

## "Hope for the Holidays"

We all know that Christmas and New Year's can be a wonderful time and also a painful time of year. I didn't realize though, till I looked into the research, that increased suicide rates during the holidays is actually a myth. Researchers believe that the increased social activity and events during the holidays leads to decrease in suicide. Nonetheless, the season of joy and giving leads to people being more stressed than ever. While suicide rates decrease during the Christmas season, drug use and unhealthy behaviors increase during this time.

Nielsen reports that alcohol consumption increases dramatically in December and the week leading up to New Year's Eve. The Day before Thanksgiving is one of the biggest partying nights of the year. Moreover, the American Psychological Association found that ½ of American women experienced heightened stress during the holidays and coped with overeating (41%), alcohol use (28%) and other unhealthy behaviors.

The irony is that the focus on family togetherness and the desire to have the perfect Christmas and ideal family holiday gathering many times breeds more loneliness, isolation, and the tension can trigger relapse and increased drug use.

So what is our response as the church and the body of Christ? Isaiah 54:2 instructs us to "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes." The promise is to a barren woman and anyone who feels alone and without hope. God goes on to assure his people, "For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth... but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer."

More than ever, at this time of year, the promise is that we are not alone. Our Lord, Emmanuel has come to be "God with us". We can enlarge the place of our tent and hold nothing back because we prepare for the everlasting kindness, love, and presence of God who will never leave us. Yesterday morning during our weekly time of *Prayer Force*, I was reminded of a scene hiking in the Canadian Rockies near Banff Alberta. It was a scene hiking up a beautiful trail and the scene came to my mind several times while we were praying and meditating on this verse in Isaiah 54. I remembered the scene vividly and it was a point on the trail that overlooked a mountain canyon and the valley below, but then I remembered that spot was only half way up the mountain. I felt impressed that God was encouraging us as a church, to keep going up the mountain to experience more of God, more of his love, more of his presence, more of his hope, more of his redemption, more of his salvation, power and healing for Isanti county and beyond.

May God fill our hearts and enlarge the place of our tent so we can have more of him and see him save and heal more than ever. May this Christmas overflow with Hope at New Hope as we come together to find ourselves, our family, our identity, our joy in Him. May the greatest gift of Christmas be a surrender, a hunger, a desire for the Giver of all gifts, Jesus Himself! God bless you all this Christmas season!

-Pastor John Foley