

HELPFUL HOPELESSNESS

2nd in the series: There's Something About That Name

Isaiah 7: 10-17, Matthew 1: 18-24

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When you have given up and lost all hope, there is nothing quite so irritating as someone trying to cheer you up. It might be something as simple as your team losing badly. There could be a few minutes left in the fourth quarter of a football game and your team is down three touchdowns. You are rightfully grumbling and swearing when someone says to cheer up, they might come back. You say that they can't; there is not enough time. Well, they cheerily say that there is always next week. You have to explain that next week will be no different. The team stinks, which is why they are down three touchdowns with a few minutes left to play. All you want is to throw up your hands and mutter. You don't want to hear about hope.

That's just a game, of course, but the same can be said about the serious times of life. Your business is failing, or your marriage is failing, or your health is failing, or your...(you fill in the blank), and you have tried everything you know how, and you know you cannot stop it, and the feeling is crushing. You need someone to commiserate with you, someone who understands there is little time left and you are going to lose. What you do not need is the smiling optimist telling you it is going to work out just fine. Maybe in time. Maybe when you are more ready to hear that, then some encouragement will be more welcome. But on the day that all seems lost, the eternal optimists are just irritating.

I rather think this was how King Ahaz felt about Isaiah in our lesson this morning. Ahaz was the king of Judah. During that time Assyria was a world power out conquering anyone and everyone. Ahaz's cousins from the north, in the tribe of Ephraim, had teamed up with the army in Damascus to combine their forces in hopes of stopping the Assyrians. They asked Ahaz to join them. He said no. So, the Ephraimites and Damascans decided to attack Jerusalem, capture it, and install a different king who would be open to their invitation.

Ahaz knew that he did not have the power or the army to stop them. No matter what he did, Judah was going to fall, he would be deposed, probably killed, and for what? In time the angry Assyrians would wipe them all out. He felt so hopeless that, in a real way, he was already defeated. He needed the prophet Isaiah to commiserate with him, to say that you're right, you're toast. Better run for it while you still can.

Instead, Isaiah told him that things were going to be fine, that God had it under control. You don't believe me, he prodded? Ask God for a sign. Anything. Ahaz, trying

to act pious, said no that he would not put God to the test. What he was really saying was shut up. It's over. Suit yourself, Isaiah told him. God is going to give a sign anyway. A pregnant young woman is going to have a son and name him Immanuel. Before that child is old enough to make moral decisions, these two kings causing you trouble will be gone.

That's the sign? How is some baby being born a sign? The significance of this prophecy is in the name to be given the soon-to-be-born child: Immanuel. The name means *God with us*. Interestingly, in this prophecy Isaiah was actually agreeing with Ahaz. He was telling him, you're right. You do not stand a chance. You don't, but God does. He was not giving Ahaz a pep talk – you can do it buddy. He was giving him a faith talk. Trust in the Lord's care. No matter what it looks like, God is with us. It is a talk Ahaz initially refused to hear, but he came around, largely because he had no choice. After all, he had no hope but God.

This is sad in one way. Ahaz might as well trust God because he had no other choice. There's a great faith witness. In another way, though, it is a faith witness. Think about this for a second. Hopelessness is what caused Ahaz to be open to the work of God.

As is our habit, Amanda and I spent some time talking about this Advent series – what did we think was important? What did we want to say? We agreed that we wanted to sound a note of hope, because we are experiencing a loss of hope among so many, for so many reasons. She shared some of that last week. We talked about how devastating hopelessness is. It drains us of our spirit, paralyzes us from taking action, and leaves us feeling helpless and lost and defeated. We agreed that it is a terrible thing to lose all hope.

But this exchange between Isaiah and Ahaz raises the question: is hopelessness always all bad? Mostly, I would say. Almost always, I would say. Almost always, but not always, always. There is a time when hopelessness can actually be helpful. This is counterintuitive, but this is why. Hopelessness strips us of all pretense. It strips us of all arrogance and pride and the belief that we have the power to solve all things. Hopelessness drives us to our knees, forcing us to acknowledge our dependence on God.

This sometimes has to happen. Look, Ahaz was a king. You know how kings are. Do you think that if Jerusalem was fortified enough and his army was large enough and his military skill was great enough, that he would have paid any attention to Isaiah or given God a second thought? I don't. He would have told Isaiah to get lost, he would take care of things himself.

This is my guess because this is what people do, not just Ahaz. We see it in the Bible and we see it in our own lives. Every time things started going poorly for the Israelites, their first thought was not that we need God. Their first thought was that we need a better king. We need another king just like David. Things were good when he was

on the throne. When Assyria was on the move, the tribe of Ephraim did not think we need God. They thought we need an alliance. What about us? When we experience local, national, and international violence and social disruption, everyone's first thought is not that we need God. The first thought covers a range including we need a bigger army, we need more police or fewer police, we need fewer guns or more guns, we need a wall, we need a new president or new congress, we need more prisons, we need security guards at our churches and schools, we need metal detectors in public places, we need this, we need that. And then, after we have exhausted the list or discover that there really is no end to the list, we might say, "Oh, maybe we need to pray and ask for God to save us." Sometimes it takes a state of hopelessness to truly open ourselves to the work of God.

I don't know. I don't want us collectively, or any one of us individually, to feel hopeless. Hopelessness is a nasty thing. But here is what I am thinking. We are in a season of waiting for a coming Messiah. We are looking for the Lord to come, and it will be a big day on Christmas when we celebrate the birth of that Messiah. But do we really grasp, truly comprehend just what a stupendous event this is? This is not just a commemoration of a historical event. I mean, we are not actually waiting for Jesus to be born. Jesus has already been born. We are waiting for Jesus to come in glory, to take this world by the ears and give it a good shake, to set things right according to God's intention in creation.

And here is the thing. Only Jesus can do that! Oh, we can make some things better. We can shine some light in the darkness around us. We can make some positive differences in some negative situations. We are not helpless and we are not free of responsibility. But if we think that we have the power to rid this world of the evil that has gripped it throughout history that we are the generation that will solve the underlying issues of hate, violence, greed, and godlessness, then we are seriously deluding ourselves. In that case we might as well forget celebrating Christmas because what we really are saying is that we do not need a Savior. We will take care of it ourselves, thank you very much. Given how many people are now talking about Jesus as a choice and not a necessity, talking about Jesus as someone we can take or leave, follow or not, I fear that is what many actually do believe. They believe we do not need a Savior.

If that is true, we need a dose of helpful hopelessness to get us to understand just how much we do need a Messiah. Because as long as we think it is in our power, within our ability, to usher in the kingdom of God, we will be frustrated and disappointed and lost.

Helpful hopelessness gives integrity and heart to our prayer: O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. Helpful hopelessness gives urgency to our plea: Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. Helpful hopelessness taught

Ahaz and can teach us that deliverance does not come through alliances or military might or our own power or anything else other than divine intervention by a God who keeps promises. And God's promise is to be with us. How do we know? Because this is the name given. Emmanuel. God with us. God with us. Not God above us or God nearby or God not too far away. God with us. Emmanuel is the name that moves us from helpful hopelessness to helpful hopefulness because this name gives us confidence to trust in the Lord's care.

Isaiah could not have known what woman was going to bear a son to be named Emmanuel. We know, because it is made clear in Matthew. After Joseph was instructed in a dream to marry Mary and accept the coming child as his own, with the name Jesus, the name we will talk about next week, it is said that this is the child Isaiah was talking about. And this child, though in the lineage of King David, was not going to be just another king who could maybe get some things accomplished. This child was a holy child, the very Son of God, the very presence of God in our midst. This is the true source of our hope; the reason we do not have to be hopeless in any situation. God is with us.

There is an awful lot going on in our country and world today, all piled on top of whatever is going on in our own lives. It can be overwhelming. And I do not know what all of the solutions are or how we will get out of some of the messes we are in. What I do know is that, if it is all up to us, there is no hope. And I do know that some days it can feel that way.

That is when we want to remember the source of our true hope, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. Remember that we have a wonderful counselor, mighty god, everlasting father, prince of peace. Remember God is with us.

Maybe you are feeling hopeless, or close to hopeless this morning for reasons known or unknown. I don't want to be that irritating person glibly trying to cheer you up. I do, though, want to say, unequivocally, that there is hope. I do not know exactly what you are going through right now, but whatever it is, there is hope. I can say that without any doubt, not because I know what the solutions are, or because I have confidence that there are experts who know what the solutions are. I can say it without any doubt because God is with you. You may not see him just now. You may not hear him just now. You may not recognize him just now. But that does not mean that God is not here and acting. God is with you and you can trust in the Lord's care.

How do I know? Because his name is Emmanuel. There's something about that name.

Amen.