

## GOD WITH US BRINGS HOPE

Back in 2017, two long time commercial fishermen named John Aldridge and Anthony Sosinski, set out to fish from Montauk, Long Island. The boat was on autopilot. As they headed out to sea, about forty miles offshore, Anthony was sleeping below deck while John started to get things ready for the catch they would soon begin to haul in. He was at the back of the boat pulling on a handle that was stuck. Suddenly the handle snapped, sending him falling off the back of the boat.

Since the boat was on autopilot it just kept going. As soon as John resurfaced from under the water, he began screaming for help. He knew that there was no way Anthony would ever hear him. He watched as the boat went up and over the crest of a wave, and then it was gone. He was alone, treading water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, without a life vest, thinking this was the way he was going to die.

Can you imagine what that must have felt like? If there's ever been a hopeless situation, that has got to be it. Or is it? As John was trying to calm down and quiet his thoughts of certain death, he realized that his boots were very buoyant. Then he got an idea. He took one off, emptied it out, and pulled it back into the water upside down so that it created an air pocket. It floated! So John stuck his boots under his arms as flotation devices. At least he could stay afloat. A flicker of hope.

John thought of his family and knew that no one, not even Anthony, knew what had happened. No one knew where he was, except maybe the two sharks that were swimming about fifteen feet away. He tried to set goals, starting with just living through the night and making it until morning. Four hours later back on the boat, Anthony woke up and realized John was gone. He called the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard began its search procedures, even though the Coast Guard commander admitted he didn't have much hope of finding John in so much open water.

Anthony found the broken handle and knew what John must have been doing when he went overboard, which also meant he knew the ocean depth of where he would have been doing it. That helped narrow the search. John made it alive to morning and tried to keep his hope alive. But the hours kept passing, and there was no sign of help. Finally he spotted a fishing buoy and was able reach it and climb onto it. This was a new surge of hope. Less than an hour later a Coast Guard helicopter flew nearby and spotted John waving and splashing. They pulled him up to safety. "We've been looking for you for nine hours," the Coast Guard rescue diver told John. He answered. "Well, I've been waiting for you for over thirteen hours!"

Miraculously, John Aldridge survived. What an amazing story of hope. If it were most of us out there bobbing alone in the middle of the ocean, we probably would have given up hope that there was any chance of survival. But hope is like that. Hope is the whisper that maybe, maybe these boots will float if I turn them upside down. If I can just make it through the night... maybe help will find me.

What is hope in your life? Today is the first Sunday of Advent and we are starting a new series called God With Us. God With Us brings hope, love, joy and peace. Today we want to talk about hope. Advent is the season of hope. The word *advent* means "coming" or "arrival," and the season is marked by expectation. The waiting, anticipation and longing for the coming of Christ. Advent is a season that links the past, present, and future. It looks back at the longing that was fulfilled when Jesus was born in a manger 2000 years ago while also remembering and anticipating the fact that one day Jesus will come again.

Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. It is a celebration of God's gift to us. It is a reminder that God's *present to us* is His *presence with us*. To really understand Christmas we have to start at the very beginning. The journey of hope begins at creation. God created us to be in relationship with Him. In the beginning Adam and Eve walked freely and openly with God. He was with us and we enjoyed wholeness and intimacy with God. But you know the story. Adam and Eve chose sin which divided us from God. The result was the brokenness of our world that we know today.

However, God had a plan. The serpent would strike man's heel, but ultimately his head would be crushed. Throughout the bible we see God's plan of redemption unfolding. We see hope coming from the pain and defeat. We see it in God's covenant with Abraham:

Gen 12:2-3 I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

When Jacob encountered God at Bethel, we see this covenant restated and reinforced:

Gen 28:14-15 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

As the years, generations and centuries passed by we see that Israel grew impatient. "How long, O God?" was the cry of the nation. From the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob onward to the time of David and then Elijah and Elisha there was a repeating history of devotion to God and then neglect of God. There was prosperity and there was recession, feast and famine, pleasure and pain. The Hebrew people were not much different from us. When things got good, they tended to forget about God. When things got bad, they cried out for God's help.

Through it all, there was a deep and ongoing longing for God to fulfill His covenant and His promise of a Messiah, who would come to make everything right. This wasn't just a happy idea that drifted in and out of the Israelites' consciousness and culture. This was a deep hope that sustained them and encouraged them, especially through thousands of years of turmoil and uncertain waiting.

In the midst of that long journey of hope came Isaiah. He was called the year that King Uzziah died, which was a time of great trial and uncertainty for the nation. Isaiah warned that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better. He told the people that a foreign army was going to come and destroy the nation. In the midst of this doom and gloom, a message of hope was given. Seven hundred years before Jesus would be born he gave us beautiful words that ring with hope for the coming Messiah. Listen to some of these:

Isa 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isa 9:1-2 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-- 2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

Isa 9:6-7 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Can you imagine living in those day and hearing these words? Can you imagine the hope that would spring in the people's hearts? I doubt that Isaiah really understood all that God was telling him. Perhaps on some level the message of the coming Messiah was understood, but he did not know God's time line for when it all would happen and the Messiah would come. Perhaps Isaiah thought it would be in his lifetime. Perhaps he was wise enough to know that God's work stretched for generations and generations. But those words must have filled him with hope. God's promises fueled Israel on for years and centuries, and his vision of God with Us still fuels hope inside of us today.

Throughout the exile and the eventual return of the nation of Israel to the promised land, the hope continued. They were conquered by the Babylonians and then the Assyrians. The last book of the Old Testament (the book of Malachi) ends with;

Mal 4:5 See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

... and then nothing. For 400 years, God was silent. Nations continued to rise and fall. First the Greeks and then the Romans. Through it all the hope remained. Just imagine how long 400 years really is. Think about it. The nations of Canada and America did not exist 400 years ago. Jamestown Virginia (the first permanent English colony) had not yet been founded – back when Pocahontas saved the life of John Smith. The Pilgrims would not arrive on the Mayflower for another 20 years. Almost all of North America was still unexplored by Europeans. Henry Hudson was just about to discover Hudson Bay. Johannes Kepler was just figuring out his laws of planetary motion. The King James bible had not yet been published in England.

Yes, 400 years is a *long* time, but 400 years of God's silence must have seemed like an eternity. Then we read about a priest by the name of Zechariah who was serving in the temple in Jerusalem. Luke described him as righteous and blameless. He was a good Jewish follower of God and a spiritual leader to his people. He would have been well acquainted with the words and prophecies of Isaiah and he undoubtedly held deep longings for the Messiah who had been promised. One ordinary day Zechariah was going about his priestly duties and God again speaks;

Luk 1:13-17 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth ... 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous -- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

God says that the one promised in Malachi to prepare the way for the Messiah is coming, and will be his son. As a couple they had given up hope of ever having kids, until this happens. Disappointment turned to joy, hopelessness turned to glorious hope. It was such a shock to poor old Zechariah that he cannot believe what was spoken to him and so is made speechless until his son John is born.

Can you imagine the hope that was in Zechariah after his encounter with the angel that day? And then those long 9 months of not being able to share it!

Maybe some of you are thinking, OK Pastor Steve, what is your point? That's all nice and great for them thousands of years ago, but what about today? What about for me? They were not fighting cancer. Their spouse had not just died. They were not living through a pandemic. They didn't lose their job with no warning, with bills to pay and debts stacking up and kids expecting Christmas presents, not to mention just having something to eat on the table.

God is able to take the most hopeless situation and fill it with hope. Like the person who is on the lowest rung of the ladder, God flips it around so they are suddenly on top.

No matter what kind of problems and struggles you are facing right now, no matter what kind of season of darkness and pain you are in, let me encourage you not to abandon hope. Hope is still alive, even in our deepest pain and most hopeless circumstances. Hope is alive because God is with us. How can we know that? How can we find that tiny spark of hope when we're on the verge of giving up? I think there are several ways that all of us can rekindle and reconnect with God's hope during this Advent season, no matter what the circumstances we are facing. Our hope is based on 3 things;

#### 1. Hope is Based on God's Word

We know that God is with us because of the written word that He has left us. These are His promises to us. It is His love letter to us. The bible is a beacon of hope. They are reminders that can penetrate our hearts and spirits and assure us that no matter what we are facing, no matter how bleak tomorrow looks, no matter how bad the pain, God will never leave us or forsake us. And nothing can separate us from Him. Consider these words from Psalm 139:

Psa 139:7-12 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Can you feel the hope in those words? You are not alone. God with Us means that He always will be with us, and nothing in all creation can take that away. Scripture is filled with stories and words and promises that can rekindle a supernatural hope within us. As we move through Advent, let me encourage you to dig into the words of the Bible expectantly. Because God is with us, we can take hope that we are never alone, that He is always working in and among us, and that He is not done yet with His greatest and final work of healing.

Billy Graham once had a New Testament that was falling apart so he sent it to a book-binder. He told the book binder to write on the edge of the book "The New Testament." However, after binding the book the binder felt that the edge was too little to contain the full words so he just wrote "TNT". When Billy Graham came to collect the book, he was first disappointed that the binder did not follow his instructions, but then realized it was a fitting description. God's word is TNT! (TNT means Tri-Nitro-Toluene - an essential ingredient in all bombs)

## 2. Hope is Based on God's Work

Everything that we can see from creation around us and from what God has done in our own lives tells us that He is good. Our hope is based upon our assurance of the character of God. When we lived in Kuwait there was something that we repeated often: God is good, all the time... and all the time, God is good. His goodness gives us hope.

In the book of Mark we read the story of a woman who must have lost all hope.

Mar 5:25-28 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. 26 She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. 27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

For twelve years, this woman had this condition. Doctors had tried to help but it says that was only making things worse. This was a condition that would have affected everything about her, every day of her life. Perhaps she had heard about this Jesus - the stories of miracles and healings. She had heard enough to be convinced that He was good. In an act of desperation there is a rekindling of hope. If I can just touch his clothes, I will be healed. It was a bold hope she held. It was a courageous step. She got through the large crowd that was surrounding him and reached out and touched Him, and received her healing. Then the unthinkable happens. Jesus stops and asks "who touched me?" The crowds and disciples just try to brush off and ignore his comment, but he continued;

Mar 5:32 But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.

We have no idea of how long Jesus just stood there looking around, but for this woman it must have seemed like an eternity. She must have been terrified. Finally, she realizes that she will either have to be found out or confess so she falls in front of Jesus and admits what she had done. Jesus says to her "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

This is our God. This is His character. Jesus is worthy. He was and still is God with Us. He fulfilled Israel's hope for the Messiah when He arrived that first Christmas. He fulfilled humanity's hopes for victory over death when He resurrected that first Easter. And one day He will ultimately fulfill all hope and complete God's work of restoration for all creation.

This is the promise He left us with to give us a foundation of confidence and boldness:

Mat 28:20 ... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

This is a promise worthy to fuel our hope. Because God is true to His character, because of who He is, we can take hope in Him. I have walked with Jesus over 40 years now, and everything I have read or heard or seen about God's character tells me that He is good.

One of the things I hate to do is go to the Dentist. When I was growing up I had some very traumatic experiences with dentists. Since moving to Brampton, I have been going to Doctor Neville – who is also the chair of our Board of Elders. I have had 2 root canals in the past few years which are very painful. You sit in the chair and you are in pain and you have no idea of what is happening, but you trust the one who is working on you, and in the end everything is OK.

### 3. Hope is Based on God's Witness

The third way we can find and choose hope is by focusing on our personal experience or witness of God's faithfulness. How has God worked in your life? What are those moments and memories when you have experienced God's help in the past? Maybe it was this week. Maybe it was years ago. Either way, it was a time in your life when you knew without any doubt that the presence of God's Spirit was with you. Gratitude breeds hope. Thankfulness fosters hope. Acknowledgment and appreciation bring hope. Listen to these words from Jeremiah found in Lamentations;

Lam 3:21-23 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: 22 Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. 23 They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Jeremiah understood that there is hope in the future when we remember what God has done in the past. He knew that hope sparks like a fire. It flows like water. It grows like a seed. Hope grows and spreads like a living thing. It can also dwindle and wane and, yes, even die. But with nurture and care, it can revive and flourish and multiply.

Focusing on gratitude can renew and grow our hope. Recognizing and appreciating the good that God has shown us in the past can increase our hope for all He will do in the future. Sharing this gratitude and hope with those who love and support us can multiply its effects. As we nurture this living hope, it can sustain us through our darkest days as we wait for God to move.

Today is the 79<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. What many people do not know is that the day after Pearl Harbor (Dec 7 1941) came the bombing of the Philippines. Gen. Douglas MacArthur was the commander of the American forces stationed there. When the Philippines was attacked there was no way that the American and Filipino forces could win. President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to escape to Australia to organize the American war effort from there. MacArthur loved the Filipino people, and he wanted to stay and fight with them. However, he obeyed his orders. He escaped in a submarine through enemy controlled water and made it safe to Australia. At that time he got on the radio and sent a message of hope to the Philippine resistance movement: "I came through, and I shall return." The people were strengthened by MacArthur's promise. They knew that MacArthur loved them and that he would not abandon them. When life became nearly impossible during the occupation, they whispered to each other: "MacArthur will come back! MacArthur will return." On Oct 20, 1944, Gen. MacArthur kept his promise. American forces landed on Philippine soil and began the fight to free them. MacArthur stood on that beach that day and uttered his most famous quote, "To the people of the Philippines: I have returned. By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil."

As glorious an event as that was, it cannot hold a candle to the return of the King. We celebrate Christmas, and we remember when Jesus came as a baby and entered into our world. The next time He comes, it will not be as a baby. It will be as the almighty King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We do not know when that day may be, but we do know it is sooner now than it was a year ago. One day in the not too distant future Jesus will return and take us home. The devil will be destroyed and our current history will be replaced with eternity. We will be made new and never again will there be death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. By God's grace He will accomplish all of this. The return of the King is certain, even if the timing of the return is unknown.