

SERMON TITLE: "Hoping for What?"

SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 64:1-9

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: December 3, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Several months ago, I participated in a Zoom meeting for a conference committee. The meeting began with a devotion. The person in charge of the devotion told us about a new book she had read that told about some different types of hope. One was "realistic hope," like: I hope we get snow this winter, I hope that we have snacks after worship, or I hope that I will be able to visit my relatives next year. A second type of hope was "utopian hope." That's a great big, giant hope for our society and the world. An example would be, I hope peace can come to the Middle East, or I hope we can find a solution for climate change. A third type of hope described in the book was "chosen hope." The author described that as a willingness and intentional choice to endure difficulty and sacrifice in the present time in order to help bring about a hoped-for outcome in the future. The fourth type of hope discussed in the book was "transcendent hope." Transcendent hope could be a generalized optimism in life that rises above whatever adversities are happening now. Transcendent hope could also be that comforting heavenly belief that, someday, in eternity, all will be well.

I'm telling you about this because today's Advent theme is hope. While we might read useful books about hope written in recent times, hope has been a part of human life since the beginning. And, I dare say, we people of faith are always negotiating within our own hearts and minds what is the right kind of hope. Does 7-year-old Jeremy dare hope that Santa will bring him a certain expensive toy? Does 27-year-old Alyssa dare hope that she might succeed in her career? Does 47-year-old Stuart have the right to hope that he might finally fall in love? Is it reasonable for 77-year old Mary to hope that her medical treatment will bring about a restoration of health? It's a challenge, isn't it? We want to be

positive and hopeful, but we're scared that if we hope too much or too big, then we might be disappointed. We might feel betrayed. We might lose faith. We might even look foolish and irrational.

So how do we know what's right to hope? I'm sure that's a much bigger question than we can solve this morning in this one little sermon. But, using Isaiah 64 as our biblical text, let's give this question a try. Reflecting on the longings of the prophet Isaiah and his Jewish people centuries before Christ, let's ponder the question, "Hoping for what?"

1—GOD WILL INTERVENE IN A DRAMATIC WAY

The first thing I see in this chapter is the hope that God will intervene in a dramatic way. In verses one through three, Isaiah prays that God would "tear open the heavens and come down." He also talks about fire that causes water to boil, and he describes mountains quaking and nations trembling at God's presence. Isaiah's urgency is seen in his imagery. It's like the threat that a dad says to his kids while they're driving on their family vacation: "Stop fighting in the backseat right now, or I'm going to pull this car over." Or maybe a mom says to her children misbehaving in the backyard, "Don't make me come over there." This prayer of Isaiah is that God would radically intervene and set things right.

This is the kind of hope we have when we've become exhausted and exasperated. We're tired of things not going the way we think they should. We've attempted other methods of correcting the problems, and we don't know what else to do. So we pray to God, sometimes with four-letter words, to curse the evil we perceive. In a sense, we hope that God will just blow it all up and start over again with something fresh and new.

Of course, we don't want God to come down hard on *us*. Rarely would we hope that God would see and punish *our* misdeeds. But quite regularly we find ourselves hoping that God will intervene with those *other* people and put them in *their* place.

Christians who subscribe to apocalyptic ideas are fond of this kind of hope. They like the imagery of God's judgment, hellfire, and damnation on those other people. If not eternal, end-of-life

judgment, then at least heavy-handed, law and order now. Throw them in jail. Close the border. Keep them in their place. In your awesome power, O God, overthrow the current evil system. Then, finally, the rest of us good folks will be able to live in peace and eternal bliss.

While there is some benefit in hoping that God will upset a rotten apple cart and someday set everything in proper order, that hope can be dangerous if it veers into Christian nationalism and supports supremacist ideas. People who believe that God is on their side and opposed to the other are often willing to go to extremes and commit all kinds of atrocities. While this kind of hope might feel good in a moment of passion, we or our descendants might likely regret it later. We must be very careful with this kind of hope.

2—HOPING WITH PATIENCE FOR GOD’S WAY

In verse four and the first half of verse five, we see a different idea about what we might hope for. There, the prophet Isaiah extols God’s faithfulness to those who are patient and righteous. Through all the ages past, no other being has accomplished what God has done. The works of God are trustworthy and worth waiting for, says Isaiah. The prophet doesn’t spell out God’s works here in these verses, but assumes his readers are well acquainted with the stories of God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, with the provision of food and water in the desert, and the giving of the commandments and worship practices that helped shape and protect their lives. Isaiah assumes his readers know about God’s gift of a homeland, a kingdom, and a temple. Isaiah 64 was written toward the end of the Babylonian exile, at a time when God was helping the Jews restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

For those who would gladly remember God’s ways and do what was right, there was much reason to put their hope in God. With patience and confidence, they could realistically believe that God would assist them in the future, just as God had assisted them and other people of faith through the ages.

These words of Isaiah remind me of the hymn written by Isaac Watts in 1719: “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come/ our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”

What was true in the centuries before us still stands strong. We who gladly do what is right are validated in our hope that we will hear and see God’s awesome works in our day too.

3—WE ARE THE WORK OF GOD’S HANDS

When we get to the second half of verse five and continue through verse nine, we see another type of hope expressed by Isaiah. In these verses, Isaiah isn’t looking for God to overthrow the society or shake the mountains. And, rather than trusting that God’s awesome power will come to assist those who are righteous, here the prophet acknowledges the pervasive sinfulness of God’s people. Here, Isaiah is confessing that we, the people of God, are all guilty of sin. While God is eternal and can be counted on through the ages, we are like leaves blown in the wind.

In these verses, Isaiah expresses a sense of despair that God has abandoned them, as if God had hidden from them in anger. Isaiah insists that God’s absence is just making their sinfulness worse. Of course, God didn’t cause their sinfulness, and God wasn’t really absent. But Isaiah hopes that by confessing their sins and calling for God’s forgiving attention, now the people will *perceive* that God is with them. In other words, the prophet put his hope in the restoration of relationship between God and the Israelites. Remember not our iniquity, he pleads to God. Rather, remember that we are your people.

Just as Isaac Watt’s hymn came to mind before, now we are reminded of one written in 1834 by Edward Mote:

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.
When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace . . .
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

Sometimes what we’re hoping for isn’t that God will come to us because we are patient and righteous. Sometimes what we’re hoping for is that God will come with forgiveness because we’re all

sinner in need of God's grace. We trust and hope that, in the hands of the potter, we the clay will be transformed into vessels worthy of God's love. In the words of yet another hymn, we hope and pray:

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me, after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

CONCLUSION

Yes, we can still hope—realistically or unrealistically—that someone will buy us a particular new toy for Christmas. And we can still hope transcendently that God will give us the ability to live above the fray of problems now and in the future. What Isaiah 64 shares with us is the hope that God has the power to set things right for those who are patient and righteous. And if we're not patient and righteous, God can also forgive our sins and reshape us, if we let him. This, at least, is something for which we might hope.