

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Espoir"
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Advent I

For many of us, hope is a foreign word. That's why I used the French word for hope as the title of this sermon. There used to be hopeful times, a long time ago. There used to be less losses. There used to be a sense of everything was getting better. But soon with Danny gone, what are we going to do?

But you know I'm not here to talk to you about political hope. Because political hope shifts like the wind, but spiritual hope can become a strong anchor against the cruelest of storms. But before we go to get that hope we have to acknowledge the fact that many of us operate in a kind of existential despair. We watch the news night after night and we wonder where our province and city is going. We hear of armed robberies and break-ins and drug busts and organized crime and some of us call into the talk shows and tell the hosts what we think is happening.

A big part of what is happening has been a loss of hope. We have lost the cultural sense of hope that was rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage of our province, our nation and much of the world. We have not recognized that the biggest part in maturing, the centre of our individual work can often be summarized by how we deal with our losses rather than our gains or consumption. Change in values is all around us. Change in our health and the health of our loved ones is all around us. Change in even knowing what is right and wrong, if such categories exist anymore. Change is all around us.

So if we have lost hope, if we are struggling with despair, if we are depressed with all the changes we are facing, then the first most important thing to do is acknowledge that this is so. If we are lacking hope, it is okay to admit that. In fact, admitting it is the first step toward gaining or regaining a solid, spiritual hope. Denying what we feel and denying what we are like on the inside will never work for very long in our lives. Denial may get us through a short term shock or loss. But it is not meant to be used for the long term.

Some of us keep hoping with a kind of hope that has no future. This is what the psychologists call “defensive hope.” This kind of hope is not really hope at all. It is the belief that things will change even though we continually do and believe exactly what we have always done and believe. It is the person who believes another person will change just because they wish it to be so, or that they have power over the other person when in fact they do not. This is the person who is dating, and keeps getting rejected over and over by the same person, but instead of moving on to another person, they defensively hope that that person will come around, if they just try hard enough. Others hope their closest friends and family members will change if they just hope it to be so.

Unfortunately, none of us have the power to change others. God does. We do not. We may have some influence, but usually less than we think. If we are to hope for positive change and work for positive change, this is good, but we must be realistic in how much we can actually influence others.

I used to hope that these sermons would be life changing, that people would hang on my words. But I have learned over the years that the effect of these teachings and talks are cumulative and rarely does any one message significantly effect your lives. And that's okay. It's because I put hope in the One who is worth hoping in and working for. That's not me. I am not the one to put your hope in. I know, or at least I need to remind us that I will disappoint people at some time, even if I haven't yet for some. But God is completely trustworthy and a worthy object of our hope. God is the transformer of lives and the One who comes to us with love and truth.

I hope you sensed last week a bit of the faithfulness of God through the toughest times and the riskiest times and the leanest times of our congregation, last week in the interviews and in the video. It was quite hopeful. Why was it hopeful? Because God has seen us through so much, and He will continue to do so as we choose to trust him. Every person I interviewed and many others will be the first to tell you that any success we have had wasn't because they were so awesome and so courageous and so wonderful. No, but God's faithfulness to us was the reason why the congregation not only survived but thrived. Don't deceive yourselves. It isn't by our ingenuity and creativity that we have become who we are today. It is in spite of our differences, of our disagreements, of our financial challenges, of our fights and struggles, in spite of all that, God has been very

gracious to us and sustained us over many generations. Do you have any doubts in that regard?

If you do have doubts, or if you don't, we invite you to read the Scriptures again to point yourself and to point all of us back to the reasons why we in fact have true hope. So when you read the Scriptures in Isaiah and the Psalms, you recognize the **source** of hope. This is always the key.

This is why Isaiah invites us to go up to the mountain of the Lord, to experience the presence of the Lord, to be taught by him to walk in God's ways. Walking in his ways is a metaphor for learning to live out what we say we know. Samuel Clemens, who also used the pseudonym of Mark Twain, used to say that it wasn't the parts of the Bible that he didn't understand that bothered him. It was the parts of the Bible that he did understand that bothered him. What he meant was that he struggled with putting into practice what he knew he should do, say and be. Saying the Bible was too foreign and too ancient was not an option.

So Paul says what we are to be and what we are not to be is quite straightforward. Here's the Message translation of the passage we read from Romans 13: "Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight." (Romans 13: 12-13) This should help us as we see how we can be during the Christmas season and how God encourages us to be. "Wake up!" Paul says.

None of us know how long we have in this life. Someone could be taken just like that and face judgment, just as the Gospel passage says. Others could stay a lot longer. But it is not about staying or going, it is about choosing to receive what we need from the Lord now rather than putting it off for a time when it is more convenient. I've told you about my professional, highly educated friend who says that living out his Christianity and learning more about his faith he decided years ago would be his retirement project. Well, now he's retired. And guess what, he got lots of other things to do. He's bought a piece of property, is building a house and is planning for lots of recreation, just as in the days of Noah. These are good things, but putting off learning more about your faith is not a wise decision. What we have is today. Plan to learn more about your faith today. Plan to

be honest with yourself today. Plan to fess up to your despair or your lack of hope, or your loneliness or depression or whatever it is. Because once we get to that place, the place of honesty, then we can begin to look for the place of healing. But if we are dishonest with ourselves, which I dare say is the majority experience of the way to be, then we will have difficulty finding either hope or healing.

Worship puts us back in the space to remember our core identity (as God's dearly loved ones, as God's children, as the family of God, as brothers and sisters). Worship puts us back in the place to receive our meaning, our reason for being, our motivation for the day (one day at a time, one moment at a time), and that's why this season is special. Advent is the time to remember the Lord's first coming and to anticipate the Lord's second coming.

Advent is another season to worship. And remember that this is mainly about learning to worship the Lord, and put aside anxieties, and the rush, and the sense of a lack of time, because this season will once again be over before we know it. So make the time this year in this season to worship.

Maybe you can make your own advent wreath and remember to light the candles, one at a time with friends and family, and worship the Lord. In those moments, receive the hope you need, the motivation you need, the reclaimed sense of identity you need as God's beloved friend and child.

Let us pray.