

You can be an angel of hope

Message for Sunday, November 27, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7; 1 Peter 3:15;

Children's Message: John 1:1-9; 8:12

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. First of all, what does the word "Advent" mean? Answer: "coming." You might hear the weather reporter talk about the "advent of winter," meaning the days are getting colder, and snow is on the way. In the church, Advent means the coming of Jesus: we think of when Jesus was born in Bethlehem about 2,000 years ago. We also look forward to the time when he comes again.

Let's look at the Advent wreath. It's round, in the shape of a circle. A circle has no end; it just goes around and around. That's a symbol of eternal life that we have with Jesus. "Eternal" means life that has no end; we will live with Jesus forever.

The colour is mainly green. The green branches are from evergreen trees. Their colour remains green all year round. That's a symbol of God's love for us: even when we do wrong things, God still loves us. It's also a reminder for us to faithful: to be constant in following Jesus.

We use candles because they give light. Imagine what life would be like if it was dark all time—*not good!* Jesus is the light of the world; he shows us the way to live.

The time of Advent is a time patiently waiting for Christmas to come. While we're waiting, we don't just sit and do nothing. We can still do the work that Jesus gave us to do, of loving God and loving other people.

Message: "You can be an angel of hope"

1) Be ready to give hope

The four Advent candles represent Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Today I want to focus on the theme of hope, by asking the question "Where is the hope?"

Everyone needs hope. When people don't have hope, we call that feeling "despair." It's not a pretty sight.

It's easy for a person to lose hope. The daily news features stories of people in desperate circumstances: the wars in Syria and Sudan; the conflict in Ukraine and Israel. Add to that the situations in which individuals may find themselves: someone working at a full-time job, yet still unable to provide for their family; a marriage and family falling apart. It can be difficult to find hope in today's world.

Late one night about forty years ago, a friend called me on the phone. He said, "I'm going to kill myself. You have five minutes to tell me why I shouldn't do it." A couple of years after that, another friend stopped me as we were going into class and said, "Bruce, give me some good news. I need to hear some today." I stammered and said "Uh, uh..." and he replied, "Bruce: *always* have good news to give someone."

That's what the Bible says:

1 Peter 3:15, Today's English Version:

Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have.

How would you do if someone was feeling blue and said to you, "Give me some good news. Give me some hope." What do you say?

I suspect most of us would find it hard to be put on the spot like that. Well, life is like that. You don't get advance notice of disasters and tragedies. That's why Peter urges us to "be ready at all times" to "explain the hope you have." You never know when you're going to need that answer.

Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas, and today is the start of Advent. It is a time for preparation, for anticipation, for hope. Preparing for what? Hoping for what? Preparing for, hoping for, longing for Jesus Christ to come into our lives, into our world.

This is a far different kind of preparation than what we'll find on television and in the stores. For those who believe in the Santa Claus Christmas – the one where, if Jesus makes any appearance at all, it is only as a cute little baby, and never as the Lord – the preparation often ends up in disappointment. Our lives never seem to measure up to the Christmas fantasies that are portrayed in the movies.

This season of preparation in the church has nothing to do with dreams of dancing sugar plums. The Bible readings in Advent invite us to dream about a better world, about justice and peace, about helping those in need. Let's listen to the prophet Isaiah, telling about the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour.

2) God gives hope: his name is Jesus

Let's set the scene. The leaders of the nation of Israel have forsaken the Lord and neglected the people; instead they have pursued their own interests. If King Ahaz ever was a follower of the Lord God, he had long ago abandoned that faith. Not trusting in God's help, he made an alliance with Assyria, a powerful nation further to the north.

2 Kings 16:3, 7 New Living Translation:

[Ahaz] followed the example of the kings of Israel, even sacrificing his own son in the fire. He imitated the detestable practices of the pagan nations the Lord had driven from the land ahead of the Israelites. . . .

King Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria with this message: "I am your servant and your vassal. Come up and rescue me from the attacking armies."

As the leader goes, so goes the nation. Isaiah was a prophet in Israel at that time. God put a fire in Isaiah's belly, and sent him out to tell the people to turn back to the Lord. If they refused, they would perish. But if they did, then wonderful things were in store!

Isaiah 9:2-7, New Living Translation:

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light—a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow. Israel will again be great, and its people will rejoice as people rejoice at harvest time. They will shout with joy like warriors dividing the plunder. For God will break the chains that bind his people and the whip that scourges them, just as he did when he destroyed the army of Midian with Gideon's little band. In that day of peace, battle gear will no longer be issued. Never again will uniforms be bloodstained by war. All such equipment will be burned.

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He

will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the Lord Almighty will guarantee this!

"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." A life apart from God is like a life in darkness. That's what it feels like to be without hope: darkness. None of us know what the future holds; but for those without hope, they can't see even one footstep ahead. When everything looks hopeless, even the smallest thing takes incredible effort.

But the message is that light – a great light – will shine upon them once again. This is a message of hope.

This hope cannot be found in any store. You can't buy it with money, even if you max out your credit card.

That message of hope is still true for us today. For them, it was a promise that God would save them. For us, the promise has been fulfilled, at least in part. That promise has a name, and his name is Jesus. The rest of the promise—"He will rule forever with fairness and justice"—that will happen when Jesus comes back to earth a second time.

The British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge was the guest speaker at a breakfast meeting in Washington, D.C. He told the story of his own life, particularly how things had changed for him after he became a Christian in his sixties. After this, he also commented on world affairs, and was very pessimistic about it all (similar to how I introduced this sermon, by listing many of the problems happening in the world today). One listener asked him afterwards, "Dr. Muggeridge, you have been very pessimistic. Don't you have any reason for optimism?"

Muggeridge replied, "My friend, I could not be more optimistic than I am, because my hope is in Jesus Christ alone." He allowed that remark to settle for a few seconds, and then he added, "Just think if the early church had pinned its hope on the Roman Empire!"

Everyone needs hope. You and I need hope. Hope is the difference between life and—well, not death, but something even worse: despair.

When Jesus is in our lives, he brings us hope. He is the light of the world. Life without him is darkness. But knowing him, and knowing that our lives and our future are in his hands makes all the difference.

3) Be God's "angels" of hope

God gives us hope. Now, as followers of Jesus, our mission is to give hope to others. The word "angel" simply means "messenger." You and I can bring hope to people, through our acts of love and kindness.

Joyce Hollyday tells the story of a teacher who worked in a large hospital, helping children who spent long times in hospital keep up to date with their school work. A teacher at a school phoned her, asking her to help a boy who had been admitted as a patient. She wrote down the boy's name and room number, and noted what the other teacher told her: "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's room that she realized that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain.

The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs." This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through his English lesson, ashamed at putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher began apologizing for making the boy do such a stupid exercise, but the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy said: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?"

Even when all that we can see is pain and disappointment and brokenness, your love and kindness can bring hope. You never know—you just never know—how your deeds of love will make a difference in someone's life.

Next Steps:

- Do you have hope yourself? You can't give to others what you don't have. The first step is to give your life to Jesus, who is the very source of hope and life.
- Be ready to explain your hope. This doesn't mean arguing. Something simple like "Jesus is my hope; he's my everything."
- Give hope away to those around you. That means being positive, kind, loving, forgiving.