

SERMON TITLE: Maintaining Hope  
SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 1:5-17

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For the next four Sundays, we're taking a break from our study through the Gospel of John to focus on four biblical themes commonly associated with Advent—hope, peace, love, joy. Today, we will talk about hope. For children, the days of waiting for Christmas go by way too slow. For adults, the days go by way too fast. But the thing is, no matter how long it seems to take, we always get to Christmas, don't we? The date is set—December 25 (just 26 days away). Well, the interesting thing is, this dynamic of waiting is the same dynamic that set up the very first Christmas. You may know this or it might be new information, but for generation after generation after generation, in ancient Israel, there was always a remnant of Jewish people who waited every single day for the arrival, not of Santa Claus, but God's promised Messiah. In ancient Israel, in every single generation, there was a group of people who lived their lives day after day after day, who woke up every single day, hoping, "Today could be the day that God's Messiah will come." But unlike the certainty of our Christmas, for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, people waited and waited for Messiah to come and nothing happened. 99.9% of those people died, and for them, there was no fulfillment of that promise.

Now I want to talk about hope today, and I specifically want to talk about a tension that all of us *have faced or are facing or will face* as it relates to hope. And, it's the tension of trying to maintain hope when there are no visible, tangible, obvious reasons to keep hoping. How do you maintain hope in what seems to be a hopeless situation? That's the question. Sometimes, when we begin to lose hope, we struggle with this question—"What's the point? Why try? Why work this hard for nothing? Why love someone who shows you no love? Why trust God when he hasn't done anything for me lately? At some point, all Christians wrestle with questions like this, so you are not alone. How do you maintain hope in what seems to be a hopeless situation? The Good News is that the Christmas story gives us an answer to that question.

Isaiah 9:1-7 — Isaiah was one of Israel's most prominent prophets. He lived in one of the darkest periods of Israel's history. Israel's rulers, for the most part, had become corrupt. They had allowed flagrant injustice and oppression of the poor to run rampant in Israelite cities and communities. And most people had turned away from Yahweh to worship other gods. Isaiah is rebuking the people for their sin and rebellion against YHWH. He's warning them that if they don't repent, then God is going to bring judgment on them. So, he's warning them that disaster is coming. And it did come. The territories of Zebulun and Naphtali were ransacked, and the land went dark (see 2Kings 15:29). But God also promises here in Isaiah 9 that there will be a future day when the light is turned back on and that day will be a time of peace, joy, and freedom. What will happen to turn the light back on? A king will be born who will set right all that is wrong in the land and he will rule over Israel forever (read the familiar Christmas prophecy there in vv6-7). Interestingly enough, we see that Jesus fulfilled this very prophecy as he began his ministry in Galilee (see Matthew 4:12-17). So, Matthew, and the conviction of all the early Christians, is that when Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, it was the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah 9.

But, think back to Isaiah 9—Assyria conquered Israel, carted them off to slavery, and the light was turned off. And, Israel remained an oppressed people under the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The land was dark for 700 years. But then the King comes and YHWH turns the light back on. But that is 700 years of darkness! That's a long time to wait. But, for 700 years a small group of Israelites held fast to the hope found in Isa9 even though there was no visible, tangible evidence that the promise would come true. Think about it, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, generation after generation after generation—think about all the people who died—99.999% of those people waited and waited and waited for the coming of the Messiah, never seeing the promise fulfilled in their lifetimes. But some of them prayed and waited and they remained hopeful and faithful until the day they died. How is that possible? How do you maintain hope when there is no visible, tangible evidence to keep hope alive?

Luke 1:5-17 — Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist) were two people who never gave up hope. They were both from the priestly line of Israel and they were both "righteous in God's eyes." They kept the commandments and served God faithfully and they maintained hope with no visible, tangible evidence that anything would ever change. But what is even more amazing, they stayed faithful to God despite the fact that God had denied them the thing they wanted most in this life—a child. And in that culture, if a woman was childless, there was a sense that for some unknown reason, God had chosen to curse her. But still, this couple remained faithful to God and his promises.

So, here's the tension between hope and hopelessness I mentioned earlier. It's a tension that can totally undo you. You wrestle with questions like—Why stay faithful to God when God hasn't answered my prayer? Why not just go my own way?

And many, many Jews did turn away from God during that 700-year period of waiting. But not Zechariah and Elizabeth. They remained faithful and hopeful to God's promise when there was no visible, tangible evidence that they would see God's promise fulfilled in their lifetime. And they remained faithful even when they personally experienced a lifetime of disappointment and shame because they couldn't have children. Amazing! Well, God grants them a miracle child in their old age, and their son John will be the one to announce the Messiah's coming. Zechariah realizes this as he prophesies in 1:67-79. Speaking of the coming Messiah, "He will give light to those in darkness and in the shadow of death, and he will guide our feet in the way of peace" (v79). And where is that from? Isaiah 9!

For a follower of Jesus, hope is based on God's promises—on God being faithful to his promises. But also, our hope is based on God's freedom to fulfill his promises in ways we don't expect, in ways that might surprise us, in ways we could have never predicted. That's also a part of biblical hope and this is the tension we sometimes feel as God's people. Just like childless Zechariah and Elizabeth, this is our story, our dilemma as well. When God doesn't come through for you like you hoped—Do you stay, or do you go? Do you continue to believe, or do you chuck your faith? Do you stay married? Do you do the shady deal? Do you maintain your integrity, or do you just do what everybody else is doing? Do you take matters into your own hands, or do you leave things in God's hands?

In every generation, there's a remnant of Christians who have to decide whether or not they will remain faithful to God and the promises of God despite the fact that there is no visible, tangible evidence that God is working on their behalf—no visible, tangible evidence that anything will change—no visible, tangible evidence that God will keep his ultimate promise to send Jesus a second time to set right what is wrong in this world. Will you be a part of that remnant in this generation? In these uncertain times, will you remain faithful to God even if what you're hoping doesn't happen for you? You see, the way you and I maintain hope when there's no visible, tangible evidence to keep hope alive is this—We trust in, rely on, rest in the faithfulness of the God of the Bible. These Scriptures show us that our God keeps his promises. Yes, sometimes he takes longer than we expect, and yes, sometimes the fulfillment of his promises is a bit different than we would have predicted. But that doesn't mean God is not a faithful God. Oh, and this is a big one—You trust that if God says "NO" to the thing you want most, then you know his "NO" is actually a "YES" to something better. If you want a hope that remains hopeful even when life feels hopeless—you trust that God is always at work in your life whether you see it or not, whether it looks like you expect or not, whether it comes in this life or the next. You look beyond what's going on in your life and in this world today, and you stake your life on the fact that you belong to a promise-keeping God.

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#### Discussion Starters —

- Begin by asking the group about what it was like waiting for Christmas to come when they were kids. What kinds of things did you do while you waited? Circle the things you wanted in the Sears catalog? Mark the days off the calendar? Hunt for presents? Find hidden presents and secretly play with them?
- Where have you experienced or are you experiencing the tension between hope and hopelessness in your life? What kinds of things can make you throw up your hands and say, "What's the use?" "What's the point?" "Why stay faithful to God when it doesn't feel like God is faithful to you?" Give time for everyone to add to the discussion. Ask follow up questions like, "Anybody else experience tension like that?", etc.
- Think about the flow of the message—
  - The Prophecy of Isaiah 9
  - The fulfillment of the prophecy by Jesus in Matthew 4:12-17
  - Two people who maintained hope when there was very little evidence to keep hope alive in Luke 1:5-17.
- Then ask: How do these passages of Scripture help you to maintain your hope when there is no visible, tangible evidence to keep hope alive?