

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

Today, we begin a sermon series on Hope. Today is also the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is traditionally a time of preparation to welcome the baby Jesus, a time of hope as we consider all that Jesus' birth means to the world and you and me.

Waiting for and anticipating the birth of Jesus, welcoming the Christ child, has become central to the church's and our society's understanding of Advent. However, we're not just celebrating the birth of Jesus, but we're also celebrating our hope of Jesus' return to the earth: the second coming. We wait in hope and with eager anticipation for Christ's return to bring peace on earth. We wait for Christ's return when he will establish his kingdom on earth, when Christ will eliminate war, hunger, and wipe every tear away.

As Christ-followers, we live in that hope and we need to share that hope more than ever with the world we live in. Today, many people live in fear because of the perceived mess the world is in. But are things really that much different from things in the past? Probably not. Many of you have been living long enough to know that. We still have wars and rumors of wars. We still have violence in our streets. And the list goes on.

Things haven't changed much. But is that reason for us to lose hope?

In the Tuesday Bible study group, we've been reading the story of the Hebrew people. We've read how God shaped the former slaves into the Hebrew nation as they walked through the desert after they left Egypt. We just finished reading Joshua's story of how, with God's help, the Hebrew people conquered the land God had promised to give them. The consistent message? God is in charge of the world. And no matter how we humans muddle around, God uses our tangled mess to accomplish God's plans.

So, no matter the mess the world is in today, we know that God knows what's going on and is using it to accomplish God's plans. We also know that Christ will return to straighten out the mess we humans have made. That is our hope as Christians.

Isaiah 41:10 says: **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.**

Jeremiah 29:11: **For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**

In John 14:27 Jesus says: **Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

How do we as Christians express our hope? Is there some way we can become more hopeful? Would being hopeful allow you and me to be better ambassadors for Christ in the world today? Those are some questions we'll be considering in this sermon series. But first, let's look at what hope is and isn't. The next few Sunday's we'll be looking at how we can be more hopeful, how we can increase the amount of hope each of us has.

The main content for this series is taken from a book by Ray Johnson, *The Hope Quotient: Measure it. Raise it. You'll never be the same.* You may want to purchase the book to read it, but I'll be sharing with you the main points.

So, let's get started. Hope. What is hope? Do any of you want to venture a definition? Webster defines hope - to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true. As Christians we anticipate Christ's return. That is our hope.

Why is hope important? People need hope to live. It's been said that you can live 40 days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air, but not a single second without hope.

Giving people hope, sharing hope with anyone – that's one of the best gifts you can give. Yes, one of the best gifts you can give your family is hope. One of the best gifts you can give your friends is hope. One of the best gifts you can give your neighbors is hope. One of the best gifts you can give your coworkers is hope.

You may be saying – “What about faith and sharing your faith with someone? And what about love.” Faith, hope and love. There is a relationship between the three. Just a Bible verse for you to ponder: Hebrews 11:1 - **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

All three are important. We spend a lot of time talking about faith and love but little time talking about hope. That's why we're looking at hope. More on that later.

Imagine for a moment that two people you know are walking towards you. One you know is the most encouraging person you know, the other the most discouraging person you know. Which would you rather spend time with?

Imagine two people in identical circumstances, except one faces life with hope and confidence, the other does not. Which person will be the most successful and happy?

The author of the *Hope Quotient* (p. 6) lists eleven major differences he has found in those people who have high levels of hope and confidence. They will:

- Have more satisfying relationships
- Be more productive
- Be less affected by stress
- Be more successful
- Feel more satisfied
- Be more compassionate
- Be more willing to help people in need
- Be physically healthier
- Hold to higher moral and ethical standards
- Be more likely to assume leadership
- Be more likely to see God as loving, caring, and forgiving.

What a list! But, I think you can look at your life and the hope-filled, confident people you've known – each would exhibit these differences the author lists. I know I've experienced hopeful confident people and the list is true in my experiences. Why some of you exhibit these characteristics in spades!

Now I can imagine some of you are saying to yourself, "OK, Lee, that all sounds great. But isn't hope really just wishing as in the Dusty Springfield song, "Wishin' and hopin'"?"

Hope is not wishing. Hope is not an unreliable feeling. Positive thinking is not hope. Hope is something you intentionally build into your life. Hope is a constant in our life. Hope is the expectation of something good to come.

Hope is also not blind optimism. It's not a pretend everything is fine attitude. There's a story about a guy who fell off the balcony at the 52st floor. Halfway down, someone saw him and yelled "How are you doing?" The guy falling said, "So far, so good." That's blind optimism!

That's a couple of things that hope isn't. Hope is not wishing, and hope is not blind optimism. The kind of hope we Christians have is that God has better days ahead for us.

Let's next look at what it is that hope does for you and me.

Hope releases you from your past. Hope liberates. Some of you may know the story of "Louie" Zamperini. Zamperini took up running in high school and qualified as a part of the US Olympic team for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. A runner, he finished 8th in the event. In 1941 he was commissioned into the United States Army Air Forces as a Lieutenant. He served as a bombardier in B-24 Liberators in the Pacific. On a search and rescue mission, mechanical difficulties forced Zamperini's plane to crash in the ocean. After drifting at sea for 47 days he landed on the Japanese occupied Marshall Islands and was captured. He was taken to a prison camp in Japan where he was tortured. Following the war he initially struggled to overcome his ordeal. Later he became a Christian Evangelist with a strong belief in forgiveness.

What does Zamperini credit as to why he was able to overcome all the adversity in his life. Hope. He looked to the future and for better days to come.

What else does hope do? Hope motivates and helps you to bounce back. Almost every successful person has come back from discouraging circumstances. Why the Bible is full of such stories:

- Joseph endured mistreatment from his dysfunctional family. He was sold into slavery by his brothers. Yet, he became a leader in Egypt and saved his family from starvation.
- David bounced back after several failures. His affair with Bathsheba. His failures in leadership. His inability to control his kids. One even revolted against him and tried to take David's throne. Yet David is known as the greatest king in Israel's history. A great comeback is possible.
- Peter was disappointed with himself when he denied knowing Jesus. Yet he overcame his self-disappointment to lead the new church.

Just about everyone in the Bible had to bounce back from something. The question we ask about each situation, “Did that person have hope?” Yes, they did and that enabled them to bounce back. Hope believes in future possibility rather than resigning oneself to current reality. People bounce back when they have hope.

What else does hope do in your life? Hope sets you free to dream. You can't dream without hope. I'm not talking about dreams when you sleep, but those dreams you have for the future. Many people have made a major impact on their communities and on the world because they had hope, and that hope gave them their dream.

Martin Luther King had a dream of better days ahead for people who faced discrimination.

Desmond Tutu dreamed that the black people of South Africa were equal to the whites and that apartheid was wrong. He even wrote a book about his dream: *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*

Corrie ten Boom hoped for freedom for Jews in the Netherlands. Rev. Everett Swanson dreamed of helping children orphaned by the Korean conflict. His dream turned into Compassion International.

The list goes on and on. You can name people in this congregation who had hope and dreams. They acted on those dreams and have changed peoples' lives.

The fourth aspect of hope I'd like to mention: Hope is the fuel that makes the world a better place. Hope helps people believe that they can make a difference, regardless of their circumstances.

Just think about the early church. It started with a few discouraged disciples and became the greatest force for good in all the world. Because of the hope and belief those persecuted and itinerate followers of Jesus, today we have hospitals, universities, shelter and feeding programs for the homeless, orphanages. Those in the church worked for the abolition of slavery, the value of human life, and Christianity inspired much of the great music we enjoy today. Those few disciples did make a difference in the world.

Mother Teresa comes to mind as a modern-day example. She had hope the poor could be helped.

What examples can you think of?

Most of you know First Corinthians, Chapter 13. It's read at weddings many times. Paul writes about faith, hope and love. The Christian church has done a good job of teaching and encouraging faith and hope. I had classes on faith in seminary and I've preached sermons on faith. Likewise, I have emphasized Christian love in the way I live and in my preaching. But hope, I can't say that I've preached a sermon on hope.

But that's changing beginning today. Hope is a critical ingredient to our everyday living; a critical ingredient in our success in living the Christian life. It is a critical ingredient in how we deal with our families and friends.

All of us want to be faithful and caring, but there's more to consider. Let's look at Hope. Let's examine and consider the third ingredient in our faith, hope and love trio that Paul talks about.

This week, think about examples of how:

- Hope liberates
- Hope unleashes compassion
- Hope encourages people
- Hope motivates
- Hope helps people try new things
- Hope motivates people to find new strengths
- Hope propels people forward – even when it seems impossible

Next week, we'll begin to look at the seven factors that help you become more hopeful.

**Isaiah 40:31**

but those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

**Psalms 62:5**

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.

**Romans 15:13**

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**1 Peter 3:15**

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

**Micah 7:7**

But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.