December 24, 2020

A Hope-Filled Christmas

Pastor Ryan Harmon

Bryan Clark:
Thank you, Daniel. He's pretty awesome, isn't he? So here's the deal, if you look closely, the guitar had two necks. I don't know what you're doing at seven o'clock, but I'm kind of seeing a Bryan and Daniel duet. We'll see how that works out. (*laughter*) He didn't know about that until just now. All right, so welcome, Happy Christmas Eve. If you're new with us, we'd certainly count it a privilege to help you any way that we can. If we can help you, you notice on the screen there's a slide, all you have to do is text Berean to that number 95000, get a little form, and tell us how we can help and someone would be happy to contact you. Also, if you're newer to Berean, and you'd like to get connected into the life of the church, the best way to do that is to get into a Life Group. The next session starts the middle of January and starting January 1, you can sign up – just go to the website, has information there on the screen. I really encourage you to do that. And then as you've already heard, one of the things that we celebrate at Lincoln Berean is the opportunity to be generous, both to people in our community, and people around the world. And we can do that because the people of Lincoln Berean are very generous with what God has given to them. So often on Christmas Eve, people like to participate in that. So if you would like to help us continue to do that, there's a couple options, you can either text to give on the screen there, or you can give online. Or if you physically have a gift this evening, there are boxes at the north and south entrance, and you can drop it in those boxes on your way out. Also, just a reminder, if you were with us this past weekend, Jeff talked about very specific opportunities to give that are on these cards. You can find them out in the foyer if you're here in the building. And if you're watching online, you can go on the website and find opportunities to give. I encourage you to consider that.

I think we would all agree that 2020 has been a very unusual year. It's been a year with a lot of frustration. It's been a year with way too much anger. It's been a year with a lot of fear – so much fear – maybe more than anything else. It should have been a year that reminded us that our hope is not in our bank account, it's not in our job, it's not in the government, it's not in an election. It's not in our health, it's not in a mask or a vaccine. Our hope is in a Person. That's the whole point of Christmas: that God sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. Our prayer is when you walk back out these doors this evening, or if you're watching from home when you turn this service off, that you will have a renewed sense of hope no matter what it is you're going through. A reminder that ultimately there's reason for hope, because God sent His Son to be our Savior. Merry Christmas.

Scripture Reading:
The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. For a child is born to us a son is given to us. The government will rest on the shoulders and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. (From the book of Isaiah Chapter 9)

And suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared among them. And the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Do not be afraid! he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today in Bethlehem, City of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You

will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." Luke 2:9-14 NLT

Ryan Harmon:
What a blessing what an incredible thing as I sit and hear these voices rise up on that song. Of all the traditions at Christmas, the one that is hands down my favorite, the one that is tops is what we just got done doing. It's singing these Christmas songs, these Christmas hymns, Christmas carols. I'm sure there's a part of me that loves them because I'm nostalgic. You know, it's kind of what you always do. But much more than that, I think they're an enduring power for me and for so many is because they are speaking incredible truths. Truths and themes that are synonymous with Christmas, synonymous with what we're celebrating, tonight and tomorrow. Themes like joy, and peace, and rest and love, wonder, worship, and hope.

That word *hope*, this year it sits a little different with me. It's a little more poignant than other years, I think. If you're listening to the wrong voices, you might be thinking that hope kind of took the backseat this year. But we know that's not the case. We are called to be people of hope. And so the question is, how do we have a hope filled Christmas? You know, one group of people that always get it right, I think, in terms of hope, is kids. I see some kids out here tonight wide eyed – hoping. Growing up, I remember looking at the calendar in September or October, and I remember thinking to myself, how will I possibly make it? I've got two more months! Two more months till Christmas. It's just agonizing to wait because you know that what is on the other end is so good. And there's some kids here tonight, I see the hope in their eyes. Surely what they're hoping for is that whoever is buying them presents got them the right presents. That's appropriate. My son, my oldest, had two requests: He wants a drone, and he wants rainbow bacon. Don't ask me what rainbow bacon is – I don't know, I just know it's one of the requests. We'll see if he gets it.

It seems that as we get older, sometimes as adults, we start to lose sight of some of the hope that we hold on to as kids. And while it's absolutely appropriate that as we get older the object of our hope must change, we can't let go of hope. We have to fight to be people of hope. As Bryan already made clear, that's not the way of the world. The world has kind of moved to where the posture is constantly one of fear, and one of pessimism and negativity and even cynicism. The cynical posture is kind of default these days. And in so many ways I think that's a learned response. You know, as you endure pain as you experience struggle, we just get cynical. And in some ways, it's understandable because there is a lot of suffering in the world. And the people that have kind of assumed that posture as their default position in life, they might hear the word hope and they might kind of snicker; it might seem naive to them. Kind of like wishing on a star – not grounded or rooted in reality at all. Almost like to have hope requires a miracle. To which we would respond, "That's absolutely right. That's exactly what Christmas is about."

In the story that Carson read to us just few minutes ago from Luke 2, the angel appeared to the shepherds and they were terrified. Surely they'd never seen anything so brilliant, anything so gorgeous. They didn't know what to do, they were afraid. And the angel spoke to them and turned their fear into hope. The angel said, "Do not be afraid for I bring good news of great joy." Don't be afraid there's reason for hope. Fear is really nothing more than the anticipation of harm. It's the anticipation of trouble. But hope on the other hand, is the competent anticipation for good, for blessing. That's precisely what Christmas is all about. We can be people of hope at Christmas because when we look at Christmas what we see on display is that there is an incredibly good and great God.

What can we glean about who God is from the Christmas story? What can we glean that can cause us and help us be people of hope? The first thing I think is that God sees the predicament the world was and is in. He's not absent, He's not distant. He's not aloof, ignorant. The passage from Isaiah, that prophecy that we read earlier, it said, "The people who walk in darkness." Walking in darkness is a great description of what it's like to live life without God. It's a fumbling, stub your toes on things kind of experience. It's chaotic, it's dangerous. It's confusing and confounding. It's to be lost. And when you're lost you can't find your way, you need someone to rescue you. We don't have a God that is distant. We have a God who knows. But it's not just that. Not just that He knows. He doesn't merely know, He knows and He cares, He is full of mercy. What we celebrate at Christmas is the sending of His Son. He sent His Son as a baby, to intervene on our behalf. To overcome the darkness that had dwelled over the earth, that had taken root on the earth. That truth is captured so well in that verse that we all know and love, John 3:16 and 17, *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but will have everlasting life (*eternal life*).* For God didn't send His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him. All we celebrate at Christmas is that we have a God Who didn't just see, He saw and He acted. He intervened, He sent His only begotten Son to come in as a rescuer for us in the darkness that we would be in without him. That's who God is. He is full of compassion and that is a great reason to hope. The passage in Isaiah says the *people who dwell or who walk in darkness will see a great light*. Those who dwell in darkness upon them Light has shined.

All the times in my life where I've experienced darkness, there's one that stands out as the most kind of profound experience of darkness. I was on a flight going from London to Nairobi, Kenya. We crossed the Mediterranean and then we were going over North Africa. And as we entered over the airspace above the Sahara Desert, that vast, massive, empty desert, we entered into all I can describe is just complete and utter darkness. There are no cities, no people, just cold sand for miles and miles and miles. And as I looked out the window, I couldn't believe what I saw. But there wasn't a bright moon that night, and so I could not tell the difference between the land and the sky. There was no horizon. It was just pure void, pure chasm, and darkness. And as I looked out the window, I thought, what must it be like to be down on the ground to be and dwell in that darkness. And then as I looked on the horizon there was a small, tiny little golden glow like a pinprick. And as we flew towards it, it didn't necessarily get bigger. But it became clear to me that it was just a little campfire. A tiny little campfire on the floor of this desert, and here I am 35,000 feet in the air six miles above. And the light of that fire was reaching my eyes.

That's the power of light: piercing through the darkness, casting out the darkness. On that holy night, long ago, light appeared and it came to overpower, to cast out, to overcome the darkness of sin and death. On that silent night hope appeared. And for those of us that have placed our confidence in Him, that hope – Jesus Christ our light and our life – well that hope will never disappoint. And because of that, we can have a Merry Christmas and we can be people of hope. Will you join me in prayer?

Our Father, we praise you. We praise you this evening because you are a good and a great God and You looked at the world and its desperate estate. And you sent your only Son to be a rescuer. We praise You for doing what we could never do on our own, for Your grace that was poured out. And Jesus, we praise You and we worship You. Help us we pray to be full of hope grounded in the knowledge that You are good and we are Yours. Amen.

Scripture Reading:
This is from the Gospel of John, and Luke. In the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything

through Him and nothing was created except through Him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from Heaven is about to break upon us. To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.

Scripture taken from the NEW LIVING TESTAMENT
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