

Impossibly Good: Hope
Text: Matthew (selected)
11/27/16



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Now that you are looking back, are you better able to trace God’s movements in your life? Has God incorporated some unexpected people and some unorthodox methods as he has revealed himself to you? How has your ability to look back (and trace such movements) provided you with confidence in God “Present-ly”, and with hope about a faith-filled outcome?”

“What are your expectations? How have they been informed and formed? Are they based upon possibility or feasibility? What if you were to abandon your present hope for something more promising?”

“How long have you been waiting? How much longer are you willing to wait? Would you say that your conversations and actions demonstrate that you are possessed by hope or obsessed with fear?”

“Perhaps you might share a ‘nevertheless’ prayer and declaration of trust with another as a means of strengthening hope during this season.”

Teaching Notes...

When you are unwilling to abandon God in the midst of some pretty painful and confusing life-circumstances, that’s trust. The result of trust is hope.

So, we enter today the season identified in the life of the church as “**Advent**”--- from the Latin word meaning, ‘**coming**’.

Each year, we are challenged to not only rehearse the Story, but to enter it and attempt to re-live the longings of people who have historically “lost their way”; lost their God. A people who believed that what they were experiencing was not the way that it was meant to be, and in the process, struggled with extended bouts of fatigue and frustration. A people who were “**waiting**”, but not always patient or faithful. In some ways, it’s not so hard to enter the Story; to see in ourselves that story.

I think we are “**waiting**”. Even if we wouldn’t describe it that way or be able to put our finger directly on that for which we are waiting. When we are waiting, it brings some strange sense of comfort to us to be reminded that others are waiting too.

“The people who walk in darkness will see a great light...” Isaiah 9:2-6

“Walking in darkness...” This is not simply depicting people who occasionally stumble into a darkened place/episode but a people whose environment is characterized by darkness.

Darkness is what our news is about. Darkness is what our songs are about. Darkness is what our prayers are about.

In darkness, we can't see very clearly (ourselves, our situation, others). We get disoriented [lose our ability to navigate]. We can't envision what's ahead, so our movements feel less free and more calculated and we're never really confident as to their accuracy.

The darkness plays on our fears. We see things that aren't really there--- and we don't notice the things that are! One thing we can sense in the darkness, even when your optical capacities fail us, is “Presence”.

Psalm 130: 5-6

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning...”

The Psalmist says that hope usually “dawns”. The light slowly and steadily overtakes the darkness.

I always get the feeling that Advent says, *“Not so fast...”* We want to rush beyond the conflict and the confusion toward the happy annunciation--- the light streaming in--- but God seems to say, *“I want you to see it. I want you to hear it. I want you to feel it.”*

Not so, I think, that the season might hold us captive to our own fears and, but so that we might be more alert; that our other senses might be heightened; that we might not only reflect on promise, but perhaps hear a word of promise.

“This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendent of David and of Abraham”
(Matthew 1:1)

To modern readers, the ancestry lists are the most dismissed portions of scripture in the narrative. They are difficult, time consuming, and tedious. To the ancients, they were some of the more meaningful portions. They were a shorthand way of connecting people; reminding them of the common story they shared. **Genealogy is destiny.**

The Advent narrative, as rehearsed in its original context, is anything but *“sloppy Hallmark-sentiment”*.

Malachi to Matthew: It has been called the *“dark period”* in Israel's history. It is a period characterized in Psalm 74:9 as a time when *“we no longer see your miraculous signs. All of the prophets are gone, and no one can tell us when it will end.”*

In our obsession with our own lives, we read the names and forget that they represent real people in real places, with hopes, dreams, expectations; possibilities for their children and grandchildren. Hopes and dreams to which they would cling... then they died.

It has not been (400) years of silence, in terms of tranquility and calm. It has been four centuries of God's seeming silence--- his absence--- but (400) years filled with the noise of social, political, religious, and economic unrest. 400 years of pent up frustration and desperation. A people who were tired of being told to “wait”.

With no God speaking, no God acting, no God walking amongst us, all we are left with is our own “wiki-stories”--- our own autobiography with no way to make sense of who we are and why we are and where we are except the stories we tell ourselves, often in order to ease the pain and better manage the disappointment.

Advent is about God inserting himself back into the Story and declaring that he is impossibly good and that he refuses to let us move into a future absent of mystery, wonder, and possibility. This is a traceable representation of God’s movement toward and with us.

In Advent, you “declare” a lot of things--- about life, about God --- which are forged in anticipation and hope, even if not evidenced in your present experience. Everything you find yourself doing or declaring is “in spite of” what you see or what you don’t see. It’s birthed out of faith.

No matter how reliable we believe God to be, no matter how capable and potent, if he is not “good”, he cannot be trusted. Our trust comes from an experience of another, even if our knowledge of that person is incomplete. **It is nurtured in not that we can “trust the other”, but that we can “trust ourselves with the other”.**

I think that I am discovering an interesting **paradox** in my faith: the older I get, the less I really know: myself and God. I am growing more at ease with God’s tenacious and relentless love for me which is causing me to rest. As I am able to stop squirming and thrashing, I am compelled toward trust.

Trust is the only healthy alternative to my endless demands for clarity and understanding. In this way, trust becomes substantial (“*substance*”, Hebrews 11). It reveals what’s within us and gives meaning and direction to our relationships, our energies; what we give ourselves to; to whom we give ourselves.

Despair is what you experience when you have nothing to which you might attach your hopes other than your own wit and strength-finder score!

Trust is birthed on the far-side of despair. Being exhausted and having exhausted all of our resources, we are invited to trust the will of another. We call it surrender.

Hope is that space between what we are currently experiencing and what we are expecting.

Paul says, “*Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently*”. Romans 8:24-25

Hope means that even in the waiting, in some profound way, we already possess it; it possesses us. Even though it has not become our reality, it already has a power over us; it currently determines “how” and “how long” we are willing to wait. When your hopes are rooted in God-possibilities, what you eagerly anticipate and expect is worth the wait!

If you already have everything that you think you want, you don’t need hope. If everything you are hoping for is within your reach, independent of God, you don’t need faith.

Hope is not simply some “mental happy place” to which we retreat when life gets messy. It is not some form of escapism which prevents us from being overtaken by our reality. It is, in fact, a more resilient trust which becomes less demanding. Which chooses to believe, even in the absence of corresponding evidence. It’s a deeper trust.

You get the sense that the closer you get to “salvation”, the more frustrated you become and the more you are able to tolerate in order to see it through to realization.

Our “pain thresholds” typically increase in order to give birth to the life we anticipate.

“persevere”- (2) Latin words: “through” and “severe”... “through the severity!”

“Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever...” (Isaiah 9:1)

“Nevertheless”... is an Advent word. Grammatically, the word is used to suggest that even given the previous considerations, you might be surprised to see where the story is going from here!

We’re not always sure what God is up to, but we’re committed to sticking around to find out, and, when we do, what results is a **hope that is a different sort of hope** than what brought us to this scene. It’s hope that’s not confined to my own expectations of how God would and should act but it is centered in the sovereignty of God--- the loving determination to make good on his promise.