

“COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS (#1): COME HOME TO HOPE”

(Mark 13:24-37)

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[PROP NEEDED: Video Clip from “The Wizard of Oz”]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 11-27-11]

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1. (Advent Candle Text: Psalm 80:1-3, 17-19)
[BOTH 9:30 & 11am Services] Read NRSV Text: Mark 13:24-37 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH VIDEO-CLIP, The Wizard of Oz (1:39:14-1:41:10) “there’s no place like home” -- Time: 1:56]**

A--At some time in our life or another, probably every one of us here has identified these words from Dorothy: “*there’s no place like home.*”

1--They reflect a deep longing in each of us for a place to call “home” -- a place safe and secure from the struggles and the rat race of life.

2--A place where (at least ideally) we fear nothing, and in which we’re perfectly free and at ease to be ourselves.

B--And even though this feeling is timeless, it’s especially intense during the days and weeks leading up to Christmas -- the season that we Christians call “Advent.”

C--We hear songs like “*There’s No Place Like Home for the Holidays*” & “*I’ll Be Home For Christmas,*” & these echo our own inner longings for the place called “home.”

3. And yet, in a very real sense, “home” is not a physical place at all, but a state of being which symbolizes the deeper, often unspoken yearning within each one of us for an intimate relationship with God our heavenly Father.

A--And although this relationship is available to us throughout the year, the Advent-Christmas season again offers a special invitation to find our way back “home” to God.

B--During this time, God invites us away from the “rat race” of the holidays, and to come “home” to the true meaning of the season -- to “*Come Home for Christmas.*”

C--That’s the title of the sermon series we’ll be sharing in over the next few weeks, and my prayer is that by exploring five different spiritual and emotional attitudes and postures, we’ll be better equipped to deal with the stress of the holidays, and instead to focus on and recapture the true meaning of Christmas.

--II--

4. We begin this series today by looking at the first of these attitudes/postures: **HOPE.**

A--You know, our own individual and personal lives today are often filled with struggles and troubles: worries over money or our children; the hurt caused by a friend or spouse or family member; the loss of a job or payout; etc.

B--Not only do these stresses threaten our personal lives, but all around us our world is filled with things that also threaten to overwhelm us with fear and despair: war, terrorism, violent crime, tragedy, etc.

C--In other words, both as individuals and as a society, we're in desperate need of hope.

5. With that in mind, I want us to notice that the turmoil our world is in today and the hope that is its antidote is *precisely* what Jesus describes in today's scripture from Mark 13.

A--For example, the 1st part of the chapter (Vss.1-24) describe various challenges to come: the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; the coming of war, violence, earthquakes, and famine; coming persecution of Believers and promises of false Messiahs -- all culminating in what's described in Verses 24-25: "*In those day, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*"

B--And yet, notice Jesus' words in Verse 26: "*Then they will see 'the 'Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to ends of heaven.*"

C--In other words, in the midst of all of the turmoil and distress of our own personal and corporate lives, Jesus says that there is hope!

6. Of course, we need to remember that there's no evidence that Mark intended Jesus' words here to apply to any time other than his own (which would have been @ the 60s A.D.).

A--It was a time (like today) when people were nervous and fearful about the state of their world and about the future.

B--But the truth is that even when God's Word is initially written to address a *specific* time and place and circumstance, it also contains a sense of *timelessness* which the Holy Spirit often uses to apply its message to *other* times and circumstances.

C--So today, as we think about these words of Jesus and the hope which he offered to Mark's readers back *then*, we consider that it's this *same hope* that he offers to us today in the midst of our own personal and corporate trouble and difficulties.

7. With that in mind, I'd like to suggest that today's scripture offers three things we need in order to have biblical Hope.

8. First of all, biblical hope requires **A CHOICE** -- a conscious act of the will.

A--Remember that the first part of Chapter 13 describe all kinds of terrible things happening on the earth before the coming again of Jesus.

1--And yet, in the midst of it all, Verse 29 says that *"When you see these things taking place, you know that he [meaning Christ] is very near..."* -- in other words, don't let bad or troublesome things overwhelm you or drive you to despair, but instead (against all evidence to the contrary), consciously *choose* to have hope.

2--Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann: *"Hope is... a decision against despair."* ¹

3--And 20th-century theologian Henri Nouwen once explained that *"Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying 'yes' to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying 'yes' to a hope based on God's initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work, and not mine."* ²

B--If this is true, then it should affect our outlook on life and our interaction with others, as 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]. Hope 'lights a candle' instead of 'cursing the darkness.' Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities. Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism."* ³

C--The biblical Hope we have at Christmas, you see, is not "pie-in-the-sky" utopian optimism but a conscious choice *not* to buy into the cynicism and despair of our world.

9. And yet, I believe today's scripture also teaches us that biblical hope requires **FAITH**.

A--That's really what Jesus' short parable about the fig tree says in Verses 28-31: that in the same way we can have faith that summer is near when we see the green leaves of a tree sprouting forth, so we can have faith that God is near when we see the things Jesus describes in this passage -- it's a reminder of God's *faithfulness*.

B--Back in the 16th-century, Saint Francis of Sale wrote, *"Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life in fear; rather look to them with full hope that, as they arise, God, whose you are, will deliver you out of them. He is your Keeper. He has kept you hitherto. Hold fast to his dear hand, and he will lead you safely through all things; and, when you cannot stand, he will bear you in his arms. Do not [worry about] what may happen tomorrow. Our Father will either shield you from suffering, or he will give you strength to bear it."* ⁴

1--In other word, biblical hope contains a *Faith* which allows us to see and trust the hand and guidance of God in our lives when circumstances look otherwise. ⁵

2--As John Calvin put it, *"Hope is nothing else but the constancy of faith."* ⁶

C--So, what is it this holiday season that you are trusting and having "faith" in? If it's anything but God, then you may find hope to be elusive and imperfect.

10. Finally, today's scripture also teaches us that biblical hope requires **RESPONSIBILITY**.

A--Jesus words in Verses 32-37 are all admonitions to take personal responsibility for making hope a reality in our world: *"Beware, keep alert... [and] keep awake"* he says, *"for you do not know when the time will come... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly."*

1--In other words, biblical hope is not simply sitting idly by, wishing for better things to come along.

2--Instead, it's an active *watching in confident expectation* -- as one author put it, *"Hope is faith holding out its hands in the dark."* ⁷

B--Bible scholar John Hayes says that... *"Grace [and hope] do not mean an automatic exemption from the distress[es of the world.] Rather [they should] produce [in us] a prayerful watchfulness and a freedom from indulgence and anxiety about things."* ⁸

C--So, if we want to have biblical hope -- if we want to be free from the burdens and anxieties of the holiday season -- then we need to be responsible to spiritually and emotionally *"beware, keep alert,... and keep awake."*

--IV--

11. You see, given the hectic nature and frantic pace of our contemporary culture, the Advent-Christmas holiday is always a time of emotional stress and strain.

A--And even though our culture tries to tell us that this should be a time of emotional *high*, ironically it's a time when many people's emotions and spirits are lowest.

B--Yet, Jesus' words in today's scripture remind us that in the midst of this irony, God offers us a way through (not "out," but "through") -- **the way of HOPE**, which requires (1) a **conscious choice** of will, (2) the employment of **faith**, and (3) a sense of **responsibility**.⁹

C--So, whatever stress, dilemma, or personal tragedy you may be facing this holiday, today's scripture invites us to "come home" to one of the things that Christmas is all about... to *"Come Home to Hope."*

12. [PRAY]
13. [11am CLOSING HYMN: #196, "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"]

ENDNOTES:

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1. Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination, cited in Reuben P. Job, A Guide to Prayer for All God's Minister's, p. 246). With the same idea, writer James Harnish says that 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' (Micah 4:3)"* [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].
 2. Henri Nouwen in New Oxford Review (Nov. 1986). Christianity Today, Vol. 31, no. 18.
 3. 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. Saint Francis of Sales (1567-1622), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5907.
 5. *"Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it"* (Rubem Alves, Leadership, Vol.9, No.4).
 6. John Calvin (1509-1564), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5946. In a similar vein, Germano theologian Jurgen Moltmann explains the relationship between faith and hope this way: *"Faith binds man to Christ. Hope sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ. Hope is therefore the 'inseparable companion' of faith. ... Without faith's knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a faint-hearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man finds the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps him on that path"* [Jurgen Moltmann in "Theology of Hope," Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 12].
 7. George Iles, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #5920.
 8. John Hayes, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Advent-Epiphany, p. 19.
 9. Author Vern McLellan summarizes all three of these points in saying that *"Hope is [consciously choosing to] put 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)].