



A few days ago, I participated in a memorial service as part of my role as Police Chaplain for the Lake Macquarie area. A tragedy had occurred last month, and the entire unit gathered to make a guard of honour in memory of those whose lives had ended in terrible circumstances.

While chatting with the officers after the service, one made a comment that seemed untimely given the theme of 'hope' that marks this first Sunday of Advent.

He said, "It sure is hard to be optimistic in this world."

Now, I did not disagree with him. Police officers are required to confront members of society who don't want to be reminded that they need to obey the law. They often have to look evil in the face while responding with respect and professionalism – it's a big ask and they rarely get the support they deserve.

No wonder they find it hard to be optimistic about the future.

However, I think it is not only police officers who struggle with the direction the world seems to be going. Whether it be climate change, global warming (which we vividly experienced last week), corrupt leaders, or the rising crime rates even in our own communities, there's enough going on in our world to test the most committed optimist.

That's probably why God's word often describes our world as a world of darkness. We are like the people to whom Isaiah spoke, "people who walk in darkness." (Isaiah 9:2) And so, what do people who are in darkness do? They search for a candle or a lantern to give them some light.

And this searching for light is how the season of Advent begins – it begins in darkness with a waiting for a light to shine. And that's why the first action of Advent is to light a candle. This represents that while we live in a dark world, we have found the light of hope.

However, if we imagine what our worship space would look like at night, when it is pitch black, a single candle only gives a little light.

And that is often what 'hope' feels like when it first enters the scene. We speak of bleak situations as having only a 'glimmer of hope' or 'a tiny spark of hope'. And that is what it was like in the years before God's Saviour entered the world.

It was a bleak situation. While they knew Yahweh, God Almighty, was Lord and God, there wasn't much evidence of His reign and rule on earth. So, all they could do was wait and listen to what the prophets' revealed God was promising to do.

That's the dark bleakness of how the Advent season starts.

And every time God spoke through His prophets, revealing His future plans, they were designed to inspire one thing, that is, HOPE. In those days, those who lived in darkness, knew that hope was a 'doing word', and it meant 'to wait with expectation'.

Psalms 130 describes the hope, *"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ...."*(v5)

However, in order for this 'waiting in expectation' to continue, year after year, century after century, it needed an energy source. What was the energy source that kept hope alive in God's people? Well to discover that let's step back and hear how God's people kept the flame of hope alight.

After God's people were taken captive by the Babylonians, they found themselves in one of the darkest, most hopeless situations, they had ever faced. Their hearts were breaking, and lament was pouring from every mouth. In the third chapter of the book of Lamentations, we read:

*"He has made me chew on gravel. He has rolled me in the dust. Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is."* (v16-17). Then, he finishes off *"I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss."* (v20).

However, even in the depths of despair, when all trace of optimism had vanished, there is suddenly a conscious choice to choose hope.

*"Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my inheritance; therefore I will hope in him!'"* (v21-24)

Their secret energy source to fuel the candle of hope was found in remembering God's faithfulness. Faith, therefore, is like the fuel that keeps the light of hope aflame. Faith, Paul reminds us, "is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1).

Do you remember the police officer who was struggling to hold onto his optimism? No wonder. It is near impossible to stay optimistic year after year, when there is absolutely no indicators or signs that things are getting any better.

However, when hope is fuelled by faith in the surety of God's faithfulness to His word, hope will stay alive.

However, there is another aspect that I think we need to remember.

Notice that he prayed, "Yet I still dare to hope ...". Only when they had plugged in their faith, they had the courage to "dare to hope". It takes real courage to be hopeful because the decision to look forward to something when there is no evidence that what you hope for is going to eventuate, takes energy – and that energy is faith.

It takes courageous faith to be hopeful. When everyone around you is wallowing in the darkness, despairing about all that is wrong in the world, it takes courage to not only hold onto your hope, but also to share about the hope that is alive in your heart.

It also takes courage to protect the flame of hope from being snuffed out. And one of the things that hope is most vulnerable to, is the winds of disappointment. If hope is like the light of a candle, and faith is the fuel that keeps it aflame, disappointment is like a huge gust of wind which has the power to completely blow it out.

We've all experienced disappointment, haven't we?

In my own life, the strong winds of disappointment blew most violently in the months and years following the failure of my marriage. During this season, something the Apostle Paul wrote, helped me. He wrote, *"Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*(Romans 5:5)

Paul is saying that hope that is grounded upon God's faithfulness, does not disappoint us. He's not talking about our hope and belief in ourselves. Nor is he talking about our hope in a person, for people will always let us down. Nor is he talking about our hope that a certain situation will turn out the way we'd like it to. Rather, he is talking about a hope that is in the faithfulness of God to fulfil His promises. He's talking about the surety of the presence of God's Spirit in our hearts when we enthrone Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

So, does Paul mean that we will never experience disappointment?

I know from personal experience that's not so. However, I have discovered along the way, that disappointment isn't always a bad thing. In fact, from one perspective, it can be regarded as a good thing.

How so? Disappointment can reveal to us that our hope was set on the wrong thing, or on the wrong person. Think about it. Disappointment often brings with it disillusionment. Most of us don't enjoy the feeling of disillusionment, so we consider it a bad thing. However, to be disillusioned means we have been forced to confront our illusions. Or, to put it another way, we've been forced to face the truth.

And when we remember that one of God's enemy's most deceptive schemes is illusion, we can see disappointment as an opportunity to learn to ask, "Where had I allowed an illusion to misdirect my hope in God's truth?"

This totally transforms disappointment, and it becomes a gentle invitation from the Spirit of God to confront the deceptive illusions and recenter our heart's desire on God's sure and certain promises.

Then, once God's truth dispels these illusions, we can find firm footing upon which to face our fears with courageous hope.

**Application |** Let me sum up:

Christian hope is having courageous confidence that because God is faithful, what God has promised will come to pass.

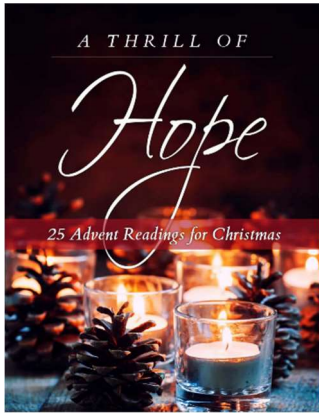
Courageous hope says: "in spite of the present circumstances, something very, very deep inside me refuses to give up."

It is the deepest of hopes coming from the deepest of convictions – that the faithful love of the Lord never ends. Even more, I dare to hope when I remember that "The Lord is faithful; therefore, I will hope in him."

So, as we continue to walk in hopeful expectation of God's growing presence in our lives, let us remember that God is always faithful to His promises.

And let us be courageous in sharing our deep dependence upon God and the hope we have in Him.

# The Thrill of Hope Advent Devotional



The famous Christmas Carol "O Holy Night" has one line in one of its verses:

"The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices."

It is worthy of pondering whether you are 'thrilled with hope' ...

To assist you on your journey through Advent we have made available a "Crosswalk's" Advent devotional inspired by this carol, entitled "A Thrill of Hope".

This devotional contains 25 readings and can be picked up in the foyer of the Church.

May you experience the thrill of hope this Christmas season.