



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 2, 2007

Hope Springs Eternal

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## Isaiah 35:1-10

<sup>1</sup> *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus* <sup>2</sup> *it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.* <sup>3</sup> *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.* <sup>4</sup> *Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."* <sup>5</sup> *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;* <sup>6</sup> *then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;* <sup>7</sup> *the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.* <sup>8</sup> *A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.* <sup>9</sup> *No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.* <sup>10</sup> *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

Can we still hear Isaiah's ancient prophecy? Can God still inspire us through the same words that inspired exiled Israel? After all, we experience almost none of the physical despair and privation that Israel suffered in captivity. Isaiah wrote his achingly beautiful poem to stir hope in a hopeless people. But the physical circumstances of these exiles were so different from ours that relating to the text can be difficult.

After all, we are a well-directed people, cruising down brightly lit interstates guided by satellite navigation, but Isaiah's Israel experienced a sense of lostness. The certainty of their youth had given way to the ambiguity of the wilderness.

We are a prosperous people, taking tap water and abundant harvests for granted, but Israel shuffled over burning sands. How do you summon the energy to plow the fields when there is no prospect of rain? How do you labor on when it has been so long since you've seen the fulfillment of fresh, green growth?

We are a strong, resilient people, in a landscape dotted with health clubs. Isaiah's rag-tag clans were hobbled with feeble knees and weak hands. How do you press on when every step seems a bit more leaden, a bit more painful – when tasks that were once a frolic are now a labored challenge?

Isaiah knew that the answer for his people could be stated in one word: "hope." With hope, Israel would be able to endure even unimaginable physical suffering. Without hope, Israel would collapse into the dustbin of forgotten nations. So, to his people of "fearful hearts," Isaiah proclaimed: "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God!"

Aren't these the words we long to hear spoken into our lives as well. Isn't hope the indispensable prescription for us too? Of course our physical circumstances are different than ancient Israel's, but aren't our spiritual predicaments the same? Haven't we all wandered through times of exiled strangeness or wilderness lostness? Haven't we all lingered at turning points, unsure whether pressing on would bring us closer to our destiny or further into a trackless waste? Haven't we all hit walls, tired of pouring out love when those around us seemed like thirsty ground into which our love disappeared without a trace? Haven't we all endured dark nights of the soul, unable to sing, "God, I love you" without cringing at our own hypocrisy? Doesn't every heart here share a prayer that somewhere, sometime, somehow during this Advent season our hopes might be renewed by a message from on high, from within, from one another – from wherever God's messages come – whispering to us, "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God!"

Hope is no mere spice in the bread of life, but rather the indispensable yeast. Nobody can live without hope, even if it were only for the smallest source of comfort in the midst of the worst poverty, sickness, or social failure.<sup>1</sup> Holocaust survivor Bella Tovia told our Youth Group that sometimes, while she shuffled through the ghetto gaunt with hunger, a stranger would wordlessly slip a heel of bread into her pocket. Just that much comfort, just that much recognition of her humanity, was enough to give her hope to go on. Hope is the dynamic that powers our lives into the future.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians listed hope along with faith and love as the primary spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13:13). Saint Augustine raised up the same three gifts, but Augustine named hope the greatest gift of all.<sup>2</sup> As Martin Luther wrote, "Everything that is done in the world is done by hope. No husbandman would sow one grain of corn if he hoped not it would grow up and become seed . . ." <sup>3</sup>

But just as Hope is essential to our lives, so it is sorely tested by our times. We are surrounded by experiences that sow pessimism, cynicism, or even despair rather than hope. Our hope is eroded by fears of ecological disaster, or terrorist attack, or physical debilitation, or, dare I say it in the house of the Lord, even fear that maybe it's all not true, fear that maybe God went fishing after the creation or never existed at all.

And, even if we agree that hope is essential to life, we have all lived long enough to know the difference between mere wishful thinking and well grounded hope, between delusional hope and realistic hope, between hope built on foundations of sand and hope built on foundations of rock. None of us want to end up like Charlie Brown, always charging forward hoping this time Lucy will let him kick the football and always ending up on his back.

So what is it to be? Shall we be a people of hope or a people of despair? When a mother tells her crying child everything will turn out all right, is she telling the truth or is she lying? Is our Advent hope in a triumphant Christ built on a foundation of rock or a foundation of sand?

Here is one way to test our hope's foundation. Every hope belongs, in part, to an unknowable future, but theologians and philosophers teach that every justifiable hope, every hope that can carry us forward, every hope that can withstand our fears also has roots in the past and an active reality in the present - every justifiable hope has roots in the past and an active reality in the present. For instance, hope for a future oak tree is justified by the potential already bursting in an acorn and its tap root. Hope for a future engineer is justified for the child who has been tinkering since he was three. And hope that you and I will find our rest in the everlasting arms of Christ is justified by the three-thousand year story of a relentlessly loving God who has never, never let us down.

Our Bible, our church, tell a continuing story of a people who periodically stumbled into dark nights of despair only to hear a prophet, an angel, a Christ, a Holy Spirit say to fearful hearts "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God." Abraham shivering under a canopy of desert stars, Moses trapped on the banks of the Red Sea, Israel in the wilderness, Isaiah in Babylon, Job on the dung heap, Shepherds in the Bethlehem field, Paul struck down on the Damascus Road; Puritans stranded on a rocky shore: all fearful, all despairing, all given the same word to renew their hope. In the entirety of the Bible, the most common words from Human to God are "help me;" and the most common words from God to human are "fear not!"

The words come in all manner of forms and voices. Martin Luther recalled slipping into despair, groaning hopelessly at his plight. Suddenly his wife Katie appeared wearing a black mourning dress. "Are you going to a funeral?" He asked. "No," she replied, "but since you act as though God is dead, I wanted to join you in mourning." Luther quickly recovered.<sup>4</sup>

The more we search our own hearts, the more we find that we, too, are part of this ancient story; we, too, experience a word of hope that sustains us just when we don't see how we can go on. My own experiences may have been more ambiguous and muddled than those of the Saints, but God's "fear not" got me through my darkest times and sustains me to this day. Whenever life throws me to the edge of despair - when my son's spleen ruptured, when my faith faltered at seminary, when my daughter's lung collapsed, I remember the "fear not" I heard twenty years ago and

throw myself down in prayer. And maybe not on my schedule, and maybe not just the way I want, but sooner or later and without fail I have felt God's hand bear me up, renewing my hope. "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God."

And now in my fourteenth year here, I have walked with you long enough to know that many of your stories are like my story. The details are all different - a struggling marriage, addictive behavior, catastrophic illness, collapsing career, gnawing guilt, but the patterns are the same. My brothers and sisters, we are like a secret fraternity or sorority in which we have each, unknowingly, shared the same initiation. Even as life tossed us to the brink of despair, we heard, we felt, we experienced new hope through God's Spirit. "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God."

If you have shared such an experience, then Advent is our anniversary season. Each Advent we recall gratefully how God delivered us in our personal time of waiting and hoping. Each Advent we look forward hopefully, waiting expectantly for Christ's promised triumph.

And if you are in the midst of despair this morning, then I proclaim to you the Christ who comes to all who wait and hope. Look for him, pray to him, wait for him. He will come. He always has.

And if you have been spared both despair and answering grace, then Advent is still a time of watching and waiting. But wait expectantly, wait with hope, for even now God's angel is limbering up, rehearsing the Christmas song he'll sing to all with ears to hear, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.<sup>[11]</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.." Fear not. Here is your God. **Amen.**

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1 Paul Tillich, "The Right to Hope," *Christian Century*, November 14, 1990, pp. 1064-1067. Also available online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=62>

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2 For Augustine's treatment of the interrelation between faith, hope and love, see ch.8 of the *Enchiridion*, available online at <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/augenchiridion/enchiridion01-23.html>

3 From Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.html>

4 Cited in Markwald and Markwald, *Katherina von Bora*, at 140.