing embrace that your heart is truly longing for is only found in Christ. So as you think about putting your faith into practice this week know that we have a few things we want to call your attention to.

First, Pastor Jennifer is looking for folks for this year's confirmation class. If you know someone who is the appropriate age please reach out to her as we seek to get that class filled out and so have them get in touch with her.

Second thing to pay attention to is angel tree. We still have one or two one more week left. So if you haven't gotten your tag off the tree please make sure you do that so that we can get the things in and get them to the families in need.

[ 30 : 12 ] Last piece I want to highlight because so much is in your bulletin and you can find it either on the website or it's in the piece of paper in front of you is that our Advent Bible study called Almost Christmas a Wesleyan Advent experience is underway.

You can come to either the morning group or the evening there and if you're looking to reignite the hope within you reignite the peace within you that's a great place to start.

Come and join our group on Thursdays either at 11 or at 7 p.m. And so our benediction for this week has responses to it so let us pray together.

We wait for justice. We wait for restored health. We wait for wholeness.

We wait for peace. And so my friends like bells ringing out with the news that the sun still shines on cloudy days fill the night left in sadness with messages of hope.

[ 31 : 27 ] Go into your lives humming the tunes that will keep hope alive in you and that spur you on in the work of justice and reconciliation. Hear the voice of the angel saying do not be afraid.

Do not have a fear. Hear the hope of your world. Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit go now to serve God and all God's children.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.