

*The Promise of Hope*

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 33:14-16

This is your early warning announcement: You have only 26 shopping days to Christmas – counting today and all the Sundays, of course, because... well, somewhere people are able to shop 24 hours a day every day between now and midnight Christmas Eve. I could calculate how many hours that is, but I want to suggest turning toward a different kind of preparing.

Here at the beginning of the season, let me suggest that you do some Advent shopping instead of Christmas Shopping.

You know what Christmas shopping is. It's about "making a list and checking it twice" shopping. We ask people what they want, and they make a list. If we have a clear choice on the list, we buy it. Sometimes we just bail out and give them a gift card or money. Why? Want to make sure they get what they want, and - to be honest - it is easier on us. It takes less time, ...and thought. We just don't know what to get them. And being happy is about getting what you want.

The Problem with Christmas shopping... People only write down what they already want - or think they want. It's just a wish list. And usually the things on the list don't give us what we really want - whatever that is.

Sometimes we don't want anything. We look around the house at all the stuff we wanted and wished for, and mainly we wish we just had less. We are content with what we have, or resigned to it. We don't want more of the same, and it all starts looking the same.

Advent Shopping is different and strange to us. What if we ask loved ones to make a list of what they haven't imagined they wanted yet? Or we ask them to make a list of their dreams or their hopes, not just some new stuff to put in a box under the tree? What if we ask them to go bigger than what they could put in a box - beyond a wish list to a hope list?

What if we gave a present for what we hoped it would do for the person instead of just add to what the person already had or was? Better yet, what if we really listened to them, to their offhand comments or the times when they say "I hope..." or "I wish we could..." or "Wouldn't it be great if..." and we went to work imagining a gift that would point them in a that direction. A gift that would be "just right" not because it was on their list or what they wanted, but "more than right" because it made their life better in a way they hoped, but maybe did not even realize.

It's a scary proposition, isn't it? There is some real risk involved. Our idea of a surprising, life-altering-in-a-little-way-gift may turn out to be just a dud. But I've done the other kind of shopping and bought duds, so what have I got to lose? And the risk in the selection the real cost of the gift? And isn't the hope in the gift the real gift?

How about an example of a gift that does not settle for what people think they want, but stretches past their hopes to a gift that will change their future?

God is looking at the people of Judah, and times have not been good for a good long while. Josiah had been a good king, but things went down hill from there.

The decline was not completely the king's fault – there was plenty of blame to go around. Sure king's were never perfect, and some worse than others. But blaming the leader or just pointing the finger at others is generally less productive than looking at what we could be doing to turn things around. Greed and self-centeredness were everywhere. Excess and escapism were the themes of the day, and only today counted. Just imagine the t-shirts on the streets of Judah: Enjoy! Life is good! Seize the day! Seems like I've seen those t-shirts recently.

The popular, false prophets didn't help. They never do. Every nation has its share of people who are willing to tell people whatever they want to hear. That is why false prophets are always more popular than true prophets.

The real prophets weren't helping much either. True to God, they just spoke the obvious of what they saw from faithful eyes. They gave a true and terrifying picture of injustice and evil at the core of the culture. The doom-and-gloom was true enough. But people were not repenting, even if the scary message was true. Most looked around and said it wasn't that bad, or figured the judgment was a long way off. People need something to turn toward before they will turn away from.

Jeremiah sees what people really need and really want, even if they don't know. Jeremiah tells them what they really want is salvation from their mess and safety in their living. Seems like I've heard that theme recently in lots of places. Jeremiah tells them that what they have been doing is not helping get them toward salvation and safety. It is really just keeping them stuck in their rut and sealing their fate. How could they expect different results by repeating the same patterns. That is the definition of insanity.

Instead of the same direction of inevitable fate, Jeremiah calls them repent, to think and act different – to turn from their same old ways and turn toward hope. The promise of the Lord is where they will find safety and salvation. The different way of the Lord will be the right way to their living. Faithfulness to God in their living is the way to safety and salvation. *Living* in the Lord's hope will lead them to right living. It's as if we are down 21-0 at halftime, thinking we have already lost and wondering how bad it will be. But the team has hope and decides to trust and live in the promise that they can win. Living in the promise can make miraculous things happen.

Jeremiah is not really announcing a new way or a new promise The covenant is as old as Abraham. The repenting is about turning from not living the promise to turning toward the promise and living it. Living the promise in hope will give the gift of a new life. Marriages are not built on taking vows and making promises. There is not magic in a ceremony in a sanctuary with pretty stained glass. Marriages flourish when vows are lived every day and when couples look to tomorrow with hope.

Jeremiah says that we can turn toward a hope in salvation, and that makes life more secure and safe in the Lord. That hope makes turning away from our usual when it is not

going all all that well easier than we think. The promise of God does not fail, even when we do. What a gift!

How does this lesson in finding safety and salvation in the different direction help in our search for an Advent gift? What is the lesson so far?

Well, it may be more obvious than we think. Look at the Christmas wish list most of us make. Some of those things are just stuff we have seen, not real wants. Some of those things are not going to be things we want once we have them. Some of those things may not really be good for us or do much of anything to make our lives better, once we think about it. Truth is, a lot of the wants on our lists are diversions or distractions, not our real wants rooted in deep hopes.

Look past the list, and look into your heart. Too often, we want the wrong things.

Too often, we don't really know what we really want. Too often, we don't want anything, because we don't think about what we really want. Too often, we are not honest enough to say what we really want. Use the light of hope to see your real longings and yearnings - the deeper desires of your heart that are your real wants. Maybe it is time to think and even share with each other what we really want from the birth of the Savior of the world?

I know that Christmas traditions are the most powerful and emotional patterns we have got. Every Christmas morning I have to have a small, pocket knife to open presents. I can't tear into them. Growing up, I watched my father take out his knife and open presents. But maybe Christmas can become a tradition of sameness that keeps us from seeing hope in the light, salvation in the future. We would rather have the disappointment or depression or just sameness we know that turn ourselves toward the hope that can change our future.

The world lets one Christmas pass after another, and it still lives in darkness and destruction and excess and starvation and all those things that add up to unsafe - and we have given up wanting it to change because we believe it will never change. We see darkness all around, and we won't turn toward the light that God has given to the world. We see darkness, not because there is not light, but because we refuse to turn toward it.

Here is the real question for Advent? When we celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world and the one who is our safety and example of right living, will it make a difference in the way we live - a difference in the days after Christmas?

If the answer is that we will go back to life as usual as soon as the tree is down and the wrapping is thrown away and the gifts are put on the shelf for occasional use, then we have every reason to think differently now, to turn to hope now. We know that not turning in all the seasons past had done nothing to change us. All those familiar ways are pretty use-less [have less use] and hope-less [and have less hope]. So, why not turn to the gift that has always promised hope and salvation, and try God's promise? Why not repent?

So let's begin Advent with a hope for a genuine surprise, and do some different shopping. Here's a hope list:

...that we would give some gift to someone we love that would be a genuine surprise and would say we hope that we add to their hope and joy for the future, and maybe change their life just a bit in a good way.

...that we would see Christ at work in our lives in a whole new way, leading us to some new insight about ourselves, or some new task that will bring us real joy, or some new appreciation for what we have, or some new way to bring a better life to those around us.

...that we would see a place Christ is working in our community that we never noticed before: some place where we are surprised to think, "God is here in the middle of this," or some group we would never think were God's helpers, but hope makes see them differently. Things are better than I thought?

...that we would look at the world in all its very real problems as a place where Christ is working and changing for the better, where we can be working the way Christ is working to make it a little more like Christ wants it to be. Think what God's promise and our hope can do.

Several years ago, there was a pretty envelope under the Christmas tree with my name on it. It was from my wife, and she never gives envelopes. In it was some money, ...and a note. She wrote, "You have kept the cameras in the closet too long, and part of your life is missing. Use this money to build a darkroom and do something you love." The gift was a risk to ask me to change my direction. The hope in that gift changed me and brought me a lot of other gifts in meaning and joy.

Come Christmas, the best gifts are always wrapped in hope. We want people to be surprised and pleased, and the wrapping is there to say that we put love into its selection and the gift is not ordinary. Use Advent shopping in the light of Hope to change your Christmas giving.

God put a lot of thought into a gift that would bring salvation to the world, and God wrapped it in love in a way that we could understand. We look at God's gift and we see what has been missing. We forget our wish list that are not really what we want, and we say yes to God's gift.

It is just the first week of Advent gifts, but the candle is HOPE, and before we open the Christmas gift there will be other Advent gifts – and light enough for the whole world.

Prayers of the People

Pray prayers of hope this day...

Pray that you will live the hope that God has put in you. Pray that hope will overcome fears and defeats, and you will see the power and goodness of God at work all around you.

Pray for us in this community of hope, that our candle will be a light that people in all kinds of darkness will find in this season. Pray that we will live our life together in hope and trust of God's future for our church. Pray that we will encourage each other to live hopefully in the face of the genuine problems that are all around us.

Pray for people who have no security, live in real unsafety, and don't know where to turn for salvation. Pray that God will come to them in people who love them, do good with them, show them hope because they show them God's caring way.

Pray for a world full of God's promise of hope and full of people who do not want things to go God's way. Pray that God's way of love and sacrifice and service will show people the right living that makes hope real.

Pray for children in this world who wish for most anything because they have nothing. Pray for children who hope there is food today. Pray for children who have no idea what safety is like. Pray for God's children, and pray that near and far we will be lights of hope to children in darkness.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."