

JOY – Great Expectations
Lessons: Isaiah 7:10-16

The fourth candle is lit, and we are late in the season of watching and preparing. So, how have preparations been going for you? Are you ready for Christmas Eve? Are you ready to re-live the birth of Savior in your own life? Of course, we know he comes to save their people from their sins, but what does that mean for you? Let's see...

Isaiah wrote, "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light." Remember? The Light is there to guide us. They are already burning, so the question is whether or not we walk in the light. These lights are the ones that lead to the stable.

Week 1: HOPE - Hope is not just wishing for what isn't. Hope is real. It makes the future present in every moment if we live to the light in front of us. We can't sit in the dark and wish for a different future. We have to take the step that joins the present to the future. Hope is trusting enough so that we have one foot in the present and one in the future. To do that, you just have to be walking toward the light you have been given. Are you sitting or walking?

Week 2: PEACE – We look everywhere for some peace, and Jesus is right – there "is no peace." We don't have it, because we want the wrong peace. Our idea of peace is relief - the quiet and calm of escape. We want to close our eyes to what is in front of us, so we cannot see the light of a different peace. Christ says we will find peace at work in the middle of the messiness of life. Peace is that deeper sense of rightness that comes from trusting that God is walking with us. When we work to make things in our lives and in the world the way God wants them, then we have peace in the present because we are stepping from the present into God's future.

Week 3: LOVE – We remembered that Mary had every reason for fear with her surprise pregnancy. But she trusts. She sings that God has done great things, and she is available to the surprising work that God will do with her. She sings that God always reverses our ideas – raising the humble, and feeding the hungry, and filling the poor with the good things. Who else would? She trusts God with this different birth. Her trust does not end with a new beginning. She trusts and walks with this boy as he grows to be a very different man from her hopes for a Messiah. Love sometimes puts us in the dark about what to do so that we will stumble some in our own way. We look for light, and this candle of love burns to show us to walk toward God's direction with those we love.

So, let's remember the themes we have heard in all of the candles so far...

1. The light of God's presence is always in the present, and always pointing in the direction of God's future.
2. When we trust and see the light that is there, we have no reason to sit in the dark or wander in darkness. We trust enough to step into God's light, to step toward the light we can see.
3. If you are hoping more than wishing, working more than wanting to escape, available to surprises more than frozen by circumstance, we are preparing. We are already walking in Advent's light with one foot lighting in the present, and putting our weight on the lead foot in the future.

Now, we can walk toward the Joy of the fourth light.

Ahaz is the King of Judah, the southern part of the now-split kingdom of the Hebrews, and he has a awfully long journey toward joy. Ahaz is a king in a crisis. In the name of security and peace, he has made alliances with two kings he knows are only interested in themselves and will use him for their own self-interest. He has honored the rich and powerful and neglected those without power or money. He has turned a deaf ear to the word of the Lord from prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah. Instead, he has used religion to advance his politics. Step by step, he has built altars to false gods right there in the temple.

Two kings of the North – the king of the struggling northern kingdom called Israel and the king of powerful Assyria – have come calling with economic aid and treaties they do not intend to keep. Ahaz sells out the Northern kingdom of the tribes of Israel to Assyria and pays tribute to Assyria for protection. Ahaz thinks he is smarter and craftier and stronger than they are. He will benefit more from the deals than he is risking, but he does not realize that the ultimate cost is bondage.

Deep down, Ahaz has no love for others. He knows deep down that his peace dealing will bring no peace. He is doing all he can to keep things going because he likes it, and he does not have much hope that there is a future if he does change. Love and peace and hope are there in the light of the prophet's message, but Ahaz chooses not to walk toward the light.

Let's turn the darkness of Ahaz to the present tense: Nations – no matter who is king – tend to work in their self-interest and trust their own strength and smartness to outsmart other nations. Nations who are dominated by preserving power and neglecting the needs around them don't look to what will happen in the future when they are just trying to preserve the present.

We are pretty much there, aren't we? ...short-sighted quarterly reports instead of long-term investment; ...deals with foreign powers, thinking they will need us more than compete with us; massive income shifts with wealth concentration because we take care of the powerful who take care of us; middle-class stagnation, economic neglect-and-abuse of the poor. We can all see the present tense fumbling in the darkness so plainly that reading Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Micah and Hosea is just plain scary.

Now let's look at Ahaz in your own life. Of course you aren't like him! But how different is the pattern of your life from the habits of Ahaz?

Are you "over-extended" just trying to keep things going? Has life been so busy for so long that you can't remember when you had time to choose to do what you wanted? Have you committed to people that you suspect are more committed to their own interest and are just using you? Are you caught in decisions and powers that you can't control but seem to control you? Do you feel trapped in the jaws of your own decisions?

We could ask it this way: Do you need a savior? Are you desperate enough with the way things are somewhere in your life in the dark that you will risk enough and trust enough to step toward the light of a different hope and peace and love?

If you knew there was someone in front of you, would you shift your weight and take hold of that hand which will pull you into a new future? If you feel like your leading foot is in the air and you are ready to shift your weight toward the future, then what Isaiah says to Ahaz may be enough to tip you over into the light of God's future for you.

In the middle of all the messiness that is always in every present tense, Isaiah says to King Ahaz: "Working on your own hasn't worked out so well so far, has it? – for you or anyone else, for that matter." He dares Ahaz, "Why don't you put God to the test? Ask for every need you've got: World peace, a good economy, the end of poverty. Stretch our hopes from the wishes of the dead in the tombs to the dreams of the future in tomorrow's heaven." Look what God has already done! Ask God for a surprise instead of doing what you have always done. Shoot for the moon! Expect great things!

Ahaz replies: "I won't put God to the test." It's an excuse, and admission of his faithlessness in a way. Ahaz uses the commandment that he should not play God and tell God what to do, but he has another reason he won't expect great things from God. He knows God's hope and peace and love have always been there for the choosing. But if he wants them, he has to change the way he is living and acting and choosing. He can't sit in the dark and walk toward God's light, so he decides to stare at the candles and *not* step toward them. He won't take the dare, because it's a dare to trust and walk.

The time for preparing is running out of time. Don't be Ahaz this late in Advent! Think of one thing in your life – maybe a big thing that you know you should start doing, or something you know you should stop doing – something you have wanted to do for your and God's good in your life. Stop sitting in your darkness over that thing. Just stand up. Just step forward toward those candles of hope and peace and love. Shift the weight of your life toward the promise that God really is coming to save you.

Go ahead and ask for help from God! Ask for saving help! Ask God to give you a nudge, a pull, and put a Savior in front of you to take you by the hand. Trust God just enough to pray out and work out your own Great Expectations!

Remember what the candles have already told you...

The light of God's presence is always in your present, and always pointing you in the direction of God's future.

You have no reason to sit in the dark or wander in darkness. You can trust enough to step to God's light.

You can hope more than wish, work more than want. You can open yourself to surprises more than freeze yourself where you are.

You can take Isaiah's dare, and you can dare to walk with trust. You can walk in Advent's light with one foot in the present. Just shift your weight on your leading foot in God's future for you.

Oh, it's the fourth week. And maybe you are wondering why I haven't talked about the candle we named JOY. Let's return to that candle, and see what the promise is.

If all of the other candles point to something different than we thought in the beginning, and we are willing to admit that what Isaiah says about hope and peace and love are more true than the things we might wish for, then we are ready to hear the lesson about joy.

Isaiah says that if you ask with great expectations, the Lord will give you a sign that is the light for your path. You are leaning to that step and you can see the light of joy. You are looking for someone to lead you by the hand. Isaiah says your savior isn't here just yet, but a young woman is already pregnant and she will give birth soon enough. And this child will be named Immanuel, "God with us!"

Hearing the good news that your savior is on the way, seeing that the light is nearer than when you first believed, puts a feeling in you of great expectations. That feeling in you right now is the gentle pull of grace that tips your weight and gets you walking toward the light. That feeling in you is the genuine trust you have in God's hope and peace and love for you.

That feeling in you is the deep and real and present joy you have in great expectations. You are expecting him, knowing he is on the way to save you, ... that God's future will become your present, anytime now.