

ADVENT 2017



L i v i n g
in the
L i g h t
of

HOPE



Welcome to Living in the Light of Hope

There is no denying that 2017 has been a hard year, so much destruction, loss and tragedy for so many people. Maybe even now, in your own life, darkness threatens to envelop you with persistent negativity, and fatalistic despair. There is no denying that darkness is always nearby and is ever present in every soul.

Advent is a time to fearlessly acknowledge the dark shadows that surround the world and our own reality. Where are the dark places in your life? Advent is a time to wait there and discover a courageous hope from within the darkness. Sometimes finding hope can seem impossibly hard, yet this is what God tells us to do. The psalmist puts it this way, “*For you give me hope, O Lord; I have trusted in you since I was young.*”¹ Trusting that God is *for* us is the beginning of true hope. Trust allows us to wait with a deep longing and eagerly anticipate the coming of God’s light into the shadowed places. Ruthlessly trusting God gives us the boldness to hope through our daily anxieties and relieves the chronic fear of meaninglessness.

Living in the Light of HOPE is not about certainty. It is not some kind of mental projection of a future we want or false optimism in the face of solid evidence. It is not a last ditch, “Hail Mary” response to life’s circumstances. *Living in the Light of HOPE* is the condition of the Christian soul even when we cannot see the road ahead. This deep and powerful sense of hope is a defiant posture against every bleak condition, a reliable shield against despair and a rebellious protest against the inhumanity of humanity. Hope trusts that love is stronger than hate and that violence will eventually give way to peace. Hope knows that God is always at work, around us and within us. This is the hope that compels us to light an Advent candle against the darkness of our world.

We bear this Advent hope together, strengthened by the space between us. May your holy work of sharing and listening deeply in the safety of a small group find you *Living in the Light of HOPE*.

In faith and hope, **Bob Brown**

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WEEK ONE

The Light of Hope Within

Main Point

The light of hope within each of us is not merely the key to a meaningful life; it also enables us to make sense of our world.

Idea

Life surely has its ups and downs. Most of us have experienced great joy and happiness as well as deep sadness and despair. The antidote to despair is hope. Hope is different from optimism, positive thinking, joy, or faith. One way to describe hope is that it is the expectation and anticipation of positive outcomes and the belief that one can influence one's destiny in a positive way. Indeed, hope lies at the core of our ability to face challenges and to triumph in the face of adversity. While hope can be narrowly viewed in a secular way, it is through a spiritual lens that we see the full prominence and power of the light of hope within us.

- How do you relate to this description of hope?
- How do you define hope?
- How does your Christian belief provide or bolster your hope?
- In what ways is Christianity a religion of hope?

Romans 15:13 (NIV): *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God in human form. In Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection we glimpse his pain and we understand that he has experienced our pain. Indeed, God became human so that we can fully be human!

- What are your sources of spiritual hope?

Psychologists have amassed a huge body of evidence that hope is essential to an enriched life. Hopefulness is a strong predictor of emotional satisfaction. A sense of hope is positively associated with productivity at work and performance in academic pursuits. Scientists have shown that hopeful people tolerate injury and pain better than their less hopeful peers by releasing endorphins and enkephalins and thereby blocking pain. By way of example, one study found that people who score high on a psychological scale designed to assess extent of hope were better able to bear up in dire circumstances, for example, following spinal cord injury. Among many important factors that influence lifespan, research has shown there is an association between hopefulness and longevity.

Vaclav Havel was a writer, a political dissident in Czechoslovakia, and in his last 10 years of life was the first president of the Czech republic.

“Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t. Hope is not a prognostication—it’s an orientation of the spirit. You can’t delegate that to anyone else.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed.

Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope." --from *The Politics of Hope* by Vaclav Havel

- Is there a spiritual component in The Politics of Hope or recent scientific findings about hope?
- When you hear "I hope the Red Sox win the World Series," is this the same kind of hope that Vaclav Havel and psychology are speaking about?
- Why or why not?
- Is the hope provided by Jesus more meaningful or more permanent for you than hope in the secular domain?

"All that the downtrodden can do is go on hoping. After every disappointment they must find fresh reason for hope." --Alexander Solzhenitsyn

"The antidote to quiet despair is quiet hope."
--unknown

- When you have found yourself in despair, what has turned things around for you?
- Was the turnaround internal or external?

Now consider the slightly abridged verses of **Lamentations 3** (RSV) of the Old Testament:

I am one who has seen affliction
 under the rod of God's wrath;
² he has driven and brought me
 into darkness without any light;
³ against me alone he turns his hand,
 again and again, all day long.
⁴ He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
 and broken my bones;
⁸ though I call and cry for help,
 he shuts out my prayer;
⁹ he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
 he has made my paths crooked.
¹¹ he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
 he has made me desolate;
¹² he bent his bow and set me
 as a mark for his arrow.
¹⁴ I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
 the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
¹⁷ my soul is bereft of peace;
 I have forgotten what happiness is;
¹⁸ so I say, "Gone is my glory,
 and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
²¹ But this I call to mind,
 and therefore I have hope:
²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
 his mercies never come to an end;
²³ they are new every morning;
 great is your faithfulness.
²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul,

“therefore I will hope in him.”

²⁵The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.

⁵²Those who were my enemies without cause
have hunted me like a bird;

⁵³they flung me alive into a pit
and hurled stones on me;

⁵⁴water closed over my head;
I said, “I am lost.”

⁵⁵I called on your name, O Lord,
from the depths of the pit;

⁵⁶you heard my plea, “Do not close your ear
to my cry for help, but give me relief!”

⁵⁷You came near when I called on you;
you said, “Do not fear!”

⁵⁸You have taken up my cause, O Lord,
you have redeemed my life.

- What are some of the feelings expressed in verses 1-18? Despair? Desolation? Abandonment? Affliction?
- What are some of the feelings and thoughts expressed in verses 21-26? Thinking about verse 24, what does it mean to hope in God?
- In Lamentations 3, why might the lamenter transition from despair to hope?
- Think of a time or times when you have felt despair. How did you transition from despair to hope? What can make this difficult? Easier?
- What kinds of emotions are expressed in verses 52-58? How easy is it for you to relate to these verses?
- What frames your hope?

If you choose to, feel free to read the next quotations and then silently reflect -- perhaps for several minutes -- upon what you have been discussing.

“Thinking of hope as a virtue, in a world that thinks of hope as the fancy of dreamers and children, turns religion upside down. Without hope, evil is a state of life and failure is a given. With hope, no amount of failure is an excuse to despair. “Constant has been my hope in you,” the psalmist says. “Constant.” Whatever you regret in life, whatever you have done that you fear, put it down; hope in God, be at peace. Constantly.

–Joan Chittister

“If faith puts us on the road, hope is what keeps us there. It enables us to keep a steady eye on remote ends. It makes us persistent when we can’t be optimistic, faithful when results elude us. For like nothing else in the world, hope arouses a passion for the possible”

--William Slone Coffin

Some final quotations for reflection and discussion:

“The Christian leader is one of hope...without hope, we will never be able to see value and meaning in the encounter with a decaying human being and become personally concerned....” --from *The Wounded Healer* by Henri Nouwen

“Whenever you see darkness, there is extraordinary opportunity for the light to burn brighter.” --Bono

- What do you hope for?
- Where do you find your hope?

WEEK TWO

The Light of Hope of God

Main Point

The light of a transcendent God illuminates a path leading to blessings and hope.

Idea

Life's pendulum swings between sadness and joy, and also between discouragement and hope. External events – as well as internal states of mind – tilt the pendulum in one direction or another. In contrast to life's shifting events and moods, the love and forgiveness of Jesus is a fixed and firm "rock" on which we can always rely. God's love is stated simply and powerfully in the New Testament:

John 3:16 (NIV): *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

- Is John 3:16 the ultimate statement of humankind's redemption and hope?
- How do you define hope? Is hope important? Or is hope a naïve gesture given the failed state of our world? Might hope be a useless distraction inasmuch as it draws our attention away from things that are wrong and are in desperate need of urgent action?

Rather than being a passive surrendering to circumstance, true hope is about being active and working to bring about the change we desire. This is a hope of fulfillment and it is enacted when we take concrete steps to do good – even perhaps in the context of tragedy. As we become more practiced in the art of hoping, we become more capable of tackling life’s challenges. Two months ago there were hurricanes in the Caribbean and earthquakes in Mexico, and hundreds of people were killed. A man was interviewed on the news discussing his hope that victims would be found alive. As he was talking, many responders were digging through the rubble hoping to locate and rescue victims. And after having been buried – sometimes for days – victims who were lost were indeed rescued.

- Do you think that God is active in the everyday affairs of people?
- Do you experience the hope of God through everyday blessings? Or is God more real to you as a result of a life-changing event?
- Have you experienced a miracle?

“Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I don’t think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains.”

--Anne Frank

Matthew 19:26 (NIV): *“Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

- Are you reassured by these quotations? If so, how?
- What do you hope for from God?

Real hope is anything but superficial or shallow. Indeed, hopefulness is necessary for spiritual and psychological health and emotional wellbeing. The opposite of hope is fear and despair. Despite our fears, God is with us, especially during times when we feel darkness closing in, as is beautifully written in the Psalms:

Psalm 23:4 (KJV): *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.”*

- Do you look for the light of God when the darkness closes in? How does God show you His light when darkness is all around?

Psalm 107: 29 (GNT): *“He calmed the raging storm, and the waves became quiet.”*

Mark 4:35-41(NIV): *“That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”*

- How can we access our hope when the storm surges around us?
- Have you experienced a personal storm? Did you understand God’s presence alongside you at that time?

Scripture tells us there is light and hope at the very end of our days:

1 Corinthians 15:55 (NIV): *“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”*

- Is the hope God provides to you more oriented towards this life or the next?

If you choose to, feel free to read the next quotations and questions and then silently reflect -- perhaps for several minutes -- upon what you have been discussing.

John 1: 1-5 (NIV): *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

- In what ways are you or those around you witnesses to the light of God?
- How does this passage speak to you? Given how this passage extends through all of space and time, does the passage provide you with existential reassurance and hope?

Some final quotations for reflection and discussion:

“The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.” --Barbara Kingsolver

**“Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -**

**And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -**

**I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.”**

--Emily Dickinson

**“It is better to light a single candle than to curse the
darkness.” --unknown**

- What do you hope tomorrow will bring?

Notes

WEEK THREE

Living Into a Life of Hope

Main Point

The light of hope, illuminated for us by God, can inspire faithful people who experience hope even in the darkest of times. Their hope is often the light that touches the rest of us and provides inspiration in our lives.

Idea

Building hope begins by filling yourself with God's thoughts, and starting to think and act like Him. Since He loved others, ask Him to let you be a vehicle -- to love others through you. He sent his Son to serve others, so you can choose to serve others, too. Jesus died for others, so the least you can do is to live for others. During Advent, try putting others first and then see what happens.

1 Peter 1:3-4 (The Message): *What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven - and the future starts now!*

- Think of a time when you have consciously put others first without expecting anything in return. How did it go? Were there any surprises?

Choosing hope in difficult times may feel impossible until we look at those who have done just that and understand their circumstances. The verses from Romans challenge us to wrestle with difficulty:

Romans 5:2-5 (The Message): *And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand -- out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. There's more to come: we continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary -- we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!*

God asks us to “rejoice” in our suffering and follow the chain from suffering to endurance to character to hope. John McCain, when he was imprisoned in North Vietnam, found the strength to refuse to go home ahead of other POWs or accept any special privileges because his father was the Commander in Chief of US forces in Vietnam. Because of that, he was tortured for 1½ years. How did he sustain hope? In his autobiography, he writes, “I was finding that prayer helped. It wasn't a question of asking for superhuman strength or for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead. It was asking for moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing. I asked for comfort when I was in pain, and sometimes I received relief. I was sustained in many times of trial. I had a lot of time to think over there, and came to the conclusion that one of the most important things in life—along with a man's family—is to make some contribution to his country.”

- Has there been a time when God poured His love into your heart? Were you paying attention?
- Who are your role models for sustaining hope in times that feel full of despair?

In Job we learn about the resilience of tree roots, and how they can sprout in the most challenging of circumstances.

Job 14:7-9 (ESV): *For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put out branches like a young plant.*

Similarly, when people find hope in a jail cell or in a POW camp or while leading a hunger strike, that hope must be transformative. Even more, the ending of a life does not mean the ending of the ideals and purpose that are the essence of that life. When a victim of a terrorist attack, beloved in our community, dies and his wife rejects hate -- instead turning toward love, creating a movement for peace and justice in the world -- then hope wins. Those roots Job talked about come alive to make something beautiful. As Christians we are called to live into that hope, and we have plenty of examples to study, to see how hope can be borne in times of darkness, and to see how the hope of eternal life can inspire us to live life bravely.

“The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don’t wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope.” --Barack Obama

“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”--Desmond Tutu

“TO BE HOPEFUL in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.” --Howard Zinn

“There is a saying in Tibetan, ‘Tragedy should be utilized as a source of strength.’ No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is, if we lose our hope, that’s our real disaster.” --Dalai Lama XIV

- In what ways does a community act like the tree? What are some examples from a community of which you are a part?
- With a partner, choose a quote and discuss how it has bearing on a particular event happening in the world. Is the author’s advice relevant and true in your experience?
- Consider again faith and hope. How are they different? How are they similar?

As this Advent series ends -- and if you choose to -- silently reflect for the next several minutes upon the following two challenges in the context of what you have been discussing.

1. Consider how to make hope a part of your spiritual routine. During the holidays, notice how reaching out to help others can lift your own mood and brighten your day.
2. Consider setting a goal to pay attention to the power of one person's hope and the ripple effect it can have.

Some final quotations for reflection and discussion:

“Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak shit anyone can throw at us.”

--Anne Lamott

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” --Martin Luther King Jr.

“There is neither happiness nor misery in the world; there is only the comparison of one state with another, nothing more. He who has felt the deepest grief is best able to experience supreme happiness. We must have felt what it is to die, Morrel, that we may appreciate the enjoyments of life.

“Live, then, and be happy, beloved children of my heart, and never forget, that until the day God will deign to reveal the future to man, all human wisdom is contained in these two words, ‘Wait and Hope.’”

--Alexandre Dumas

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.” --Thomas Merton

“Everything will be okay in the end. If it’s not okay, then it’s not the end.” --Bob Brown’s office wall

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TriCon's Small Groups series are sponsored
by the Christian Education Committee.

If you have any questions about the Small Groups Program, please
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HOPE