Coming to Terms with Christmas: Hope Memory Verse: Psalm 130:5

December 1st. 2024 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 59:1-2; 9-12, 20-21

**SLIDE 1**

 Today we begin our countdown to Christmas as we enter into the Advent season. We have just finished talking about prayer, our child-like need for it and what happens when we find ourselves with unanswered prayers. What do we do when our expectations do not work out. These are times when we enter into the wilderness. The wilderness can be a time of waiting

**SLIDE 2**

…waiting for answers…waiting for action…waiting for something to change.

 Waiting is no easy task…it’s not really even a task. It is an anti-task…you don’t have to accomplish anything to wait…you just have to do nothing but wait. We hate to wait because waiting indicates a waste of time. You could be doing something else. And so that’s why we multitask. While we wait we have little games on our phones, we page trough a magazine, we converse with someone, maybe we sit quietly with our thoughts and ruminate upon the day…but typically, we are driven to stay busy even while we are waiting.

 I recently placed an order with a non-profit ministry called the Pocket Testament League.

**SLIDE 3**

 I wanted some small copies of John’s gospel so I could give them away at the Trunk or Treat event our church was hosting for Halloween. It was a large order and it cost me a fair amount of money. I knew the shipping would take two weeks and I made the order knowing that I would have to wait. I received a confirmation email and even a link to a page where I could track my order and see it’s status. During those two weeks, as I waited, I did not even think about my order. I knew when it was coming and that was all I needed.

 Arrival day came and went, no shipment for me. I shrugged. It’s probably a little delayed. Typical. I guess I’ll have to keep waiting. Halloween came…nothing. This time I do more than shrug, I called up their main office. No answer. I have to leave a message…now I’m waiting for my package AND to hear back from the organization. Trunk or Treat came and went…no package. Weeks later, I receive an email from them telling me that they have had issues with their system and that most orders are actually going out in 4-5 weeks. More waiting.

**SLIDE 4**

And so now you are waiting to hear some sort of end to this story. Well, about six, maybe seven weeks later, my package arrived. It was just what I ordered! But it’s intended use was long past.

 Waiting, especially after an arrival date can be stressful. I had plans for that material. I needed those gospels for a certain purpose and in a certain timeframe. I was disappointed. It was a waste of money AND a waste of time. What if what we wait for does not arrive? And what if what we are waiting for is not just some product we ordered? Maybe we are waiting for a change in our own lives. Maybe we are waiting on the world to change to borrow from John Mayer.

**SLIDE 5**

 As Christians, we wait differently than other people. As Christians we wait in hope. But what exactly is hope? Hope is one of those churchy words that gets extensive use over the holidays. Throughout this Advent season, we are going to take some of those words and analyze them a bit to get to get to the heart of what they really mean. We are “Coming to Terms with Christmas.” We are going to turn to the biblical idea of hope and see how it is used in both the Old and New Testaments.

 In Hebrew, we see basically two different words that we translate as “hope”. The first is based on the word *qav* which simply means “cord”.

**SLIDE 6**

 But if you take a *qav* and pull it tight, you create tension. This is what Hebrews calls *qavah* or hope. Hope is tense. Hope is tightly drawn. Hope is not relaxed, not checked out. Hope is the tension you feel while you wait for something to happen. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God as a farmer who plants a vineyard and then *qavahs* for good grapes READ Isaiah 5:1-4.

**SLIDE 7**

 Like anyone who plants a vineyard, God hopes for; he expects good grapes. There is tension there – a pulled cord – because you never know what might happen. The vines might not produce. But the farmer tends to the vines, cares for them in hope. He lives in the tension of hope.

**SLIDE 8**

 The other word, *yakhal* means “to wait for it”. We find an example of this in Noah’s story in Genesis 8. As the flood waters recede, Noah receives an olive branch from a dove that he had sent out as a scout. No land yet, but some leaves from a tree were a good sing. Noah had to *yakhal* for another week to try the dove again.

**SLIDE 9**

 Micah 5:7 says. “Then the few remaining in Jacob will be amid many peoples like dew from the LORD, like spring shower upon the grass, which does not hope for humans or wait for human ones.” Hope and wait here are *qavah* and *yakhal*. So, to hope is to wait and Hebrew adds the idea of tension to that experience.

 But hope is about more than waiting…hope has an object. In the book of Psalms, we see these words for hope used over forty different times, and in almost every occurrence those talking about hope are waiting for one thing, actually one person…God himself. **SLIDE 10**

**SLIDE 11**

 Psalm 130:5-8 READ.

 The psalmist compares himself twice to a nightwatchman who is waiting for morning. I don’t know if you have worked as a security guard and had to work overnights, but it is a different way to function. You sort of enter into a different headspace. My wife works the overnight shift

**SLIDE 12**

 at the hospital, and I used to work some overnights at Kwik Trip. It certainly is a different world. You know the old phrase, “nothing good happens after midnight” tends to hold true, especially in a gas station. But being up and functioning while the rest of the world sleeps does give you a special craving for the sun. When the sun rises, you know you can catch a little rest. After seeing the hours tick away, it is a relief to have daylight break into the world again. A night watchman cannot do anything but wait.

 But working overnight is not so bad. You know the sun is going to rise. You know when you get to clock out. You know when the shift will be over. Life is not so convenient. Life does not follow such a schedule. Our times of waiting can be indefinite. We may not have any idea when relief will come, or when the night will end.

 But hope assures us that it will.

**SLIDE 13**

Hope assures us that God is faithful…He is love and he brings with him redemption. Hope does not pretend to know the timing of things, hope does not pretend to be able to forecast the future. Hope does not attempt to sidestep the tension. But hope is fully convinced that the fulfillment of God’s promises are coming. They cannot fail!

 And how are we to be convinced? It’s sounds great to say the God’s promises are coming – but it’s also far-fetched…how are we to be convinced? Is hope blind? What reasons do we have to hope in our God?

**SLIDE 14**

We fuel our hope by looking to the past. The past faithfulness of God motivates our hope for the future! This is why it is so important to be mindful of and thankful for the prayers that God answers in our life. Each testimony of answered prayer is another pillar that that supports our hope. Each miracle that we have experienced or heard about, each door that has opened, each blessing that is poured out. We also find God’s past actions in the Bible. We read these stories over and over again so that our hope can be continually built up and our expectation can be strengthened.

 The Christmas story is obviously one that we revisit every year. We talk about how baby Jesus was born in the manger. We know the story and can probably even relay most of the details. But sometimes in the details we loose the overarching main point:

**SLIDE 15**

In Christ, Light has come. Morning has broken like the first morning. The night is over, a brand new day, a day like no other has arrived! And Christmas morning is that occasion. It’s the event we can look to time and time again to refuel our waning hope, to show us once and for all that God is faithful, that his promises are unchanging and that our hope need not die in the darkness of our circumstance. Rejoice in hope! Christ has come!

 Because of Christmas, we can have Easter, and because of Easter, our hope has every reason to remain undaunted. But, as we go into this holiday season, please remember that hope is not for us alone. Christian hope is broad, it is all encompassing.

**SLIDE 16**

 Our hope includes the past, the present, the future. It includes our children, our parents, other relatives, neighbors and even complete strangers and those who might be counted our enemies. Our hope includes animals and plants, rivers and oceans, even other planets, even the entire universe! Our hope is boundless. Here is how Paul puts it in Romans 8:18-21 READ

**SLIDE 17**

 Paul sort of presents here a mathematical inequality in which we find that the coming glory is in fact greater than our present suffering. In fact Paul says there is no comparison. This coming glory will be for us and all of creation. But, we need to wait for it…For the moment, we are subject to frustration. For the moment, we will suffer pain, our plans will be foiled, our relationships will be complicated, our health will fail, our finances will ebb and flow. For the moment we will struggle with sin. But we choose to hope that creation will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into glorious freedom.

 And that is where we end today: with a choice. As we wait, in whom will we place our hope? Many people hope in themselves. They live with the notion that they have to be the ones to manufacture their own light in this dark world. They feel that if they could just become educated enough then they would be able to tighten their grip on the steering wheel of their lives. They seem to think that, while God might be a good idea, he is really more of a backup plan. Remember the words of the Psalm…

**SLIDE 18**

“My whole being hopes…my whole being waits for my Lord.” It is a choice to wait for God. And the psalmist here is like a poker player pushing all of this chips into the pot. He is holding nothing back, he is not hedging his bets here. He is all in! His decision is not based on an astute evaluation of the odds. He is not operating with some sort of misguided optimism, he is not going all in because he is under the influence or because he has lost his mind…And, let me tell you, the hand he has been dealt is nothing great either. The cards he holds are frustrating. The cards he can see don’t stand a chance. And yet, he chooses to hope because he knows the dealer…he is familiar with the One who is running the game. He might break into a sweat as he pushes away his chips. He certainly feels the tension that comes with such a loaded decision. And now he waits to see what the house turns up. Now he must wait to see how it all turns out. The cards have not yet been revealed…will he be rejoicing in the glorious result, or will he be completely ruined.

 Remember my Trunk or Treat story. You might say my transaction was completely ruined. With no gospels I went to the event and just handed out candy. But as I said, they did finally arrive and I thought it fitting to share them with you all. Take a look at the end of your pew and you will find some pocket sized books.

**SLIDE 19**

These are copies of John’s gospel. Please pass them around so everyone gets one. Then I’m going ask you to open up to John 1:1. It reads: READ John 1:1-5.

 I know how it all ends, this life, this world…at least I hope I do. I know light shines in the darkness! Christmas and Easter provide very good reasons why I can and should be all in when it comes to placing my hope in God alone. Christ, the Light of the world, has come! He was born as one of us! He died and rose again! All my money, all my expectations, all my hope is on Him!

Please, take your pocket copy of John and give it away to someone who does not know Jesus, the Light of the world. These books were intended to be handed out to people who might not have faith, that was my hope for them. But there is no sense in following Jesus if you don’t know his story, if you don’t know what he said or what he did. This little book allows people to experience Jesus for themselves. Then they are able to know that light has come. That the darkness cannot persist! Share this good news of the hope that we have with someone else. Take two if you would like. Amen!