

The Light of Hope, the Gift of Christmas

December 6, 2009

Hope. It is the kind of word that is hard to define. It is sort of like the old saying about ART, I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it!

Hope is described in the scripture as the happy and sure anticipation of God's promise. It is the certainty of things that are not yet seen...it is faith squared. It is called Blessed, Good and Living in the Bible, and God is described as the God of Hope. Hope finds its expression in endurance during heavy trials and tribulations as the anchor of the soul in the midst of life's storms—holding us firm through the promises of God.

Christmas is a story of Hope...fulfilled, and Hope that is, and Hope that is yet to come.

The People had longed for God's savior for a long, long time. It had been spoken of and promised since the times of Abraham and Moses, some 2,000 years before Jesus is born. Can you imagine? The fervor with which the people looked for the Messiah was directly proportional to the circumstances in which they lived. If things were fine, and they were in control of their surroundings...they did not look for God's messiah. All was well, and we did not want God to rock the boat. But if an outside power was there and ruled over the, they longed for God's deliverance. They saw the messiah only in political terms. They read into the Bible only what they wanted to see...ignoring most of what it said about the coming of Jesus. Believe me, sometimes we want something so bad, it is easy to read into things our desires.

As time goes by and the Religious leaders and the Kings grow further away from God and practice less justice...God sends more and more prophets to warn them and wake them up! These prophets also tell about the coming of God's savior. Both in Joy—that he would

treasure them and be their God and they would be their people and this messiah would be their shepherd and cradle them and comfort them and bring them to a land of safety and comfort and joy...and to warning, that they were sinning and were abusing the poor and ignoring God's warnings and judgment was coming upon them if they did not change. Prophet after prophet after prophet came, and they were ignored and abused and killed.

But, God's hope endures. And in the fullness of time, Jesus is born. He fulfills the promises of the ages, God's promised messiah, the savior of the world come not in a bolt of lightning, not riding on a stallion or on the wings of a dragon or on a cloud with lightning bolts but being born among us, as one of us. Gentle, humble, kind and loving. Hope is born.

As Jesus lived and taught, he tried to overcome the view of the messiah as the military leader, and the view of God as a God of judgment. Even his disciples reflected the theology of the day. When they came across a person who was born blind, the disciples asked the question on everyone's mind: who sinned, this man or his parents—for someone must have been a fault for God to have punished them so! Jesus' response? NEITHER! God does not punish so!

When a tower fell over during construction, the assumption was that the people building it were cursed by God because of some great sin...NO. someone did something wrong when they designed it or built it...and it fell! When a town in Samaria did not appreciate Jesus' preaching, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy it! No, Jesus said wearily. No, no, no.

The disciples' favorite argument was who was going to be the head general in Jesus' army...they asked again and again "will you now restore Israel?"

That is not what Jesus was about. The Hope of God is not about Jesus coming for one people and their geo-political aspirations. That is something we should remember in this day and age too.

Jesus comes to bring us all hope...hope for the soul. The thread that runs through the Old Testament and New is one of a new relationship with God, based not on our ability to follow some set of rules...but based on God's amazing love for us! God loves us and forgives us and gives us a new life in Christ. What hope do we have of discovering God on our own? None, really. God is so beyond our human abilities and limitations that the only way we could ever really know God is if God chooses to be known. If God chooses out of love to come and be among us in a way that we can understand, can hear and see and touch...So God became flesh and lives among us...and in Jesus the fullness of deity dwells and He is the visible image of the invisible God. In him you can see God and touch God and know what God is like.

That is the hope of Christmas...that the promises of old are fulfilled...that God has come to be among us. That God has been true to his word, and sent his messiah.

In Christmas we see that God loves us. God is not angry, vengeful, nor judgmental. God is also not impatient, but as the Bible says, "in the fullness of time, Christ was born of Mary." Maybe God waited for just the right people: Zachariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph. Maybe it was for the perfect moment in world affairs; the Romans had relative world peace at that moment and for the next 100 years...good roads, good travel, and a universal language in Koinania Greek. Who knows God's timing, but we know that when the time was right, God sent his Son Jesus to be the savior of the whole world for all time. Christmas came, hope was born. God is not slow.

Zachariah sings a song of salvation when he gets his voice back, at the birth of John the Baptist. John is the last of the Old Testament Prophets, and the first of the New Testament Prophets. A person who straddles both. His role is to prepare the way for Christ. He is to help people repent of their old thinking...that they have special privilege

because they are Abraham's children. Because they are the "chosen ones".

He sings

“And You, My Child, will be called a prophet of the most high;
For you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,
To give the people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of sins,
Because of the tender mercies of our God,
By which the Rising Son will come to us from heaven
To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death
To guide our feet in the path of peace.”

John was to prepare the way for Jesus, to give the people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercies of God. What a wonderful call and challenge. That is the hope of this Christmas as well. To give the people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins, because of the tender mercies of God...the rising SON will come to us from heaven and shine on us living in darkness and in the shadow of death and guide us to peace.

This is our hope, this is the promise of Christmas. It is still true today, the Lord is not slow, the hope is still there. Hold onto it. experience it. share it. live it.