

December 3, 2017

*“Hope – Advent 2017”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 2:1-14

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As some of you know, John and I are flying to Indianapolis this week to celebrate an early Christmas with my family. Now at one time, flying used to be a fun event, but today it seems to have become very stressful with all the parking issues, airport security concerns, travel delays, and the almost open hostility that exists between the airlines and the passengers. And then you have my husband. You see, his motto is, “time spent in an airport is time wasted.” So the time he allots to get to the airport and go through security is the bare minimum. And if there is any sort of hiccup along the way, well, the stress level builds even further. And this is exactly what happened last year on our trip to Indianapolis. Time was getting a little short and here we are trying to get through airport security when we were frustrated by this young woman who must have been about 16 years old, traveling with her mother. First of all, she was continually holding up the line because she was texting as she was walking. You know how those lines work – you walk a few feet and then stop, and then you start walking again. Well, each time this happened her mother had to nudge her along because she was so busy looking down on her cell phone, texting, she didn't notice or care about the line moving forward or the people behind her getting annoyed. And this lackadaisical attitude was compounded by her appearance. She was wearing all black. Black boots, black jeans, a big black hooded sweatshirt with the hood over her head. But every so often I got to see the face of this young woman, since you go 30 or 40 feet in one direction, then you make a 180° turn and walk back in the opposite direction, until you get to security. Well every time we made the turn, I could see that this girl was not a happy person. You know the look, the body language. There was a little bit of a glare, a little bit of a scowl on her face. She seemed defiant, rebellious, angry at the world. Her mother, walking beside her, was visibly embarrassed but obviously had no control over her daughter and the situation. So we get to the place where someone checks your ID and boarding pass, and the TSA agent there had a big smile on his face and was so polite. Yet this young woman just continued to glare and scowl, even after he told her, “Have a nice trip!” Then we get to the x-ray machine. This is where the fun really begins. The girl attempts to just walk right through the x-ray machine. She apparently didn't know, or care about, the procedure. Well, the TSA agent running the x-ray machine isn't as pleasant. “Stop. Turn off your cell phone and put it in a tray.” Glare, scowl. Her mother tries to prompt her daughter along, but she receives even more of a glare and scowl. The girl tries to walk through a second time. “Stop. Take off the boots and put them on the belt.” Glare, scowl. This is now becoming a little contest between the two of them. The girl proceeds to start through the x-

ray machine again. “Stop. Take off the sweatshirt.” Glare, scowl. But of course she has to do it. And there transformed before us was this beautiful young woman. Short dark hair in a pixie cut, beautiful olive skin, nice slim figure. And, she was wearing one of those tee shirts that read, “Don’t worry, be happy.” It obviously had to have been a gift from someone. She then proceeds to go through the x-ray machine for a fourth time. “Stop.” Glare, scowl. “Now put a smile on that nice pretty face.” And for just an instant there was the faintest little smile that came across that girl’s face. And all of us felt it. For a brief moment, we all felt a hope, yes, a hope, that perhaps this young woman wasn't a lost soul. A hope that perhaps she wouldn’t remain angry at the world. A hope that maybe mother and daughter might someday have a better, more loving and respectful relationship.

You see, that’s the thing about hope. It is always there for us, no matter how desperate our situation might seem. And be it this one little airport incident I experienced, or any one of the situations that we all might be going through right now in our lives, each one of us has a need for hope, don’t we? Hope for our children, our grandchildren, our health, our relationships, our financial situation, our country and world, and more. But what, really, is hope? We often think of hope as simply a longing for something we desire or want changed - hope based on our wishful thinking. But hope can and should be so much more than that! And that is why 'hope' is the theme for the first Sunday in Advent. Because one of the reasons Christ came to earth was to offer us the hope that only he can bring. A hope based on the love and power and wisdom of Almighty God.

Think about this for a moment. Our God left his place in heaven to become one of us, so that he could share in what we go through - the tough times, the hard times, the desperate times, even the hopeless times. And so he came into our world as the worried shepherd searching and searching to find his lost sheep. As a poor woman sweeping the floor looking for her lost coin. As a troubled father, or based on my airport experience, a troubled mother willing to give up anything to get back her wayward daughter. For those who were hopeless, he came to shed light and understanding. To give sight to the blind. To heal the sick. To comfort the afflicted. To forgive our sins. And to make miracles happen in our lives. Which he can and will do, if we only let him. If we would only make room for him to come into and guide our lives and decisions. But do we? Remember today’s Scripture: “Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” There was no place for them. The door of the inn was closed, shutting God out. That was 2000 years ago, and still today, men and women, even us sometimes, close the door of our hearts, shutting God, and the hope that only he can give us, out of our lives.

And when we shut God out of our lives, what do we do instead? We allow the culture and all the negative things that are happening in the world influence us. All the fears, the pressures, the tensions, the anger. And this brings us down, leading us to feel frustration and despair. And, because we've shut God out, we go looking for hope in other places. We've all chased after the false gods of money, power, status, material things, even alcohol, prescription drugs. And to make matters worse, we've elevated our celebrities and politicians to such God-like status, that they are the ones telling us what we should think and how we should act. Yet, just look at how these "gods," have now fallen out of favor. Yes, with all the uncertainties and disappointments in and around us, we can easily feel hopeless.

But hopelessness in the face of these things is a sure sign that we are relying on our own resources, and not on God. That's important. Hopelessness in the face of uncertainties and disappointments is a sure sign that we are relying on our own resources, and not on God. But with Advent and the coming of Christ, we are reminded that we now have a hope that relies not on our strength or our ability or our wisdom to make changes, to make a difference. Now, instead, we have a hope that relies on God's strength, God's ability, God's wisdom. And that hope points us to a better future, a brighter tomorrow, no matter what issues, problems and concerns we're facing today. Because we can trust that when we open the door to our lives and let God enter, then God will work in us and through us, transforming our lives, and transforming our circumstances. I like pastor and author Jim Wallis' definition of hope. He writes, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change." "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change."

That's the beauty of the Christmas story. It truly is an extraordinary story. Today we heard the angel of the Lord telling us, "Do not be afraid. For I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. (Good news that will give you hope.) To you this day is born a Savior." Yes, God came to us as a baby, born in a manger. The inn might have been closed, but the door to the manger was open to everyone. From lowly shepherds to great kings, all bowing together, in humility, before the King of Heaven. All aware that their only real hope, was not of this world. And the door to the manger is still open - open to everyone today. Offering the hope that is based on the love and power and wisdom of Almighty God. So that we can pray as the Psalmist, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God. I shall praise him, my help, and my God." Amen