

Hope. A desire to want something to happen in the future, usually positive. We are told in our text tonight, that we should be people who are bubbling over with hope. However, we do not always overflow in hope. Because of our sinful flesh, we are more ready to be disappointed, agitated and perplexed. In fact, our sinful flesh delights in being this way. What kind of person are you? Do you see the glass half empty or half full? Where are you looking to be a positive, hope-filled person?

Often the world points us in the wrong direction so we can be hope-filled. It tells us it will only come when our Federal deficit is under control and our government has a balanced budget, when the economy is on the rise once again; when and if we get well. It would not suggest waiting for anything but rather to run from here to there – to a new job, a better location, a different doctor, a different church, or no church, better behaved children, a better spouse. Where is your source of hope? If it only keeps you on the run, rather than maybe waiting, you have something to think about.

In the year 1967 a teenager by the name of Joni Erickson Tada took a dive into the Chesapeake Bay. She misjudged the depth and ended up paralyzed from the shoulders down. During her two years of rehab she experienced anger, depression and suicidal thoughts and doubts about God. However, Tada learned to paint with a brush between her teeth, and began selling her artwork. In addition, she went on to write over 40 books, recorded several musical albums, and starred in an autobiographical movie of her life. She once said, “The best we can hope for in this life is a knothole peek at the shining realities ahead. Yet a glimpse is enough. It’s enough to convince our hearts that whatever sufferings and sorrow currently assail us aren’t worthy of comparison to that which awaits us on the horizon.” If there was ever a woman who had reason to be hopeless because of her situation, it was Joni. But real hope is not situational in nature. Real hope is found in Christ and the knothole peeks he gives us in His Word as to what lies ahead.

Our hope is not to be found in running from place to place or in smug resignation to the evils of life, but rather in a star that is shining in Bethlehem. That star of Hope is Jesus Christ.

The prophecy was clear. Isaiah had foretold it. It’s right there in Isaiah 60:1-3: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

And so the Wise Men came. As it says in the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-2: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

The Wise Men followed the star hoping. They were hoping to find a newborn king. Hoping, wishing, dreaming that their journey would lead to a princely palace or kingly hall. Instead, it led them to a humble home of a carpenter. There they found a simple peasant couple.

Were the hopes of the Wise Men left unfulfilled? Were their dreams dashed? Not a chance. They knew Jesus was their Star of Hope. We live our lives on a journey, just like the

Wise Men. We hope for the best. Our dream and desire is that everything would turn out all right. We want a happy existence that is pain free, trouble free and problem free. But sometimes real life gets in the way of our hopes and dreams. Difficulties come our way. Troubles await us, if not now, possibly, probably in the future. One day we might be living a happy-go-lucky, trouble-free life and then, the next day, trouble strikes. We should have expected the unexpected, but we didn't. Sisters and brothers, it's then, when reality hits us square in the jaw, that we must realize that the star that shined so brightly over Bethlehem town was a STAR OF HOPE. The Star of Hope that shined that first Christmastide over Bethlehem shines with a hope that is SO very different. The Star of Hope beams not with a wish, a desire or a dream. It shines brightly with the kind of hope that is sure and certain.

A little boy was tugging at a big rock and doing his best to lift it. He was grunting and pulling at it but it didn't budge. His father came along and asked him if he was having any trouble. He said, "Yes, I am trying and trying and can't move the rock." The father said to him, "Well, son, are you using all available energy?" The boy replied, "Yes, Father, I think I am" Then the dad looked at him and said, "No, son, I don't think you are, for you haven't asked for my help."

An important life lesson is that asking for help is usually a good idea. No matter what your problem might be, somebody else has probably been through the same thing—and knows what to do. As I think back over my own short life, I realize that many of my headaches and heartaches could have been avoided if I'd only asked someone for help. When you are facing a seemingly hopeless situation, where do you turn? Of course, when you ask for help, it helps to ask the right person. The person first of all has to care about you. Secondly, they need to be able to do something about it. Jesus, the Star of Hope, meets both conditions! Even when no one else can help us, he can. Even if it seems as if nobody cares, he still does. Just ask Peter!

Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he could walk on water. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:29-33)

If you don't believe Peter, ask the two blind men and the beggar whose sight Jesus restored. Ask the Canaanite woman whose daughter Jesus freed from demon-possession. Ask the man whose son Jesus released from violent seizures. Ask the ten lepers Jesus cleansed. They all cried out, "have mercy!" and he heard their cries for help. Jesus the Star of Hope is Gracious—he loves me with a love I don't deserve. He is Righteous—he always does what is just and right. He is Compassionate—he has pity on me and doesn't give me the punishment I do deserve. Because our God did not forget his promise to send Jesus we have certain hope that he will not forget any of his promises to his people. As the Apostle Paul remarks in his letter to the Romans, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Since God came through on his toughest

promise we have the certain hope that God is also holding true to this promise "...that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Even when we don't know why things are happening the way they are, and even when we can't see how God is controlling all things for our good – we are confident that he is – because that's what he's promised. Those are promises that he will not forget. |

Indeed, hope is what Jesus "did" when he came to the hopeless world to be our living hope. Through his life of love, his sacrificial death and his victorious resurrection, he brought sure and lasting hope for us. Now, as a people filled with hope in Christ, hope is what WE do in his name.

The Root of Jesse sprang up that first Christmas in Bethlehem and people found hope in him. The same is true today. Because of Jesus, we are full of hope. We are overflowing with hope! The star of hope is shining through!

Here is what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 15:12-13: Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

"It Depends on Whose Hands it's In": A Strong walking stick in my hands will keep away a wild animal. A walking stick in Moses' hands will part the mighty sea. It depends whose hands it's in. A sling shot in my hands is a kid's toy. A sling shot in David's hand is a mighty weapon. It depends whose hands it's in. Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in my hands is a couple of fish sandwiches. Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in God's hands will feed thousands. It depends whose hands it's in. Nails in my hands might produce a birdhouse. Nails in Jesus Christ's hands will produce salvation for the entire world. It depends whose hands it's in. As you see now it depends whose hands it's in. So put your concerns, your worries, your fears, your hopes, your dreams, your families and your relationships in God's hands because it depends whose hands it's in.

Our today and every single one of our tomorrows are in the hands of Christ. We trust in him. He is our star of hope. As Isaiah the prophet said in Isaiah 9:2: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." In one of the big box stores this season, they were selling some cute, shiny, sparkly Christmas tree ornaments that simply said, "I'm hoping for world peace...But would like something shiny." But God gave us something shiny that was not a mere dream or a wish. It is sure and certain. God gave us the Star of Hope. His name is Jesus. His hope is still shining brightly in places like Bethlehem and in right here in The Villages, Florida. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:11) "Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him." (Psalm 62:5)