

WHERE THERE'S HOPE, THERE'S LIFE
Isaiah 2:1-5

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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The poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.

Here we are in December. December is not so much another month as it is another mood. We start talking about faith, hope and love just because it's December. We send greeting cards to people we have seldom seen all year. We decorate our houses with greenery hoping this symbol of life will become real. We string lights around our homes, hoping against hope to chase the dark away. It's December.

I want to spend these December Sundays talking about hope, about real hope, about spiritual hope. Or as Helen Neimast said, "Waiting with hope is an affirmation that God – not you or I – is in charge, and that God is faithful, worthy of our hope."

I'M HOPING THAT THE LORD WILL BE EXALTED this holiday.

Isaiah 2:2: *In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be raised above the hills, all the nations shall stream to it.*

Maybe it's time to move to higher ground. The mountain that Isaiah mentioned is Mt. Moriah. It's where Abraham learned that child sacrifice was not the way of the Lord, it's where David learned that he could pray for the release of plagues on his people, and it's where Solomon built the temple. It is where the laws of the Lord were kept and the ways of the Lord were practiced. Let us go up to the mountain, the highest mountain of all.

Oatman Johnson wrote over 100 years ago:

My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Tho' some may dwell where these abound
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.

May your aim be higher ground, this December.

A couple of months ago, I radically changed my prayer life. Instead of praying to get well, I started praying that God would be glorified in my life. Instead of asking God to help me not make a fool of myself in worship, I started praying that I may be a fool for Christ. Instead of praying that our services would be attractive and the sermons would be relevant, I started praying that God would be exalted in everything that was said and done in this place.

Hope is the untiring conviction that we are not permanently locked in our various predicaments. Hope stems from confidence in God.

Isaiah 2:3 *Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*

There is no doubt that you will be busy the next 30 days. That is not the question. The question is, are you going to be any better this month? Will you be busy with things that matter?

Our problem is that we try to manufacture hope. We trim a tree, we hang some lights, we pack our schedules with things to do and places to go. We take a few trips down memory lane. This is not where hope lies. Hope is not to be found in the things we do.

We can even engulf ourselves in religious activities, sing the Messiah, listen to the cantatas, engage in a thousand ways to help the needy, and still wind up feeling hopeless, because we have failed to encounter God, to learn his ways and walk in his paths. Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. Let us rise up to the place where we may learn God's ways and walk in his paths.

Let me say it plainly:

Our hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But holy lean on Jesus Name.

I'm hoping today that God will be exalted in all that we do and all that we say. Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and there learn to worship with all of our being. Let him fill our hearts and minds and souls with hope because hope alone lies in God.

I'M HOPING THAT PEACE WILL REIGN this holiday.

Isaiah 2:4: *He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war any more.*

Where have all the prophets gone? Name me one person on the national scene who is articulating Isaiah's vision of peace for our time.

Have we become so obsessed with our own prosperity that the pains of the world simply pass us by? Who's casting that vision for the world today? Have we lost it?

Perhaps we have all become realists, dismissing Isaiah's vision as nothing more than a pipe dream of naïve people. Does this beautiful poetry have any punch in the light of reality? Who are we if we give up on such idealistic dreams? Who's casting the vision for peace on earth in our day and our time?

Samuel Johnson said, "Where there is no hope, there can be no endeavor." It takes great hopes for there to be great people. The great prophets of history have been able to lean forward confident in the memory of what God has already achieved in Jesus Christ.

What would it take for us to dedicate ourselves to peace? What would it take for you to become a peace-maker today? Peace-makers are people of prayer. Are you praying for peace? Are you interceding to God on behalf of the needs of the world, are you praying for an end to this war? Are you praying for peace?

An article in the Williamson A.M. Friday told the story of Rev. E.M. Bounds. I've known the name E.M. Bounds since seminary days when I read his books on prayer. What I did not know was that he fought and was wounded in the Civil War Battle of Franklin. He was taken prisoner by the Union Army, but when he was released, he devoted himself to giving Confederates a decent burial and leading prayer meetings in Franklin First Methodist. He started with just a little group of people. Over 150 people were converted when the heavens opened and a revival broke out in that struggling church. Much of the life of Franklin First Methodist Church today can be traced back to E. M. Bounds and a little group of people who started praying. They started praying for something better than war.

Do you pray for peace? Do you petition the Lord on behalf of the war-torn countries of the world? Do you pray for your own "peace that passes all understanding?"

Peace-makers are people of love. They are willing to lay down their swords of hatred that inflict wounds on others. They are dedicated to the common good. They do not seek their own way; they seek the best way for all involved. *Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you.* It is the Christian way. When will we have enough sense to pursue it?

Peace-makers resist the forces of evil, and work for justice. When people join this congregation we ask: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world?" That's a tough question.

It takes hard work to beat swords into farming tools. Are you willing to extend the energy, endure the blood, sweat and tears?

Cicero said "While there is life, there is hope." I choose to say it another way – "Where there is hope, there is life." You see, if you have life and have no hope, you're not really alive, you are just existing. But where you have hope, regardless of the nature of your life, you are alive. You are really alive. Then you dare to dream dreams that people would call impossible, even dreams that nations would one day learn to study war no more.

May you have a hopeful Christmas!

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