

“CHRISTMAS GIFTS (#1):THE GIFT OF HOPE”

(1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37)

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[Props Needed: (#1) Two SermonSpice Video clips; (#2) Surprise Wrapped Gift Representing HOPE]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 11-30-08]

–I–

1. Advent Wreath Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
[Traditional Services:] Read Text: Mark 13:24-37 and Pray.

2. **[SHOW “JESUS VS. SANTA #3: BEST GIFT EVER” VIDEO-CLIP (SermonSpice.com- Time: 0:43)]**

A–Well, Christmas IS all about gifts. But in the frantic hustle and bustle of today’s holiday, we too often miss the fact that the “best gifts ever” *aren’t* ones that can be bought online or at stores, but are only available from our heavenly Father.

B–That’s why between now and the end of December, we’ll be sharing in a sermon series called Christmas Gifts, in which we’ll be talking about some of the gifts that God makes available to each of us free of charge – gifts that (especially during the holidays) we’re encouraged to simply reach out and accept.

3. Now, to introduce these, each week I’ll be opening and then talking about a different surprise gift that’s been wrapped by our worship team which represents that week’s theme.

A–So, let’s see what we’ve got for me today...
B–**[OPEN and TALK ABOUT how surprise package relates to HOPE...]**

4. You know, the people in Jesus’ day were people in need of Hope, as well:

A–The Roman Empire was nearly at the height of its power, taxes were high, corruption was wide spread, oppression was rampant.

B–Like today, people were nervous and fearful about the state of their world, their future in it, and they longed for the day when everything would be made right.

C–And that’s essentially the origins of Jesus’ words in today’s scripture from Mark 13.
[Contemporary service ONLY: Listen to them... (Read Mark 13:24-37)]

D–Now, though these are words that speak about the end of time and the coming again of Christ, for us to get caught up in the *details* of *how* and *when* all this will take place is to miss the main point of the story, ...because in the end, like today these words are merely meant to give HOPE to a world and a people trapped by hopelessness.

5. So with that in mind, I’d like to use the word “hope” as an acronym to talk briefly about a few biblical qualities that can help us be people of H.O.P.E., no matter what is happening in the world around us. (See bulletin Sermon Notes)

-II-

6. First of all, the “H” can stand for **HISTORY** – the idea that you and I can find hope by looking at the history of God’s dealings not only with us *personally* as individuals, but also *corporately* with His people throughout the ages.

A–Do you remember how today’s Advent wreath reading put it in 1 Corinthians 1?

1– It referred to the “*grace*” of God continually given to the believers at Corinth (Verses 4-5) , and also to God’s constant “*faithfulness*” to them (Verse 9).

2–In other words, Paul was reminding his readers of the *history* of God’s constancy and trustworthiness throughout *their* past – that in the midst of their difficulties and changing times, God had always remained faithful and unchanging.

B–And we find this same message throughout the scriptures: ...that God and God’s promises can be trusted *today* because His track-record in dealing with His people throughout the *past* have proven him to be trustworthy. ¹

1–And what’s more is that if we as *individuals* have followed Jesus for any length of time, then our *personal history* should be able to confirm this same truth: ...that God can be trusted; and so if God says “*Hang in there! It’ll be okay!*” (like he essentially does in today’s Mark scripture) then we can take that to the bank!

2–How do the words to the old hymn put it? “*Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him! How I’ve proved him o’er & o’er! Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus; O for grace to trust him more.*”²

C–You see, the “Hope” that we as people of faith proclaim at Christmas is first a call to remember the history– the proven track-record – of God’s faithfulness & trustworthiness, both in our own personal lives, as well as in the history of God’s people in the world.

7. A second quality of biblical hope is signified by the letter “O,” which I believe can stand for **OPTIMISM** – the idea that true hope doesn’t merely look *backwards*, but *forwards*, as well.

A–Remember Jesus’ words about the fig tree in Verse 28?How, when we start to see certain things happening *today*, then let it be a signal to look *forward* to in the future?

B–Pastor/author James Harnish says that biblical Hope is “*the deep, inner certainty... that God will fulfill what God has spoken.... that against all odds, and in spite of everything the world calls evidence, God’s kingdom will come, and God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. [It’s] the often unseen guarantee that in spite of all the world’s violence and hostility, one day the nations ‘shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, [and that] nation shall not lift up swords against nation’ anymore (Micah 4:3)*” ³

C–You see, the hope we have at Christmas is not a pollyana, “pie-in-the-sky” utopianism, but simply a conscious choice NOT to buy into the cynicism and despair that so often infects our world today. ⁴

D–As you’ve heard me say before, as Christians “*We may not know WHAT the future holds, but we know WHO holds the future.*” *THAT’S* the optimism that biblical hope provides.

8. Finally, the “P” and “E” in the word HOPE I believe stand for **PREPARATION** and **EXPECTANCY** = “expectant preparation,” if you will.

A–In Verses 33-37, the words ...[NRSV] “*beware, keep alert, keep awake*” [MSG] “*sharp lookout lookout,*” “*stay at your post,*” “*keep watching*” ...are all admonitions not to be passively sitting around doing nothing, but instead to be actively working towards the accomplishment of that day when the kingdom & reign of God come to earth for good. ⁵

B–You see, biblical Hope doesn’t just sit by, *wishing* things would get better in our world “sometime in the future.”

1–No, it actively tries to DO all that it can to *make* things better *today... now!*

2–That’s why real Christians are called to be people of expectant preparation, ...doing what they can to try and make the world a better place *now*, even while waiting for the promised kingdom of God. ⁶

C–So, whether it’s contributing to our “Christmas Relief Fund” (that helps needy families during the holidays), or purchasing a blanket for needy world children through our “Blanket of Hope” Tree that’s available today, (or any number of other opportunities),...

D–...this holiday I want to challenge and encourage each of us as people of faith to remember our calling to “*stay awake/keep watching*” by preparing ourselves expectantly and spiritually for Christmas through our looking after the needs of humanity.

–III–

9. Now, what does all of this look like when we put it all together?

A–Well, biblical H.O.P.E says that when we remember the **History** of God’s faithfulness in the past, choose to be **Optimistic** about the present and the future, and choose to live in **Preparation** and **Expectancy** for the God’s coming kingdom,...

B–...then no matter how bad things seem, and no matter what kind of despair we may be experiencing as a result of what’s happening in our own personal or global world,

C–...that in the end God’s “*kingdom [will] come, and His will [WILL] be done on earth as it is in heaven*”, and that most important of all, God Himself will come and be with us.

10. Kind of like this...

[SHOW “*Advent Journey - The Prophet’s Candle: Hope*” VIDEO (SermonSpice.com, Time-1:27)]

11. [PRAYER: *O God, in the midst of the frantic and hectic pace and stress of our holiday culture today, it seems that too often we are a world without hope. But today we've been reminded that among other things, Advent is a time where you call us to remember and once again receive the "Christmas Gift" of HOPE in the giving of yourself. Help us to find ways to slow down enough to be able to find and unwrap that great gift in our daily lives as we prepare for the coming again of Christ at Christmas.*]
12. [CLOSING SONG: #196, Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus]

ENDNOTES:

1. As one notable example, read Psalm 136, which recounts "the steadfast love of the Lord" throughout many, many events of Israel's corporate/national history. This scripture and others tell us that God has walked with His people, guided them, and cared for them through difficulties, challenges, changes and even national tragedies and calamities.
2. Refrain of United Methodist Hymnal #462, "*Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.*"
3. James A. Harnish in Christmas Reflections from James Moore, Reginald Mallett, J.Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohny (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), "Come Home for Christmas: Come Home to Hope," p. 138. What's more is that this optimism not only affects our outlook on life, but also our interaction with others, as well. As the 19th-century author G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "*Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst in them. Hope opens doors where despair closes them. Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot be done. Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of [humanity]*" [G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), cited Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5928].
4. Biblical hope allows us to see the "glass" of life as merely half-empty, optimistic that the other half will get filled back up shortly!
5. If you think about it, this is precisely why two of the key themes of the Christian season of Advent are "preparation" and "expectancy"—because these weeks leading up to Christmas are a time for us to "prepare" ourselves spiritually, and to "expectantly" look forward to Christmas being fulfilled in both our own lives and in that of the world.
6. Author Vern McLellan says that "*Hope is put[ing] faith to work when doubting would be easier*" [Vern McLellan, The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs and Wacky Wit (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996)]. George Iles says that "*Hope is faith holding out its hands in the dark*" [George Iles, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #5920].