

Christmas Hope

How has 2020 been going for you? It's been quite a year: a global pandemic, economic recession, unemployment, political division, cultural upheaval, racial tension, record wildfires, floods and storms.

On top of all this, all around people are suffering, even in Knaphill many are struggling with depression, grief, fear and hopelessness.

Do any of these images represent your feelings?

- If 2020 was a slide (a slide that drops at a 90-degree angle)
- If 2020 was a car (held together by sticky tape)
- If 2020 was a swing (swings that smash into a wall)
- If 2020 was a hula hoop (a roll of barbed wire)

Do you feel like you've hit an emotional brick wall this year? According to a recent survey, many people report that the constant stream of bad news has taken a tremendous toll on their lives. Not surprisingly, we are desperate to be cheered up.

"I'm so glad 2020 is almost over" as if everything will automatically reset on January 1. What if it doesn't?

If ever there's a year we need the hope of Christmas, this is it.

"Christmas is coming just in time. We could use a full helping of good news and great joy at the end of the hardest year we can remember."

But let's just look again at that first Christmas:

- we find a fearful mother as she brings her baby into such a dark place and time in history. It is not what she wanted.
- Do we see the uncertainty etched in the man's features, worried and unable to properly provide, feeling clumsy, unsure of his own role and involvement. It is not what he wanted.

Consider their sense of isolation at a time of such vulnerability, far away from loved-ones and home. It cannot be what they wanted.

Imagine the frustration they feel, forced to be in Bethlehem now, against their will, at this most intimate moment by the relentless demands of a distant government. It is not what they wanted.

If we were to ask around Knaphill I think we would discover hope is hard to find right now. Hope is not only hard to find; it's difficult to define. Some equate hope with an optimistic feeling that all will turn out well. For some, it's wishful thinking, whether it's related to the weather: "I hope it's nice today" or a general feeling that some desire will be fulfilled.

Are we just hoping for the Vaccine to fix the world after all other things have been smashed up?

The definition of Christian hope is much more robust than simply being optimistic. Hope has strength to it because its source is our holy God.

In the Old Testament hope means "to bind together, often by twisting." It refers to the process of making a rope by twisting two strands of material together. Understood in this way, hope means I bring my problems to the Lord as I hold on to the specific promises of God. To hope means to wrap my problems together with God's promises.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 then adds God's provision to His promises and our problems: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The third strand is Immanuel, Jesus Christ, born on Christmas, crucified on Good Friday and raised on Easter. He is Heaven's child, the hope of the world. With Him wrapped around our lives, we are safe and secure.

Let's put this into an equation: My problems + God's promises = God's provision

Or try this definition of hope: "Hope is wishing for what God has already promised us." Isaiah 40:31 says strength is renewed for those who hope in the Lord.

The word "hope" is used 52 times in the New Testament and is always grounded in God; that's enough hope for every week of the year!

Turn again to God with a new hope – one based on trust in Him even when all around looks hopeless.

Let us Pray - a prayer written by Pete Greig of 24/7 prayer

May the love of God the Father bring unexpected comfort to your home today, connecting hearts that are apart, and reconfiguring family this Christmas.

May the hope of God the Son, born into dark disruption and deep uncertainty, ignite a little light in your home today, surprising you with joy this Christmas.

May the peace of God the Holy Spirit console your soul today, filling your heart and your home with the serenity of his presence this Christmas.

This year of all years, we may celebrate with a new understanding the Christmas no one wanted. The fragility of life in the shadow of death, the hope of healing in a dangerous environment, the love ephemeral yet eternal, born to a tiny, vulnerable, isolated, disorientated, disappointed, fearful, fragile family, which is Immanuel, God with us (when others can't be with us), a Light that shines in the darkness, a defiant hope in spite of everything, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Amen.