

Message title: ***The birth of hope***

Lessons: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:1-20

What was your best Christmas ever? Was it the one when you had the biggest box under the tree? When you got a great parking space at the mall? Was your best Christmas ever the Christmas your great Aunt Effie's infamous holiday fruitcake didn't come in the mail?

I've been asking people about their best Christmases ever. Teresa and Cheryl and I were talking about this not long ago, so I asked them to share their testimony with you. In their stories is a persistent truth: When you ask people about their best Christmas ever, their answer is never about the specific present they got, or a tasty meal, or even a fantastic worship service. For most of us, our best Christmas ever is the one when we found hope. The meaning of Christmas is the discovery of hope.

How many of you have seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas* before today? Every year? There's a reason it has become a classic. It is the story of Charlie Brown's discovering hope. When Charlie Brown tenderly reaches out to a sad and pathetic little tree – which, it might be said, resembles Charlie Brown himself – he is castigated and hooted at by his fellows. They are indifferent to his hurt. For Charlie Brown, the night is very dark.

At the moment that he shouts, "Doesn't anyone know what Christmas is all about?" Charlie Brown is truly hopeless. But when his friend Linus tells him the glorious story of the birth of Jesus, Charlie Brown once again sees the tree with gentle love. As if he were looking through God's eyes, Charlie Brown sees himself with gentle love. Charlie Brown discovers hope.

The story that Linus tells – that remembrance of the birth of the Son of God 2000 years ago – inspires tenderness and hope in Charlie Brown because it is the story of hope being born on earth. On that cold night so long ago, that night we know as Christmas, hope was born on earth.

It isn't as though hope came into existence for the first time that night. Over the thousands and thousands of years of human kind, women and men had experienced hope. People had discovered hope and rediscovered

hope over and over again. We are forgetful creatures: it is hard for us to sustain our awareness of hope.

But hope is not merely a feeling, an emotion. Hope is not just the feeling of waiting, nor is it simply desire. Nor is hope that feeling of anticipation spurred by longing, and hope is not satisfied by assurance.

Hope is the fact that goodness, justice, mercy, freedom, kindness, power, and glory exist regardless of all the horror of the world. Hope is the fact that God is constantly loving us, faithfully urging us toward our own good. We are able to hope, we can discover hope again and again because God created us. God loves us. God entrusts the world to us. And God never stops pulling us toward wholeness and holiness. We are never alone, because God lives among us.

God, who is constantly loving and urging good upon God's children, is the source of hope. When we feel hope, we are tapping into God's wishes for us. When, in the midst of darkness light appears, it is God's love and faithfulness that pierces the darkness. We perceive that light, and we feel filled with hope.

But we are a forgetful creatures, and God wanted us to know hope. God wanted us to never lose sight of hope. And so, when the time was right, God-the-Christ – who had been at the beginning of the world, who had seen us created and come into being – God-the-Christ came to us in a form we would recognize. In the time that God chose, God tried a new thing. God wasn't going to waste God's time on burning bushes, or floods or fires anymore. In that time, on that unlikely night, God came to us in a form we could touch. God came to us so that we might never forget to feel hope.

Nearly everyone feels hopeful when they see a newborn baby. We already knew how to do that; we knew how to access those feelings of hope when we saw a child. So God came in a package that would open us to hope. God came in a form that shouted "touch me – hold me." God came to us as a little baby, born simply, and in apparent need.

Call that little baby named Jesus a "strategy", if you must. Jesus Christ is the fact of eternity wrapped in the flesh of humanity. Jesus Christ is God in flesh. Jesus Christ is hope: permanent, eternal, and human. In that single

child, that singular God, we see hope in the flesh. Hope in existence. Not a feeling: a being. Not an anticipation: a reality.

The hopes and fears of all the years, lying in a manger, waiting to be held.

Once you discover Jesus, and pick him up, and hold him close to your heart, you cannot lose hope for long. Jesus is the reminder that God loves us enough to let God's self, God's son, be vulnerable, be born and grow and live and feel and die. Jesus was truly born for us, that we might never lose sight of hope. And hope is simply the fact that goodness, justice, mercy, freedom, kindness, power, and glory exist regardless of all the horror of the world. Because God exists regardless of all the horror of the world. We are never alone. We can hope, because God exists, and God loves us.

Teresa and Cheryl shared their stories of their best Christmases ever. I want to share one more with you today. Mid-20th century novelist Taylor Caldwell once wrote about her best Christmas ever. One desperate year, when Caldwell was in her 20s and her daughter just 6, Christmas Eve arrived to find them destitute. Caldwell had \$15 to her name, and her \$30 rent was due in a week. The money would need to go for food.

Trudging home through snowdrifts, the wind blew viciously around her ears. She knew that "unless a miracle happened [she] would be homeless in January, foodless, jobless." She was alone with her daughter, with no one to turn to for help. Caldwell wrote: "I had prayed steadily for weeks, and there had been no answer but this coldness and darkness, this harsh air, this abandonment. God and men had completely forgotten me. I felt old as death, and as lonely. What was to become of us?"

In her mailbox she found only bills, and two white envelopes. She opened the door to her apartment, and her six year old daughter had laid the table, and put out the three cans of food that would be their dinner that Christmas Eve night. She wrote, "I stood in the cold little kitchen, and misery overwhelmed me. For the first time in my life, I doubted the existence of God and His mercy, and the coldness in my heart was colder than ice."

But our best Christmases ever are the ones in which we discover hope. And that evening, a delivery man came to Caldwell's door, with presents. The presents came from someone Caldwell had done a kindness many months before. A doll for her child. A purse for herself. Candy. Laughing joyously, she sat down to open the mail. One of those envelopes tucked alongside the bills contained a \$30 Christmas bonus from a brief summer job. The other was the offer of work, steady work, to begin two days after Christmas.

Caldwell writes: "The church bells began to ring. I hurriedly looked at my child, who was sleeping blissfully, and ran down to the street. Everywhere people were walking to church to celebrate the birth of the Savior. People smiled at me and I smiled back. The storm had stopped, the sky was pure and glittering with stars.

"The Lord is born!" sang the bells to the crystal night and the laughing darkness. Someone began to sing, "Come, all ye faithful!" I joined in and sang with the strangers all about me.

I am not alone at all, I thought. I was never alone at all.

And that, of course, is the message of Christmas. We are never alone. Not when the night is darkest, the wind coldest, the world seemingly most indifferent. For this is still the time God chooses."

That singular cold night, so long ago, was the time God chose. God chose to be born in a manger, in a small town, in an occupied country, to give us hope. God chose to be born among us in order to give us hope. Today, right now, in your life, is still the time God chooses. Hope comes even when the night is darkest and the world most indifferent, because God chooses to live among us.

On that Christmas Day, in the most unlikely of moments, in the most unlikely of places, to the most unlikely of people, hope was born. Tonight, when we visit the manger and, like the shepherds, glimpse the glory of God, hope is born again.

May this Christmas be your best Christmas ever. Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:1-20

Our first reading today is from the ancient Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Isaiah is proclaiming joy and hope to God's people. Listen for the word of God:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named

Wonderful Counselor

Mighty God

Everlasting Father

Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

Luke 2:1-20

In the birth of Jesus, the joy of the prophets was fulfilled. Today we will be reading the birth story from the gospel of Luke, beginning with Luke chapter 2, verse 1, and going through verse 20. Open your Bibles and read along; if you're using a red Bible, we'll begin on page _____.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them at the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem, and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.