

“Hope”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – November 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

It is that time of year again. Snow is on the ground, Christmas music is on the radio, Christmas lights are popping up everywhere, Christmas trees are going up, and we as Christians start out the season of the church year that we call Advent. The word Advent comes from the Latin that means "the coming of the Savior." It is a holy season of the Christian church that marks a period of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Christ, also known as the season of Christmas.

The church is decorated properly, representing the hope, love, joy, and peace of the coming of our Lord. The liturgical color is purple or royal blue, signifying great royalty in the coming of our Lord. And the Advent Candles on the advent wreath, represent a journey . . . a journey each week bringing us closer and closer to Bethlehem.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a Sunday represented by our first candle... the Hope candle. And with the lighting of the candle, we have begun our journey . . . venturing forward with those shepherds towards the little town of Bethlehem.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, I must ask a quick question for clarification. What is hope? It is a term that can so easily be thrown around. "I hope we have clear weather tomorrow." "I hope we have a white Christmas." "I hope the Browns win." "You hope the Cavaliers win." But that is not the kind of hope that is represented by the lone candle burning brightly this Sunday.

The hope represented by that candle, is a much greater and much grander hope. It represents the hope of an entire nation, it represents the hope of the entire world. It represents something that you and I often take for granted.

You know . . . we probably hear the Christmas story told every single year, but we forget what it was like before that very first Christmas; what it was like before the Savior came. Imagine yourselves in the shoes, or in this case . . . the sandals . . . of the shepherds.

Their religious life was much different than our own. Church was much more about following strict laws and coming into the sanctuary for little more than to make sacrifice and offerings to pay the atonement for the breaking of the strict laws they were supposed to be following.

It was an endless cycle, trying to follow laws that were impossible to follow, breaking the laws, and then making payment for sins through burnt offerings and sacrifices. Never being good enough, never being able to live up to the law, always falling short. Can you imagine how tired, how defeated, how desperate one could begin to feel always coming up short, forever, and ever, having to pay their way into heaven and never finding quite enough there to make full payment. Frustrating . . . yes . . . but there was HOPE.

Let's look again to our Old Testament lesson, and see what that hope looked like, let us turn to Jeremiah 33:14-16:

“BEHOLD, THE DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL FULFILL THE PROMISE, I MADE TO THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND TO THE HOUSE OF JUDAH. IN THOSE DAYS AND AT THAT TIME I WILL CAUSE A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH TO SPRING FORTH FOR DAVID; AND HE SHALL EXECUTE JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE LAND. IN THOSE DAYS JUDAH WILL BE SAVED AND JERUSALEM WILL DWELL SECURELY. AND THIS IS THE NAME BY WHICH IT WILL BE CALLED: ‘THE LORD IS OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.’

FOR THUS SAYS THE LORD: DAVID SHALL NEVER LACK ONE TO SIT ON THE THRONE OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL, AND THE LEVITICAL PRIESTS SHALL NEVER LACK ONE IN MY PRESENCE TO OFFER BURNT OFFERINGS, TO BURN CEREAL OFFERINGS, AND TO MAKE SACRIFICES FOREVER.”

Jeremiah wrote to his people about the great hope that they had. They would not have to make atonement forever and ever . . . soon the Lord would come, and they would never lack. To summarize . . . the prophet Jeremiah says, *“THE THRONE WILL NEVER BE EMPTY AND THE DEBT WILL FOREVER BE PAID UPON THE COMING OF OUR LORD.”*

And this is the hope that the shepherds have in their hearts the night that the angels appeared and gave them a message of great hope and joy. The savior has been born. No more *“HE IS COMING SOON,”* much rather *“HE IS HERE!”* Can you imagine the excitement . . . can you imagine the hope . . . the anticipation . . . the eagerness to run to Bethlehem to see the Lord? Our shepherds were overflowing with hope and joy, because of what it meant for them, because of what it means for all of us.

It is like this . . . Years ago, there was a very wealthy man who, with his devoted young son, shared a passion for art collecting. Together they traveled around the world, adding only the finest art treasures to their collection. Priceless works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, and many others adorned the walls of the family estate.

The widowed father looked on with satisfaction as his only child became an experienced art collector. But the day came when war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram that his beloved son had been killed while carrying a fellow soldier to a medic.

On Christmas morning a knock came at the door of the old man's home, and as he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man by saying, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you." "I'm an artist," said the soldier, "and I want to give you this."

As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of his son. Though the art critics would never consider the work a piece of genius, the painting did feature the young man's face in striking detail and seemed to capture his personality.

The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The art world was in anticipation! According to the will of the old man, all the art works would be auctioned. The day soon arrived, and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum's list. It was the painting of the man's son.

The auctioneer asked for an opening bid. The room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" he asked. Minutes passed with not a sound from those who came to buy. From the back of the room someone callously called out, "Who cares about that painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's forget it and go on to the important paintings."

There were other voices which echoed in agreement. But the auctioneer replied, "No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?" Finally, a friend of the old man spoke. "I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it. I will bid the \$100." "I have a bid for \$100," called the auctioneer. "Will anyone go higher?" After a long silence, the auctioneer said, "Going once. Going twice. Gone."

The gavel fell. Cheers filled the room, and someone was heard to say, "Now we can get on with it!" But the auctioneer looked at the audience and announced the auction was over. Stunned disbelief quieted the room. Someone spoke up and asked, "What do you mean it's over? We didn't come here for a picture of some old guy's son. What about all these paintings? There are millions of dollars' worth of art here! We demand that

you explain what's going on!" The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son . . . gets it all."

This is how it is for all of us. This message is the summary for what Christmas is really about. All the hope of the coming Messiah hinges on the true purpose for the coming of the Messiah, freedom from sin and death. So, as we begin our journey to Bethlehem, let us remember this hope as ones who do not take the gift for granted. Let us remember what it was like before Jesus came, when we were slaves to sin and death.

Let us look to the babe in the manger . . . through the eyes of shepherds, gazing on their Lord for the first time, fully understanding what a huge fulfillment of hope the baby represented. Let us look forward to December 25th, with that same hope in our hearts, knowing the price that has been paid for our souls, and knowing what a joyous and hope-filled thing it is to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us know the true meaning of the angel's words declared, *"BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF A GREAT JOY WHICH WILL COME TO ALL THE PEOPLE; FOR TO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD."*

It is our Christ, our Savior, and our Lord who awaits us in Bethlehem. It is to him that we will journey these coming weeks, getting closer and closer to Bethlehem as we get closer and closer to December 25th. May your hearts be filled with the great hope of expectation as we journey forward. Amen.