

2010 ADVENT
 "ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS...HOPE
 Luke 1.5-25, 57-80

It's Advent 2010, and our theme is "All I Want For Christmas."
 So with that in mind I asked several of our good folks at FUMC and a few others,
 "What do you want for Christmas?"

You might enjoy hearing some of the responses;
 Thinking weather-good weather, short winter, 1" of snow at Christmas
 Thinking nationally-to balance the budget, a Republican Congress
 Thinking sports-angler walleye, the Vikings to get to the Super Bowl

Thinking Youth- clothes, old car, new car, computer games and stuff,
 iPods, blackberries, communication devises, and one even said, A's on my finals
 Thinking Children-toys, transformer, squinkes
 a coloring book (actually that came from one of the staff-it's probably therapeutic)

Thinking health-a number of people said good health,
 One said chocolate covered cherries (cherries are fruit, and fruit is healthy food-right)
 two sang for me, "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth,"
 and one person even said one front tooth-he smiled and guess what?

Thinking globally a number of people said world peace

Thinking family-my kids to be well and happy, family at home,
 my son to go back to church, my son and DIW would say, to have a baby.

The two most touching responses;
 I was with a couple that has been married 61 years and he's very sick,
 I was asking the nurses and didn't want to leave the wife out,
 She said, "You know what I want!"
 And I did, and I think you folks do too.

Then there is Angie, my daughter's friend starting in the third grade-
 I'll never forget her letter to Santa,
 "Dear Santa, I just want my dad to come home. (Her parent's had just divorced.)

Thinking about churches;
 FUMC-handicap access in the street, (thinking of the ice covered streets-no doubt)
 the Humboldt, MN UMC wanted a new building
 Can you imagine the hopelessness of watching your beloved church burn to the ground
 and not being able to do anything about it.

Bethany UMC just wanted to find some purpose or meaning in their closing.

Our wish list is, whether joking or not, is driven by hope-isn't it?
The hope that we will have this or that or the hope that this or that will happen.

We light the first Advent Candle, the candle of hope,
which reminds us of our need of hope and the one who is that hope.

Our world desperately needs this gift.
So too the people of Jesus' time in a land far away.

Over three thousand years ago, just a thousand years before the birth of Christ
Israel was at the height of her political, economic, and religious power.

After King David there was a succession of weak leadership,
and widespread immorality and idolatry that contributed to the downfall of Israel.
God sent a number of prophets to warn the people but to no avail.

Then in 722 BC the Assyrians conquered Israel and turned it into a vassal state.
And in 587-586 the Babylonians after conquering the Assyrians,
attacked and completely leveled the city of Jerusalem
and in the process destroyed the sacred temple.

Think about your home or church or even parts of the community being destroyed.
How demoralizing, how discouraging.

Even though the people of Israel had been unfaithful,
the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple totally devastated them.
They found themselves helpless, hapless, and hopeless,
and wondered whether or not God would come to their rescue.

I think many of us have similar feelings today.
Our national pride and power is being threatened, tried, and tested.
We are at war and have a struggling economy.
We're often divided, even polarized politically, religiously, and economically.

From our point of view morality is at an all time low and is even being redefined.
Communities have been burned, battered,
and blown by fires and floods, hurricanes and tornadoes

And as we think of our world, add earth quakes and volcanoes,
typhoons and tsunamis, hunger and disease to those that live in poverty and terror.

Then there are terrorist who might show up in any major city of any country.
And now most European nations have unstable economies.

Then there are all of the religious, ethnic, and economic conflicts
and unrest in and between nations;
Italy, France, Great Britain, Brazil, Mexico, the Sudan,
North Korea and South Korea, Japan and China,
Palestine and Israel only to name a few.

Enough Already!!!
You're asking e why all the doomsday stuff?
We don't want to hear the doom and gloom, it's depressing.
We can read about it in the paper, or watch the news.

The history of Israel-that was the world that Jesus was born into.
The doom and gloom-that is the world the Spirit moves into now.

And don't we, too, begin to wonder, might we dare ask,
why isn't God doing something about this?
Why is God still silent? I wouldn't agree that God is silent but Israel believed he was.

For the Israelites the sense of hopeless increased
after the Romans had conquered the Greeks
who had conquered the Persians, who had conquered the Babylonians,
because not only did God NOT come to their rescue
under Greek and Roman rule for 400 years
there was no word from God, no sign from God, only silence until;

Luke 1.5, **"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zachariah..."**
He and his wife were both from priestly families and more importantly, they were good people.

Luke wants to make sure we know they are people of God, verse 6,
**"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God,
observing all the of the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."**

And Luke wants us to know that although these are good people,
their situation is hopeless, verse 7,
**"But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive,
and they were both very old."**

So what do we learn about hope.
First, **THAT THE LIGHT OF HOPE IS LIT IN LITTLE OR LESS**
THE LIGHT OF HOPE IS BORN IN BARRENNESS

Make no mistake about it, despite their prayers and faithfulness
there was no hope for Zachariah or Elizabeth to have a baby,
Barren means barren, nothing, nada, empty, impossible...

But, that is the thing about Advent; it reminds us it is in the dark and empty,
barren and broken places of our world and our lives, that is where hope is found.

Cornel West would agree,
**"What we need more and more is a sense of vision predicated on hope,
but hope has nothing to do with optimism."**

I am in no way optimistic. I don't believe the Christian Gospel is optimistic. It talks about hope which is something different than optimism."

I think is saying optimism is a human endeavor which tries to deny the pain. Hope gives us an accurate picture of the human condition.

He goes on, "**Hope comes out of our struggles, and we moan and groan, cry and scream. (Think of a mother having a baby) Hope comes from trying to sustain a sense of faith...**

I hope you always hold on to the notion that however dark and difficult the moment may be, The world is still incomplete, history is still unfinished, and the future is open-ended; there is something to hope for."

First-THE LIGHT OF HOPE IS LIT IN LITTLE OR LESS

Second-WE EXPERIENCE THE LIGHT OF HOPE AS WE LEARN TO LISTEN

Verse 8, "Once when Zachariah's division was on duty and he was serving as a priest before God..."

Remember Luke wants to make sure we know that these are good people, verse 6, **"Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the of the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."**

They listened to God and did what he asked. God spoke to them through the scriptures, their prayer time, their daily devotions, faithful worship, and active service. In that they kept the light of hope burning.

That is why we encourage you to be faithful in worship, Attend Sunday School, get in a Bible Study, Growth Group or Prayer Group. Try a four week Advent Study and hear what has in mind for you.

Did you catch verse 8, Zachariah was working. Whether he thought his job was meaningful, meaningless or mundane, he was still faithful, and God came to him and spoke to him.

Actually God surprised him. Has God ever surprised you?

The churches of Humboldt and Bethany certainly got the surprise of their lives. Remember a fire had destroyed the Humboldt church. We know what they would want for Christmas, a new building. That they got.

They got the building built but finances ran out and they didn't have enough for the furnishings. So, pews, an altar, candles, a baptismal font, communion chalice, also became part of their Christmas list. That they got, too.

Remember the Bethany Church wanted to find something meaningful in their closing? Well, they did. They still had the furnishings, Humboldt had the building.

Bethany gave what they had out of their need to give, out of their hope.
Both churches were surprised to learn
that the furnishings were very similar the ones that had been lost in the fire.

Do you want to hear another amazing thing?
The night that Humboldt met and voted to rebuild,
miles away and unknown to Bethany they were having a meeting voting to close.
Both churches heard and responded to God's voice and hope was realized.

We have an amazing God don't we?

First-THE LIGHT OF HOPE IS LIT IN LITTLE AND LESS
Second-WE EXPERIENCE THE LIGHT OF HOPE AS WE LEARN TO LISTEN
Third-**WE EXPERINECE THE LIGHT OF HOPE
AS WE CONTINUE TO LOOK FOR THE LIGHT**

A young man in his spiritual quest sought out the wise old sage.
He asked, "What must I do to find God?"
The sage asked, "What can you do to make the sun rise?"

The young man realizing that the answer was nothing, then said,
'Nothing, but then why waste all of my time in prayer and fasting?'"
The sage answered, "Ah, to make sure you're awake when the sunrises."

Zachariah figured that out, for at the end of his song in Luke 1.78-79, he sings
\“**because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death
to guide our feet in to the path of peace.**”

No matter how long the road, how dark the night, how hopeless the circumstances,
there will always be a God-given, God-driven dawn.

Zachariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, the shepherd and the wise men-they didn't miss it.
They stayed awake.

We don't want to miss it, do we?
We need to stay awake.
The disciplines and focus of the Advent season are to help us do just that.

We can't afford to miss it.
Philip Brooks writes in O Little Town of Bethlehem,
“**Yet in thy dark street shineth, the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**”

What a statement of faith.
How about if we stand (stand if you are able) and let's sing O Little Town of Bethlehem.