

Sermon for December 20, 2015 – Advent 4

Isaiah 51:5 (NASB)

**Theme: Celebrate a Better Christmas with a Better Christmas Hope.**

- 1) *God has promised to send his Salvation.*
- 2) *Wait for it in faith.*

*"My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait for Me, And for My arm they will wait expectantly.*

What are your hopes for Christmas?

I often catch my children looking at the gifts under our tree – hoping they are the toys they want for Christmas. I know people who are hoping for snow. Some people hope to see their family over the holidays. Others hope that God simply keeps their loved ones safe. Many lonely people hope to find a friend. The homeless hope to find some place warm and the poor a good meal to eat. The depressed are hoping for compassion and relief. And who doesn't hope for deliverance from all the terror, crime and everything else that is happening in our world.

Yes, people have a lot of hope at Christmas. Sometimes these hopes become a reality. Many times they do not. But there is one that I have yet to mention – one that God desires all of us to have. It is a certain hope that sustains the Christian throughout his life on earth. It is a hope that brings him to heaven. Let us consider what it is, under the theme: **Celebrate a better Christmas with a Better Christmas Hope.** 1) *God has promised to send his Salvation.* 2) *Let us wait for it in faith.*

Part One: God has promised to send his Salvation

I don't know about you but with all the news of terror, crime and everything else going on in our world, I have been really looking forward to Christmas. Why? That's a good question. At first glance it might seem to be a form of escapism: just wanting to get away from all the bad news by occupying my mind with cheerful music, beautiful decorations, and happy thoughts of peace, love, hope and joy. And isn't it nice to think about these things instead of all the other stuff going on around us?

Yes, it is nice to escape all the problems of the world at Christmas, but if this is the main reason we look forward to the holiday, then we are no better than a drug addict looking forward to his next fix to escape the realities of life! Why do I say that? Because of all the gifts, lights, trees, pretty music and happy thoughts – none of these things actually help. The problems still remain.

Then why should we look forward to celebrating the holidays? Because the message of Christmas offers me hope – not the false hope in the supposed good will of man, but the real hope that God is merciful – willing to forgive all our sins. It is the hope that God loves us and will deliver all who believe to himself in heaven where we will live in perfect peace, harmony, love and joy with God for all eternity.

But how can we be sure of this? Sometimes our life takes such a turn that it seems as if God has abandoned us. Think about the Christians in the Middle East that are being persecuted by ISIS. How about San Bernardino? How about our own lives? Maybe we struggle with depression this holiday season because a loved one is sick or dying. Maybe we are facing financial troubles, relationship

problems, or some sin is weighing heavy on our souls. Maybe the infamous “Christmas blues” have us down. We don’t “feel” our Savior’s presence and, on top of this, the world claims that He doesn’t even exist. Is our belief in Jesus just a crutch to get us through life? Where is he and when will He keep his promise to come and deliver us? Is our hope in vain?

No, it’s not in vain – and Christmas proves it!

Consider our sermon text, which was written for a time of great distress. God’s Old Testament people were about to go into captivity for their idolatries and unbelief. To understand their situation, imagine ISIS not just terrorizing our country, but taking it over. Imagine them destroying this Church before your very eyes and taking you as slaves to the Middle East. This was the kind of hopeless distress the recipients of our sermon text faced when Babylon conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took the Jews into captivity. It would seem as if God had abandoned them.

Did he? No, he didn’t. It is true that God’s people were being severely disciplined for their sin. But it was for a purpose: that they might repent of their idolatries and cling to him in faith. God would not leave them in their captivity. He would rescue them – judging the nations that oppressed them, as the LORD explicitly states in our sermon text: *My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples.*

Oh, what joy and hope this promise brought God’s people trapped in captivity! The LORD would rescue them from Babylon. But, what is more important is what this rescue would symbolize: how God would deliver all believers from their slavery to sin.

You see, ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, mankind has been held captive to sin, death and the power of the devil. This is why there is so much crime, terror and evil on this earth. Sin permeates the human nature. We are at odds with God – separated from him with no hope of saving ourselves. Our situation is certainly desperate – and that’s why God decided to do something about it.

Yes, the LORD loves us so much that, right after Adam and Eve fell into sin, He gave a promise: He would send a special son – one who would be both God and man – who would defeat the devil and rescue us from our spiritual captivity to sin. And how would he accomplish this? By being born under the law, living the perfect life we all failed to live and dying in payment for our sins.

For thousands of years, God repeated his promise to send a Savior, and people look forward to it. But, as time progressed, many became impatient tempted to give up on their hope. Would the Messiah actually come? God said that his salvation is near, but where is it? He has been silent for so many years.

But then it happened. A special star appeared, angels spoke with men and the glory of the LORD appeared in the sky over the fields of Bethlehem. God has kept his promise: his salvation and righteousness had come – all wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The Savior was born to defeat our enemies and free us from our captivity. And this is exactly what Jesus accomplished through his life, death and resurrection for us – promising before he ascended into heaven that He will come back to judge the nations in order to deliver us home to himself in heaven.

You see then, brothers and sisters in Christ, that Christmas is not just some feel good holiday meant to distract us from all the problems in the world. The message of Christmas is a message of real hope. God has sent his salvation into the world. He has won our forgiveness and is coming again soon to raise the dead, so that we can live with him forever in paradise. And because Christmas offers us such real hope, we respond by waiting for it in faith.

Part Two: Waiting for it in faith.

Remember how I said that our sermon text was written to comfort the Jews held captive in Babylon. Well, that was a little bit of an oversimplification. Our specific sermon text was actually written to use the context of the Babylonian captivity to give us (New Testament Christians) hope as we wait for Jesus to deliver us from this evil earth. This is clearly seen in what God says at the end our verse: *The coastlands will wait for Me, And for My arm they will wait expectantly.*

The coastlands are the nations beyond Israel. It includes believers from all around the world. It includes you and me. Everyone who received God's promise of salvation with repentance and faith is a child of God, who eagerly waits for the LORD to fulfill what He promised – and Christmas strengthens that trust.

Yes, Christmas is not about celebrating the human spirit, peace, Santa Claus, or anything else the secular world attaches to the holiday. It is all about Jesus: celebrating God the Father keeping his promise to provide a Savior by sending His Son.

And if God did this (which history proves he did) then we can have hope – trusting that God will continue to keep his promise to rescue us from every evil deed and bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom.

You see, then, that the reason I want to celebrate Christmas is not to escape all the bad stuff that is happening in this world, but to be strengthened to face it – confident of God's promise to cause all things to work together for good as I hold onto him in faith. And why can I have such confidence? Because Christmas is all about God giving up his Son to be my Savior. And if He did this for me, I can be confident that I am at peace with Him.

So, brothers and sister in Christ, celebrate a better Christmas with a better Christmas hope. God has come to rescue his people. Rejoice in the righteousness and salvation he won for you the first time He came into the world. Look forward to the ultimate deliverance he will give us when He comes again. Let these thoughts fortify you for all the hardships you face in life, ever leading you to look forward to Christ's return, like a child looks forward to Christmas. Amen.