

HOPE: A Choice in the darkness

Scriptures: Isaiah 9: 2 – 7, Luke 2: 1 - 20

A Christmas Eve sermon by Rev. Allan Baker



The title of this evening's sermon is: HOPE: A Choice in the darkness. The title was sparked in my imagination by the words of Howard Friend, who wrote that we Christians choose to choose life – and hope. Making the choice to hope evokes in us a counter-cultural stamina, a faith that is deeper than the mind can fathom; and in the darkness of Christmas Eve, faith in a God who cares enough to come and live among us. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God gave him the words:

“No one who hopes in me ever regrets it.”¹

This evening we are gathered here in the darkness. 10pm in wintertime is almost always a time of darkness; we are here three days after the winter solstice – the shortest day of the calendar year; and the lighting of the sanctuary has been dimmed for this time when we gather to worship the God who comes in the person of a baby born in a manger. Theologians call that miracle incarnation – God in the flesh.

I also know that there are those who might say that HOPE: A Choice in the darkness is not a politically correct manner of speaking. I acknowledge that our Christian scriptures, and the scriptures of other faiths, may not meet the secular standards of inclusivity. However, in our faith tradition, light and darkness play important roles in the drama of life. HOPE is a part of the Light of the World, God being here, walking with us, in the person of Jesus.

How can we choose HOPE in a world of darkness? After all, this is a world where:

Instead of life and faith >>> the media advertise fear and terror

¹ Isaiah 49:23 (Peterson)

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Instead of stories of humanity >>> we are offered the TSE index, hourly!

Instead of the dignity of people >>> misery is spread around the globe

Instead of faith and hope >>> a spiritual emptiness lurks in the hearts of many

Instead of community and togetherness >>> we are encouraged to compete with each other and be suspicious of help that is offered to us

Instead of working together for the common good >>> we are encouraged to think that there is nothing that we can do beyond charity to make God's world a better place for people, plants and animals.

We do live in what Tori Smit, a pastor in Guelph calls "serious times"².

- Marriages and relationships break apart
- jobs are taken away by "the economy"
- Canadians die in Afghanistan, and Afghans die because of the strife
- Zimbabweans live in terror and cholera stalks the people of that country, AND lest we distance ourselves, we remember that:
- here in Canada the water on many aboriginal reserves is undrinkable

HOPE is a choice. The world doesn't have to be this way – and HOPE can change the way things are. Mardi Tindal of Five Oaks says that:

"God intends something better for the world than anything governments and market places can provide."³

HOPE was a part of the final speech that Moses made on the banks of the Jordan River when he instructed the people of Israel, who were about to enter a new land and live in a new way – Moses instructed them to "***choose life***."⁴

Jim Wallis spoke in Orangeville Ontario on May 28, 2005. In his address to Toronto Conference Rev. Wallis said:

"Hope is a decision. It is a choice we make because of faith. And FAITH is believing in spite of the evidence."⁵

² These Times, October, 2008

³ Advent 2008 communication from Five Oaks

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁵ James Wallis, speaking at a Toronto Conference, May 28, 2005

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In addition to what Wallis said, there are signs of hope all around us;

- I have lived through a time that was called The Cold War – no more!
- I saw the Berlin Wall destroyed.
- I remember the foaming beaches of Lake Erie. We have partially cleaned up the Great Lakes and salmon are swimming in the tributaries.
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- I have seen the ozone hole in the Antarctic recognized, and steps taken to heal that hole in the atmosphere so that life can thrive on earth.
- I see a widespread recognition of the fact of climate change, and the need to change our lifestyle that has been infected by the destructive virus of **influenza**.
- I hear people questioning why women are still not considered equal to men; people asking why women's wages are, on average, less than those of men.
- I have lived to see an end to apartheid in South Africa – and I remember waiting one Sunday morning to see Nelson Mandela being released from prison;
- This past year I witnessed an election campaign that was based on change we can believe in, and HOPE. On January 20th I will be watching Barak Hussein Obama being installed as President of the United States of America.

These are signs of light in the darkness – and they all came about because of that God-given, immeasurable thing called HOPE. Rabbi Dow Marmur once said;

“Hope, even when deemed unrealistic, is worth the risk.”⁶

In the darkness of this Christmas Eve, what is it that you HOPE for?

Let's take a moment of quiet;

- a moment to watch the candles in the Advent wreath;
- a moment to listen to our hearts.
- What is that profound; that deep-down HOPE that God has written on your heart?

⁶ Rabbi Dow Marmur, Globe & Mail, December 9, 2003

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- As the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart once said;
 - *“I will sit, and be silent, and listen to God’s voice within me.”*

[1 minute of quiet]



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Our scriptures tell us:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them a light has shined.”⁷

Even though we may seem to be walking in darkness this cold December night, and the media proclaim what seem to be endless stories of darker acts, we do not lose HOPE. We have seen a Great Light!

Rebecca Solnit writes that:

“The record shows that miracles are frequent, but perfection never arrives.”⁸

This past Monday I was reading a story in The Globe & Mail – the Establishment newspaper here in Canada. The story was about Michael Hayden, who has been named “researcher of the year” here in Canada. Michael Hayden was born in South Africa and he now resides in Vancouver. He works at the Centre for Molecular Medicine and Therapeutics.

Dr. Michael Hayden found out belatedly that his award came with a cash prize. When he realized that he would have \$500,000 to deal with, he established a foundation called, “Ripples of Hope.” The Foundation will bring students from African nations to Canada to study and, when they return home, to make the world a better place.⁹

Why did he do this? His mission in life has been inspired by a speech made by Robert F. Kennedy. Speaking in Cape Town, South Africa, on June 6, 1966, Kennedy said:

“Each time a man (sic) stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Ripples of Hope – indeed! A choice made in the darkness of today’s world.

⁷ Isaiah 9:2

⁸ R. Solnit, “Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities, page 146

⁹ Globe & Mail, December 22, 2008, page A3

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Not all of us will have the effect of a Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, or some of the other saints of today. At the same time, God has come in Jesus to show us that a conversation with a Samaritan woman; mealtimes with those who are hungry; and journeys with tax collectors and sinners are remembered 2000 years later **as God's way to live life, and bring HOPE to the darkness.**

God's earthly journey began in a manger.

Hope's journey begins in our hearts when we too make choices to follow the way of Jesus and bring light to the darkness of God's world.

HOPE is a choice that we make in the darkness. Let us HOPE!

#59 – Joy to the World