

The Rock: 12-24-2020**Christmas Eve**

First reading: Isaiah 9:1-7

Title: Prisoners of hope

Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-13

Theme:

Our hope is found in the baby in the manger who grew into the King riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The Message:

Happy Christmas eve Everyone from my home to yours.

I want to start this Christmas eve by confessing that this advent season felt a bit more like lent than it did Advent. Which is why I read from the Zechariah and a text we more often at easter.

Right now, as we gather together in front of our TV screens or whatever device you may have, many are struggling, fretting and yes, even mourning.

Mourning the loss of tradition, our yearly expectations, family gatherings that have become such a part of our fabric of being.

We get and have had this unsettled feeling, the sense of helplessness and frustration that comes in waves for many.

Others, eight months in here are dealing with the sense of loneliness and struggle with depression, as sadness finds its way in.

I know those feelings too. As a pastor, it's been quite a year, and as a husband, a dad and a Papa, as a family we have navigated so many things in 2020, as I am sure so many of you have as well.

This is the first time in over thirty years I am not in church on Christmas Eve. Instead, I am sitting in my living room sharing with you.

I remember the services at church and all that came with them. The pageants, the kids up on the platform acting out this Christmas Story and manger scene. Hoping like crazy that they all stay focused and remember their lines.

Traditions we hold so close which bring us back more so to the feelings we had then, that particular time in life. It's hard to be forced, as it were, to adjust and be apart this evening.

When my kids were little, and that seems a lfe time ago because it was, I remember our Christmas Eve's. Church

would finish as we sang Silent night,
blew out the candles and pack the kids
back in the mini-van.

Off we would go to Lisa's grandmothers
house for turbo-charged instant coffee
and what I believe to be the best
Molasses cookies this side of heaven.

Grammie, one of the sweetest ladies I
have ever met has gone onto glory, but
the memories of those times are precious
to me.

Our kids are all grown now and have kids
of their own -and over the years Lisa and
I have combined traditions from our
childhood and made new ones all our own.

This year though, we are all struggling,
trying to sort things out. Who, how many,
and what we can do, are all on our minds,
and so, we try...

We try and succeed at creating new
traditions. Times and seasons changes,
but the hope of tomorrow is always there
just over the horizon.

Perspective is so helpful. Most
especially when life is interrupted -if
nothing else, we have learned that truth
this Advent season.

If you've joined us here at The Rock
these past weeks in between Thanksgiving

and Christmas Eve, we have journeyed with Matthew and his telling of the birth of Jesus.

Discovering the unsettledness of Joseph having to process the news his Mary gave him. That led to them both being displaced at the worst time as they journeyed to Bethlehem to settle and be counted by the government.

A couple of young people just trying to figure out how life is going to look for them in the unknown which is ahead.

Then the wise men show up. Another unsettling change and challenge for this now young and new family.

I learned that week as Laura taught us, and this is so very true, that I look at this story and pick up the peace and settled-ness that is there. Forgetting the chaos and the fearful unknown which is so clearly there.

Then that awful story of Herod and the brutal destruction of life, as he murdered all the little boys in an effort to keep control. That sent Joseph, Mary, and their little toddler hurrying into the night.

Fleeing into Egypt where they would be locked down for a time before they were allowed by God to come back home.

I think all of us this Christmas Eve can genuinely relate at least in some sense, to how they felt. And yet, they never doubted God, they never questioned His plan and providential care.

No matter what those in charge did, Mary and Joseph fixed their eyes upward toward Him for whom they had waited their lives for.

That season of their lives challenged them and changed them, and as importantly, prepared them for all that lie ahead.

Prisoners of hope, when it looked very much as if all hope was lost.

Their boy, God in a manger, the man on the donkey who would ride into Jerusalem as King of Kings, is our hope, our fortress, our strong tower in troubling times and in peaceful times.

When life is interrupted, we should, we must, take a deep breath and look to see what God is doing. Listen to what He is saying.

He is always speaking to you and to me, and He is always at work in us. Most especially in our unsettledness and our fears.

So, this Christmas Eve, I want to close with a quote and then a verse from one of our songs this evening.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his best friend Eberhard Bethge at the start of Advent 1943 -From Tegal prison:

"Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent: One waits, hopes, and does this, that or the other -things that are really of no consequence -the door is shut, and can only be opened from the outside."

Like Bonhoeffer, we are struggling with separation and a sense of shut-in or lock-down fatigue. As though things are taken away from us, and we feel this deep sense of loss.

Perspective is everything. I want to encourage you, as Zechariah says:

"Return to your stronghold, O prisoner of hope; today I declare to you that I will restore to you double..."

-Zechariah 9:12 ESV

"Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie -above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

All of our hopes, and yes, even our fears
are carried by that little boy in the
manger -Jesus -our hope. Rest in Him,
hope in Him, and where ever this message
finds you, I pray God's peace and
blessing be with you this Christmas Eve.

From my home to yours, Lisa and I want to
wish you a very merry Christmas.