

“Advent 1: The Lord's Promise of Hope”

First Sunday of Advent

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Scripture Readings

Psalms 130

John 3:9-16

Hymns/Songs

1) "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" 510

2) "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" 82

3) "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" 244

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE: Have any of you ever felt really hopeless about something? (They talk about that). It doesn't feel very good does it?

Do any of you know what language is? Here's an example of some other languages: (Speak French to them; and some Spanish).

Do you know what language God uses when He speaks to people?
He speaks in MANY different languages.....and guess what one of them is?

It's when YOU feel HOPEFUL inside.
That's God lifting you up-----that's God giving you more gas so your little car can keep going.....so you can continue to grow and develop as a person.

Did you ever think of that before?

So the next time you get really discouraged about something-----really short of hope inside, you can ask God to **“fill-er up please.”**

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

2 O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

4 But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

- more, than watchmen for the morning.
- 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with Him is plentiful redemption.
- 8 And He will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

John 3:9-16

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into Heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

For God So Loved the World

16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Insight for Worship

Secrets of Heaven 2338 by Emanuel Swedenborg

"As before said, spiritual temptations are attended with doubt in regard to the Lord's presence and mercy, and also in regard to salvation. The evil spirits who are then with the one undergoing spiritual battle induce the temptation strongly, in order to inspire defeat, but the good spirits and angels from the Lord in every possible way dispel this state of doubt, and keep the faithful person in a state of hope, and at last confirm him in what is favorable and good. The result is that a person who is in temptation hangs between what is negative and what is positive. The one who yields in temptation remains in a state of doubt, and falls more so into what is negative; but the one who overcomes is indeed in doubt, but still, **if he suffers himself to be cheered by hope**, he stands fast in what is favorable and good—and, he grows spiritually, and the Lord regenerates him further."

SERMON: "Advent 1: The Lord's Promise of Hope"

Today marks the first week of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, which celebrates the Lord's Incarnation. Advent means "coming" in Latin, and it is a time of

waiting and expectation of God's arrival into history in the Divine man Jesus Christ. God's incarnation refers to the breaking of God into our world as a physical human being! It happened only once in history, in the birth of the infant Jesus. I might mention at this point that Christology, the study of who Jesus is and what he did, which began with His Advent or coming in person, is THE most profound and difficult subject in all of theology **to understand with the mind**, which can be done with a lot of mental effort. But the Lord's Advent and birth here among us becomes the most meaningful and rewarding aspect of our Christian faith when embraced with **the heart**.

Or, to put this another way, I have an interesting thought for you to ponder over the next few weeks. Picture yourself going to a job interview. When you get there, the job requirements read as follows: "Bring the following four qualities back into balance on the Earth and do it in substantial and lasting ways: the **four qualities are HOPE; PEACE; JOY and LOVE**.

How do you do that? Where do you begin? This is one way to talk about what the Lord had to try and achieve in coming into the world.

Noted psychiatrist Viktor Frankl barely survived a Nazi concentration camp in Germany in the 1940s during WWII. In a sobering account of its horrors, Frankl described how some prisoners lost touch with reality. A prisoner who no longer saw hope for the future would quickly begin to decline physically and mentally. Then one day, without warning, he simply would give up. No amount of pleading by other prisoners, no amount of beating by the guards, no barking of threats brought any response. The prisoner just laid on his bunk corpse-like, uncaring, barely moving.

Admittedly that is an extreme situation of hopelessness. Few of us will ever face such desperate times as those of Victor Frankl and other Nazi concentration camp prisoners. And yet, their life journeys do illustrate the immense power and meaning of what Advent brings into the limelight: **our immense human need of feeling hopeful about life as it is unfolding in front of us each day, each week and each month and year we live!**

Hope can powerfully create and direct many acts of love and bravery the world over! Unbeknownst to many people, there are some very interesting things about hope that are not immediately obvious, but are profoundly important to understand. There are different kinds of hope, for example, but we'll get to that in a moment. More important is that hope is a **VERY serious matter!** It is deeply important in many more ways than we might think-----especially in medicine and how our physiology works.

We very much need to understand the role that hope plays in our lives----in our souls, and even in our bodies, and our very ability to survive. If we can do this, we will all be better able to cope with life's difficulties and to help those we love. Hope, you see, is a **vital force**; it is not some incidental thing like our appendix. It is **VITAL**, and, interestingly enough, true or mature hope *is never false*. Or to put this a little differently, as one doctor has said it: "We need to care for people by understanding the role that hope plays and not only treat their diagnosis."

Indeed, as one author put it in his book titled: "**HOPE in an Age of Anxiety**": "a sense of real hope needs to be rooted in modern science which takes seriously its underpinnings in the world's great religious traditions." So, as Swedenborg and others understood, both religion and science were designed by God to work hand-in-hand!

So, there are different kinds of hope, and I have identified 5 of them:

- 1. Inborn Hope** - Most children have hope, it's their basic disposition unless adults do something to threaten it. Some people have to struggle for their hope while others seem to have it so easily. There are many variables that affect it, most of all our upbringing, but also the spiritual choices we make.
- 2. Chosen Hope** - This is the person with cancer who determinedly chooses to believe that treatment will be successful no matter the current outlook. It's a parent's right to hope for a child, even if things don't look good at the moment. Chosen hope is a life stance, in other words.
- 3. Borrowed Hope** - Sometimes another person sees causes for hope in your life more easily than you can. If the person is honest and *trustworthy*, you can borrow their confidence in you, and their hope for you.
- 4. False and Unreal Hope** - This kind of hope belongs to teenagers who believe they could be the next Michael Jordan of basketball, even though their abilities are far from what's needed to attain such genius. Or the hope created by the promise of a certain cereal will help you lose weight and keep it off for years to come. You're hoping for things that could theoretically happen, but in REALITY, it's not probable. There are silly versions of this kind of hope, like chain letters promising [money](#) if you send them along. Or more serious false hopes, like the ones created by nasty insurance schemes that trick money from people. And everyday examples of false hope, such as the hope that one person, whether friend or spouse, can meet **all** your needs and make you happy.

5. Mature or Spiritual Hope:

- A person with this kind of hope can *wait*.
- His or her hope is not based on particular outcomes,
- or on a belief that everything will turn out well.
- Mature hope is based on *meaning* that comes from spiritual perception---- perception of the true nature of life and how it *really* works.
- In other words, **things are worthwhile regardless of how they turn out.**
- Mature or spiritual hope is the hope that the Bible speaks about in the Scriptures we read this morning, and it is also the hope that doctors are coming to see as vitally important to communicate to their patients, which has positive physiological effects within our body's ability to heal and thrive.

[Martin Luther King Jr.](#), was talking about this kind of hope when he said: "The long arm of history bends toward justice." Mature hope is a hope that jumps in to participate in the desired outcome. It doesn't give up easily and it can be the most fulfilling.

So what this means is that mature hope is, first and foremost, spiritual! And I find it very interesting that Swedenborg remarks that having this kind of hope as part of our psychic wallpaper is absolutely necessary if we are to truly be **ALIVE**, let alone continue to grow as a human being. In other words, you can't really **FEEL** alive without it!

This kind of inner sense of hope is to our human spirit as oxygen is to the physical body. Truly, we cannot get along without it. I'd like to recall something with you now from one of the most basic teachings in this church, and that is that we are all born into a state of spiritual equilibrium, that is, we are all born into *full bodied* experiences of both heaven and hell. We literally **love** BOTH very much! And we need to underline the word "EXPERIENCES," of both heaven and hell.

This is **not** academic. I am not talking about **ideas** of heaven and hell. Or doctrines. Or far flung theories! I am talking about actual **EXPERIENCES** that live and move within our very lives. On the dark side, for example, each one of us are born with profound inclinations toward self-centeredness, and if we do not choose consciously to grow out of our inborn affections for living and being self-centered, we become more like a monster than a human being!

But we're also born with very deep and tender experiences of love, from as early as our mother's womb. We all like to help others, but we also all know what it feels like to want to dominate, to run the show, to sometimes push others around, and doing this can feel very good inside.

And so, what we're here on Earth for is to make our fundamental choices, not from academic ideas, but from [LIVING EXPERIENCES of the dark side and the light side of life](#). Said differently, this life is all about character formation-----figuring out what kind of “character” we want to be!-----what do we want to do and be WHEN NOBODY ELSE IS WATCHING!

Now, if we are to end up choosing heaven, there's going to be a period **in or during that growth process** when **WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO CHOOSE AGAINST THINGS THAT WE LOVE!-----AND DO SO SOMETIMES SIMPLY BECAUSE WE KNOW IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO.**

For example, we may love or be delighted by stealing, or bearing false witness (lying) about someone, or adultery, or maybe we've developed an affection for being controlling or domineering with certain kinds of people; or, perhaps we've developed pleasure in drinking too much alcohol (which is hurting those around us, badly!).....but because we know better, at some point we're going to have to TURN SUCH THINGS DOWN-----turn away from them, because we know that the Lord's Word calls us to put away selfish things and do that which is good and true.

In a very real sense, we're going to have to turn down cold the things that are bad that we have come to enjoy, which can **FEEL** like turning against OURSELVES----or at least a part of ourselves. This is internal conflict of a high order **and is completely normal and necessary for our growth.**

Now, some might say: this is not a pretty picture.

It's kind of like dieting. You want that piece of cake. You want that candy bar.....and Ooooh how you want it!!

But you have to say NO. No more will I hurt my body with too much sugar. No more will I bully my family members, even though it feels good. No more will I pick up that alcoholic drink at the end of my day, because it's destroying my self-confidence and it's hurting the people I care for. No more will I turn away from feeling

open and vulnerable toward the Lord's lovingkindness, even though doing this makes me weep and cry sometimes.

Sooooo, WHAT DOES ALL THIS HAVE TO DO WITH THIS FIRST WEEK IN ADVENT.....with HOPE?

The funny thing is that the more we indulge our appetites or compulsions that aren't good for us, the more we squelch that inner feeling of hope; the more we feel a kind of chronic, inner despair. And the corollary is that the more we do what's right, *the more we may initially feel tormented*, but the more that inner feeling of hope *stands up and lives* in us.

And here then is the connection to the Lord's advent into the world: The Lord came as the hope of the world.....so we could hope again,,,,,,,,,which is the Spirit that is the sister to Loving! *The two always go hand in hand.* The Lord showed us what love was all about when the human race was caring less and less about real love, or much of anything else that is spiritual.

And if we ever stop caring about love, or knowing how to love, then that inner, spiritual sense of hope will completely disappear in our experience. *So, let your sense and spirit of mature hope rise up and stay alive in you-----let it live in you as a friend of the very core of who you are!! Hope is healthy and it is heavenly! And, I encourage you to get up early at least once a month, to watch and experience the golden sunrise of daybreak, as the light of the sun becomes increasingly beautiful, bright, golden-white light, enveloping all of our lives equally, and, unbidden. This is one of my favorite symbols for how God's Love and Spirit of hopefulness will ALWAYS rise up anew in our lives, especially after the dark times have given way to God's loving Presence.*

And bless the name of the Lord.....whose life and Love is the very source of our deeper, more important experiences of hope, now and forevermore. Amen.

Let us pray....

*Dear God, help us get ready
for your coming into our community
like you did so long ago in Bethlehem.
In the midst of the busyness of Christmas preparations,
give us silence that we may hear you speak.*

*Give us clear sight to see your guiding star among
all of the Christmas lights and decorations.
But most of all, Lord,
give us hearts able to receive the gift of Your life on earth,
to love You and hear You anew.
And in the midst of all the gifts of Christmas,
help us become greater, more generous lovers of You,
of each other, and of the world You have created. Amen.*