“Promise of Redemption” 12/1/18 Sue Black

The past few months we’ve been reading from the Bible’s books of prophecy. Some of the scripture has been hard reading, we’ve read many verses and chapters of God’s judgement and punishment of the disobedient Israelites. But some has been encouraging, sweet reminders of God’s love and redeeming purpose, messages of Hope.

In this Advent season we wait with expectation as we ponder God’s plan for the Messiah, a Savior who made it possible for us sinful people to claim Jesus as our Hope. Today’s part of the journey reveals the one who came first, the one who called out in the wilderness for the people to repent and turn back to the ways of the Lord. Just as we prepare for His birth, John the Baptist prepared the people for Jesus’ ministry.

Our scripture reading is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40 verses 1-5. It’s on page 1120 of your pew Bible. This passage is entitled “*Comfort for God’s People*.” But these words are more than comfort, they are a promise. Listen now for the Word of God.

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,” and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before Jesus started His ministry, John the Baptizer was the opening act. He was a cousin to Jesus, his mother Elizabeth was Mary’s sister. He was brought up a devout Jew, his father was the priest Zechariah. John was charged with reminding the people of the Hope promised by God and to help them focus on God’s plan to bring them back into relationship, back from the separation that happened when evil entered the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve chose to reject their Creator. Under Satan’s influence, they became slaves to sin. God’s answer to sin did not come through mankind’s own efforts to redeem themselves but through the gift of the Son, a gift that we can choose to accept or reject.

Today we light the candle of Hope. Why have a candle of Hope and why is Hope the first candle we light? Made in the image of God and born with a desire to know and be in relationship with our Creator, Hope is essential to who we are. Understanding our limited ability to control what happens around us and to us, Hope keeps us going. Especially during times of struggle, having Hope helps us to be positive and not give up in despair, even when we can’t see the path ahead of us.

The world has different views of hope. “I didn’t really study for this math test. I hope I’ll be lucky and it will be easy or maybe the teacher will grade on a curve.” Or “I’m prepared for my test today, I hope I do well. I think I understand the material. I hope she asks the questions that I know.” Both of these types of hope depend on the situation, our own efforts or the actions of others. Depending on this type of hope may leave us with uncertainly or even dread about our ability to be successful in life.

Even with our best plans, “Work hard, get a good education and meet and marry the right person, raise responsible children, be active and involved in the church and community,” so much can go wrong. Accidents, illness, death, job loss, relationships and best laid plans can change despite our best efforts. Hope that’s based on our strength and desire for happiness will fail.

Hebrews 11:11 says, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* Faith is our true Hope, the certainty in our Savior that what God promises is true and will be fulfilled in His timing. Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, *“For we walk by faith not by sight.”*

The words to one of our favorite hymns bring us this assurance, *“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”*

Scripture teaches us what it means to place our hope in Christ, to allow Him to be our Hope. We can have confidence in His promises, there’s no luck or good fortune involved. The world can’t change them, circumstances can’t alter them. One of His promises is eternal life and a place with Him in heaven when we die. Eternal life that doesn’t start at our physical death but starts the moment we say “yes” to our Savior. Our “yes” may come when we are young and don’t fully understand what we are saying or it may be very tentative, said with faith only the size of a mustard seed. But we know what God can do with mustard seeds.

Saying “yes” means we become children of God, Jesus lives within us, we are reborn, made new. The Holy Spirit awakes with us each morning giving us power and perseverance, allowing us to experience the love and care of God. Colossians 1:27 says, *God has chosen to make known the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you.”* Through His Spirit our lives take on new focus, we want to know Him better, talk with Him, read His Word, reflect the love we feel and out of overflowing gratitude, we want to share our Light with others desiring that they too come to know Him.

As God’s own, Christ lives and works in us and through us but that doesn’t mean we don’t continue to sin. But hear the Good News! God will never change His mind about us, never reject us or move on to someone more faithful. No matter how many times we fail Him, God still chooses us. Our salvation does not depend on what we say or what we do. Paul in Philippians 1:6 says with confidence, *“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.”* God uses even our mistakes and the consequences of our bad decisions to draw us more closely to Him and to bring about His glory and His purposes in the world.

In Deuteronomy 31, when God told Joshua to take over for Moses, to lead the people into the Promised Land, God promised to go with him. *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you or forsake you.”* Our Hope in Christ is steadfast. It’s like the anchor on a boat. The rain may come, the winds may blow and the waves may rise but our Anchor is more powerful than anything.

In Luke chapter 3 John the Baptist taught the people about living so their lives showed a true heart of putting God and other people before themselves and “*The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But One who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize youwith the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the Good News to them.”*

Jesus isn’t just “the reason for the season.” He’s the reason for everyday of our lives.

Let us pray.