

Sunday, December 3, 2023 ***“Why are you Here?”***

***Isaiah 64:1-9 Mark 13:24-37 Luke 1:26-39***

Why are you here? This is a question that is foundational to life, faith and hope in all its forms. What is it that calls you to look at yourself in the mirror each morning and question what is my purpose as I continue to live on earth? What is it that calls you to arise early enough from a warm sleep on a quiet morning to get ready to come into this place to sit and listen, to see and smile at familiar faces and to pray and sing? Why are we here amidst all the terrible headlines of these past weeks? And as the world seems to get more secularized where does this thing we call faith fit in and does Jesus Christ still have a role in our world today?

These are difficult questions to ask as we begin this church year and as we have lit one candle on the advent wreath. One candle which seems to just flicker a little bit in the darkness as these questions resonate in our minds and hearts in this moment. Why are you here?

You are here because of many reasons and for many reasons—and if I were to ask the answers would vary—from everything of a habit, because you feel your loved one is here with you even though they have died, or because what you experience here is beyond words—the Spirit of God has touched you before and continues to reach into your heart. There is a yearning within you and this yearning is difficult to articulate but there is something within you that sets your mind and body in motion to make an effort, to be present whether in person or online. And just what is it we are yearning for? Something wonderful, something good, and something that changes us from when we first arrived to our time of leaving—it is the spirit asking do you love me?

It is the first Sunday of Advent and our focus throughout this season is “The Thrill of Hope” an almost phrase from one of the most beloved Christmas songs, “O Holy Night”. But it is the thrill of hope that calls us together in these days because we need hope. How do we define this? Hope is a strong and confident expectation, an unwavering trust in the unchanging character of God and it is something that the world today needs just like the world has needed in previous generations.

Our Song of Praise throughout Advent “Hope of the World” was written by Georgia Harkness in 1954. Harkness was the first female full professor of theology at a Protestant seminary, (Garrett Bible Institute in Evanston, Illinois.) She broke new ground for women in the Methodist church at a time when the pulpits and seminaries were closed to females. Harkness

was a voice for racial and gender equality, a prolific author, and writer of hymns and prayers. And it is this hymn written almost 70 years ago that still calls us to focus our need for hope.

*Hope of the world O Christ of great compassion, speak to our fearful hearts by conflict rent  
Save us your people, from consuming passion, who by our own false hopes and aims are spent.  
Hope of the world, God's gift from highest heaven bringing to hungry souls the bread of life  
Still let your Spirit unto us be given to heal earth's wounds and end its bitter strife.*

But hope has been lost many times in human history—wars, battles, diseases natural disasters. The prophet Isaiah spoke of people being the clay to God as potter and creator of life. Yet there was hope that God would send a messiah, one who would right the wrongs faced by people then and this messiah would teach all people how to live and love with compassion and joy. How long the waiting must have seemed for God's people as the Isaiah's prophesy did not come through until hundreds of years later! But the longing and expectation that filled the people's hearts was truly amazing!

For many people today however the understanding of hope is but a wish or a desire. But it so much more! Hope in its deeper meaning of longing and expectation seems lost. But what if we allowed this new understanding of hope to reshape and renew our minds? For many people this false or limited understanding of hope has led many to live and lead less hope-filled lives. We have an opportunity today to allow truth to become the loudest voice in our lives. The season of Advent provides an opportunity for us to move from hopeless living to hope-filled living.

Hope is more than the longing or desire it is in who God is. And God is who he says he is: Our circumstances will never alter the character of God. Not ever. God remains the same, even when everything around us does not. God is steady, even when we are shifting. God is faithful, even when we are faithless. Therefore we need to put our hope in God. Our reading from Mark 13 describes the coming of the Son of Man; the time yet to occur when Jesus will return. Jesus' instructions to the disciples then are the same to us now—keep awake, be alert and know that Christ is and will come again. Have hope and keep faith. This is God's promise to us- he will call us to him and we will live with him forever. But we must be ready!

Why are we here? We need to see the flickering flame of hope as an anchor for what is to come in Advent. We need to receive strength and understanding of who Jesus the infant to be born is and can be in our minds and hearts. And we need to get past our hopeless ideas of

the world—because there are many people’s whose faith is stronger than those whose hope is lost.

One cannot help but reflect on Mary. An angel Gabriel was sent by God to tell this young woman that she would be pregnant with God’s Son. She would be the mother of the promised messiah. Sure she was “much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Gabriel then says, “Don’t be afraid- you have found favour with God.” You’re going to be a mom- of Jesus, a boy and he will be called the Son of the Most High. Mary’s answer was very practical—how? Gabriel explained what would happen and then told Mary about Elizabeth’s pregnancy too. What was Mary to do? Argue with an angel? Say no to God? All Mary said was “Here am I. the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” Was she afraid? Probably was she worried, no doubt. Did she wonder about what others’ would think? Yes and what about Joseph—he was going to be a dad. He would not want to have anything to do her! Yet in this moment with Gabriel the angel, Mary just said, let it be with me. I’m ok. Ready or not, God’s plan for the Son of Man to come into the world was now going to take place. Mary knew this was going to be a big deal wrapped up in her baby. Did she have hope? Yes—and her hope was in God who would lead to Jesus’ birth through her-a young maiden.

Mary’s life was going to go through many changes and she needed support of Elizabeth who was also experiencing an unexpected baby. But for both of these women, hope was made possible through them because of God.

Where is your hope in this moment? Many of things we hope for are short term, with expectations not always being met. So how do we maintain hope in our lives? There are 3 possible ways:

1) take time to process what is happening with you; give yourself a break and take the time you need when hope seems lost Mary took time to be with Elizabeth to understand and be with her as chosen people of God with a task; were their hopes challenged? Yes but they also received hope more than they thought possible

2) Sometimes we think that hope is lost because of the horrible and indecent situations and actions of people. Yet the majority of the world’s people are quietly living decent lives everyday. In these days ending 2023 and going to 2024; people still have the desire to ensure that there will be a better world for their children/ grandchildren, yet what they now experience is empathy and this is ok.

Joseph responded to the angel's message as Mary thought he would yet Joseph did right by God and supported Mary as a young couple. When he was told that the infant would be God's Son, how could he not support this chosen one whom he also loved?

3) when you walk into a dark room and find the light switch- it is in those milliseconds before the light comes on that there is an uncertain moment of what might happen. As we lit this candle of hope today—it is but a flicker for what is to come as we seek hope in Christ Jesus.

Our hope is in Jesus not only because of his amazing story at birth, but because of who he grows up to be and how he teaches, lives, dies and rises to new life. And it is in this moment that we must remember the joy He brings for we can face uncertain days because Jesus lives.

Sure there will be times when we are afraid- but we must remember God. Isaiah 41:10 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

So why are you here? TO prepare your hearts for Advent and to be tethered to God. Hope tethers us to an unwavering God. Hope secures us to God who promises the long awaited Messiah, the one who would suffer for us save us. This is the hope of the world we await. Thanks be to God.

#### PRAYER

God of hope hear our prayers in this moment as we cry and share our thoughts with you. Give us a new perspective of hope in our minds and hearts. Enable us to experience the thrill of hope as we peek into the manger for the Promised One. SILENCE> Amen.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." . Romans 15;13