

Title: Transforming Hope

Subtitle: A twofold Gospel focus

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/4OrRUnvOmHc>

As most of you know, today is the first Sunday of Advent. During the next four weeks, we will look back to when Christ first came and prepare for his incarnation in new and refreshing ways. But we will also be looking forward to the completion of the work begun in Christ, when Christ will come again, not in weakness, but in power, not in humility, but as a majestic King who comes to make all things new. This bi-focus view of looking backward and forward often occurs in our Christian life.

Today, a similar two-way focus will occur at our annual meeting. We will honor our past as we remember the highlights of our life together. But we will also take time to look forward as we envision who we are and what God has called us to achieve. Our Gospel today reminds us that God's kingdom "*is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.*"¹ Therefore, we have work to do while we wait for our Lord to return. The idea of waiting in hope may seem to be at odds with the call to work, but it isn't. To work effectively, we need a vision for where we are going. Furthermore, it takes spiritual discernment to keep both in perspective.

Waiting has never been a strength of mine. It seems like I am always in a hurry because I want to squeeze all I can out of life. But the spiritual preparation we are called to exercise brings a needed perspective on life's hustle and bustle. Waiting upon

¹ Mark 13:34

the Lord imparts spiritual vision and wisdom. It renews our strength, and it helps us exercise patience when unwanted obstacles come our way. But exercising patience is always easier said than done.

Recently, my eldest grandson had a temper tantrum over the Thanksgiving holiday during bedtime routines. And I have to admit, my response to his behavior was not a picture of godly patience, and it was something for which I quickly regretted. After apologizing, I spoke to him of my hope that both of us would grow in Christlikeness. I long to be transformed, and I know I am not alone in having that longing. It is part of what it means to be poor in spirit while also hungering and thirsting for righteousness while we wait for the day when all of our salvation will be fully realized.

The Apostle Paul expressed that same desire in his prayers for the Church at Ephesus. In it, he asks that ***“the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation...so that they would know the hope to which God had called them.”***² “The hope promised by the gospel”³ is the expectation of a future day when our salvation shall be complete, when we shall be like Jesus, totally transformed into his likeness. Paul told the Church at Roman, “In this hope we are saved.”⁴ It saves us because it delivers us from despair as we live in a world that seems to be falling apart.

One Christian author wrote, “Our Christian hope acts much like an anchor. It rests deep in the water and prevents us from drifting with the currents, yet it can be raised in order to sail expectantly into the future.”⁵

² Ephesians 1:17-18

³ Colossians 1:23 NRSV

⁴ Romans 8:24

⁵ Exact citation lost. But it comes from [Hebrews 6:19 “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul.”](#)

This journey into a desired future is pictured in the etymology of the word ‘advent,’ for from it, the word “adventure” is derived. This little-known truth brought a whole new way of looking at this season of the Church year, especially since I love taking on challenges that require my best efforts. Yet when I look at prophesies that predict end-time hardships, I find it include a hefty dose of hard-to-hear realism. Especially when Jesus says, ***“There will be distress among nations, confused by the roaring of the seas and the waves.”⁶*** The sea in that analogy is a picture of unstableness. ***“People will faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the earth.”⁷*** ***“But when we see these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.”⁸***

With all the turmoil predicted, we are called to ***“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.”⁹***

When such troubles begin, people will want to medicate themselves and give up. But the hope promised in the Gospel is meant to empower us to endure hardships. It is a hope that infuses us with the strength to face the world as it is and not as we wish it would be. And with God’s help, we can let our light shine amid the darkness so that others will see our good works.

Cornelius (Neil) Plantinga wrote a book called, ***“Engaging God’s World,”*** which graphically illustrates what this hope can look like. In the chapter entitled—“Longing and Hope,” he explains that ***“...anyone who yearns for the second coming hates the same things that God hates and wants the same things that God wants and is working right alongside him for those things.”***

⁶ Luke 21:25

⁷ Luke 21:26

⁸ Luke 21:28

⁹ Luke 21:34

We get a glimpse into what this adventure looks like when classic stories describe the character development that occurs in people through hardships and trials. Similarly, the early Church grew from infancy into maturity when troubles drew them together and gave them a common bond that they uniquely described as ‘*koinonia*.’ They coined that term to express the shared treasure of faith, hope, and love they held in common.

I once heard a story of a woman who woke up between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. When she stepped out the back door, she was amazed to hear dozens of birds singing in the darkness. At that point, she could see no evidence of dawn—the sky appeared dark—but the birds somehow knew the morning was on its way and were greeting it with song.

Isn’t that who we are as Christians, people singing in the dark? People who are waiting with the knowledge that dawn will break even when there is no evidence of it. That is why we celebrate our hope in Christ in the darkest month of the year by lighting candles on the Advent Wreath.

The prophetic word the Advent Wreath symbolizes is “Like a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”¹⁰ It teaches us that we are not without spiritual light, even amid the darkest times. Life’s difficulties are not meaningless. Our Lord has promised to work all things together for our good. Our lives are moving toward an expected goal that has a purpose, which will culminate with the second coming of Jesus Christ. A hymn writer poetically described this glorious vision as “a hope that whispers to us with its welcoming voice, making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.”¹¹ So let us lift up our heads, for our redemption draws near. *Amen.*

¹⁰ 2 Peter 1:19

¹¹ Septimus Winner, “Whispering Hope,” Words of the hymn written in 1868