



Let's Talk about Hope
"Life of Hope"
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Lets talk about hope.

It is one of the words that came to represent President Obama in his bid for the presidency in 2008.

It is a word that resonates so deeply with people because for so many it is something that seems so far away.

It is a desperate cry for something to be different than the way that reality is now. Its an anticipation of more. It is a feeling of expectation that in many many cases only ends in disappointment... because so many people walk this earth hoping in the wrong things.

Putting their hope in another person, who is flesh and blood and full of sin just like everyone else.

or putting their hope in the government, or in a political party or in some sort of movement that in theory is going to change everything but in reality, ends up changing very little.

A lot of people put their hope in religion, only to find themselves at the end of their lives facing the truth that religion can not save you.

Rules can not save you.

Guys the truth is: Without Jesus, there is no hope.

without Jesus there is little sense in anything... Solomon says it this way, "what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?... we are all from the dust and we will all return to the dust."

Such a hopeless reality of a hopeless existence.

Apart from Jesus Christ there is very little worth hoping for in this world that is only getting more and more dark... and more and more grim... and more and more hostile. There is little worth hoping in at all, and there is no hope that can save you...

Besides Jesus Christ.

and this is a series all about Jesus Christ. About his hope filled life, his hope filled death, his hope filled resurrection, and the hope that followed him when he ascended to heaven and gave us the Holy Spirit which literally empowered us, the church, to carry the hope of the world into the world.

So as we begin this new series, lets open our bibles to the book of Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 2-7. (I told you guys at the beginning of the year, this verse will be a theme for us in 2016. I am not sure if you believed me but I think this is already the third time we are looking at it... so you should believe me :) - there is just so much to learn from this set of scriptures)

"2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

- those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
- 3 You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
- 4 For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

Does that sound like hope?

Lets Pray.

My wife was at Milly's parent/teacher conference last week. The kids all got a day off from school and I stayed home with them and she went to meet with the teachers and hear how the kids are doing at school.

And Milly's teacher got out a book full of Milly's drawings over the last few months. She told Dawn that she had seen constant improvement as the year progressed.

The pictures became more and more clear.

They each seemed to tell stories. Very interesting stories.

and so she flipped through them, explaining the progress in our child's art... until she got to this one... and then the teacher said:

"And then we hit a wall."

Because a day came when Milly drew a cake.

and it was a beautiful cake. But then the next day, she drew another cake. and the next day, she drew another cake.

Milly had gotten to a point in school when every day during art time, the only thing she drew were birthday cakes. Candles. The whole deal. She is incredibly excited about her birthday.

Which is in September.

Tomorrow is her half birthday. To this day she is still closer to her last birthday than she is to her next one, but every day she thinks about her birthday. She is so hopeful for this day that will eventually come and when it comes, the whole world will be hers.

This is the story of our world.

We enjoy what we have for a moment, but spend much more time hoping that it will get better.

But the difference is, we don't really know if it is going to.

But Milly does not really have to wonder if her birthday is going to come or not. When she gets to September 14th, she will have another birthday.

and that is the difference between the type of hope that we have in Christ, and the type of hope that rests on the uncertainty of what tomorrow may bring.

The world lives day to day using phrases like “Don’t get your hopes up.”

Because everything being hoped for is not guaranteed. and we get used to being disappointed. And we prepare ourselves for it, expecting the worst so we can be surprised if something actually goes our way.

But the bible tells us in Hebrews (6:19) that as Christians, we have a “sure and steadfast anchor of our souls” and that anchor is HOPE. - We don’t have to go through every day wondering how it is going to turn out.

One of the foundations of our faith is what we call “The Blessed Hope” - and it is the hope for Jesus’ return. We get the name because Titus 2:13 says that we are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

It is something that we, the Church of Jesus Christ absolutely believe with 100% certainty will happen. No man knows the day or the hour... but that day is coming. Jesus is coming back for his church, he could come at any moment, and when he does there will be no more pain. There will be no more cancer. There will be no more sickness, disease, broken hearts or broken homes.

and the bible makes it very clear that we can live in an assurance that that will happen. That day is coming.

And so from those promises and prophecies in the bible, we have what is called “Eschatology” - we like to call it “The study of the end times”

and different sides of the coin have argued for centuries as to how exactly it will all happen.

Some people dedicate their entire lives to studying this, and arguing it.

And for whatever reason, this week, I thought a lot about eschatology. I thought a lot about the book of Revelation and about how much time so many people spend on it... because there is so much of such significance packed into those 22 chapters in Revelation.

and in Christian circles, I had heard this term for years, “eschatology” - and though I always thought I knew what it meant, I decided to study it a little this week. I didn’t necessarily study the end times... but I studied to term “eschatology.”

I studied “the study of the end times.”

and I discovered something very interesting.

Eschatology is “the study of the end of the world and the nature of the Kingdom of God.” - and I am going somewhere with this... but that is actually a pretty wide range.

You see, I believe with all of my heart that in the same way my daughter hopes for her birthday, we should be hopeful about the return of Christ. But I think that the hope that we have for a future that is different must also cause us to live differently, today.

Because in the same way that there is a blessed hope for what is to come for all those who are in Christ... Jesus lived a perfect life, and he did not do that only to die the worst type of death, just so that you can suffer through your own life here until the time that he takes you away from all this pain and restores you in another life.

That is not the gospel.

That has masqueraded as the gospel over the years, but it is not the gospel.

Jesus said that “I have come to give you life and life more abundantly!”

Life.

Life is happening now. Life is flesh and blood and heart and mind....
capable of destruction and capable of the deepest kinds of love.

Life is vulnerable and breakable and healable.

and it is something that feels.

and it is something that you should feel.

Jesus did not pay the ultimate price so that you could walk through your
life, numb to it, waiting for the blessed hope of his return.

That is not the gospel!

Jurgen Moltmann puts it this way, “eschatology means the doctrine of the
Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the
hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue,
Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving,
and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.”

and I think that a lot of times, we get so hung up on the part about waiting,
that we miss the part about living.

When John the baptist went out and began to prepare the way for Jesus,
he said “Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

He says “At hand.” It is here, now. Something is happening right now, and it
should be the driving force behind the change that needs to happen in your
life.

The word repent literally means “to change your mind”

and people tend to complicate this... but its really so simple.

Change your mind.

You used to think that you didn't need Jesus. Now you know that you do.
You have changed your mind.

You used to think that it was okay to get drunk, and to be sexually immoral, and to make decisions based on your own comfort, and your own desires.

and now you realize God has something so much better for you than that.

Change your mind! Because heaven has come to earth, Jesus Christ, the son of the living God has laid down his crown, he has stepped off of this throne and he has joined humanity in the struggle that is life... and something new is happening, and you don't want to miss it because you are so busy with your life, and your problems, and the things that you think you deserve, or don't deserve because of whatever you have accomplished or screwed up in your life.

This Kingdom that John the Baptist prepared the way of Jesus by declaring, is at hand!

In Matthew 10 Jesus says the same thing... He calls out to the 12 disciples, and he gives them *authority* over unclean spirits... and *authority* to heal diseases and every kind of affliction, and he tells them this (Matthew 10:7): "Go and proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."

It is now.

That is the message. Spread it!

Then he says this, *essentially*, while you are spreading that message... live it... demonstrate it! He says:

Heal the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the leper. cast out the demon.

He is telling them, "the Kingdom is here, and this is what it looks like."

It looks like people who have lived in desperation for so long... but they don't have to live like that anymore.

It looks like people who who have been crushed by the weight of this life... being lifted.

Being set free.

Pastor Kevin tells this story about one time when he was lifting weights, and he always goes to work out with a partner but his workout partner did not show up that day, and so he decided to work out by himself. and he went to the weight bench and he began lifting weights and suddenly he realized, “he had bitten off more than he can chew,” the weight bar was pressed against his chest and he could not lift it up. and he didn’t know what to do, he said he literally was out of strength.

Of course, someone saw him, and came up to him and asked “can I help you?” and Pastor Kevin squeaked out a “yes” before watching this man effortlessly lift with one hand the weight bar that he couldn’t lift with two...

Does the weight of the world feel like it is crushing you?

Because there are times in my life when I feel just like Pastor Kevin felt when he was being crushed by that weight lifting bar. Like when every time we fix something in our home, it feels like we find something else wrong.

Or like last weekend when we got home from church to discover that a rat had died in one of our walls somewhere and we couldn’t get it out but instead had to just deal with the smell... only one day after auguring the drains and cleaning up a bunch of sewage in our basement.

It feels like it never ends.

Last year when we were living in New York, we wondered if there was any hope for our finances, living in the most expensive city in the nation and constantly wondering if we would ever even begin to get out of the debt that we had.

Or will we ever get these student loans paid off?

Proverbs 13:12 says that “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.”

Its like the girl who waits for ten years for her boyfriend to propose to her. They talk about marriage all the time but he never actually asks. Eventually,

she is going to start getting really bitter when all of her friends start getting married who have only been dating their boyfriends for one year, or two years, or two months... and she wants to be faithful and she wants to wait on him but she feels like the best years of her life are being spent waiting.

nobody wants to wait for the promise... and in fact it is in that waiting time when more people get bitter than any other time in their lives. Its the truth. If you believe you have a promise from God, and suddenly it doesn't look like its actually coming, you will begin to convince yourself that God is a liar... that he promised you something, and that it isn't coming, and that if he is even there at all then he certainly is not on your side..."

thats when the devil comes in. that is when those lies get planted in your heart... "its not coming." "God doesn't care about your dreams" "God doesn't care about you."

Your heart is sick when your hope is deferred.

and anything built around a false hope will weigh down your entire life waiting on something to come to pass.

but then it says "but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."

Because when that thing that you have hoped for is suddenly realized, it is a cause of happiness in your life.

Suddenly it makes whatever you were waiting for, seem worth it.

Well, there is a hope that never disappoints.

and it is the hope only found in the Kingdom of God, and it is only realized through Jesus Christ.

The bible says that Jesus was a man who had a reputation as "one who went about doing good."

Everywhere he went, he fulfilled the prophecies that we read all throughout the bible... like the one we started with in Isaiah. He goes about being a

light that is shining in these dark dark places that have lived without hope for so long. Breathing life into people who have been without life for so long.

The man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5)

Jesus came upon the pool of Bethesda, and there was a sick man there who the bible says had been sick for 38 years. and really, all this man was looking for was for someone to help him into the pool, and every time he tries to go himself someone else goes before him. Because in the kingdom that we *live* in, people look out for themselves.

and it isn't clear if he was asking Jesus to help him, or why exactly we are told that part of it... but we know this. Nobody cared about this man. He was overlooked and walked over for 38 years and every time he tried to help himself someone else got in the way. And so Jesus came down to this man, he asked him "do you want to be healed?" and then he told the man to "pick up his bed and walk."

Jesus, simply with the healing power of the Holy Spirit working through his words, breathed hope into a man who had been without it for so long.

The Man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6)

There is a similar story in Mark 3, when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand. and just like the healing at the pool of Bethesda and many other times that Jesus performed miracles of hope, this one fell on the Sabbath so the religious leaders are watching closely to see what Jesus will do... and he tells them BEFORE he heals the man: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" and the bible says that they were silent.

basically Jesus said: "I know that it is the Sabbath Day. It does not change the work that needs to be done in this mans life."

and then he healed him. and the bible says that from their those religious leaders went and held counsel against him to plan how they would destroy him.

He knew he was bringing the government down on him by the way that he is disrupting the system... but he didn't do it to be a rebel, he did it because it was what the man needed.

You have to understand this. By giving this man hope, Jesus was setting himself up for his own life on this earth to be taken away from him.

Hope came at a cost. and next week we will really look at that cost, but hope came at the cost of Jesus' life.

Kind of the apex of the miracles during his time walking freely on the earth... of the hope that Jesus spread, was when he brought Lazarus back from the dead.

Lazarus

It was one of the greatest miracles recorded in the entire bible. One that offered hope to a family that thought they had lost it completely.

When Jesus arrives, Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, are already there, and they are weeping, and the bible almost implies that they are a little angry at Jesus for not coming sooner...

and Jesus looks at Martha and said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

To which she replies:

²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus tells Martha that even though it may look like there is no hope, there is hope.

and in fact everyone who believes in Jesus has a hope... a guarantee that no matter how life may look here, there is a truth that surpasses all current realities, and it is hope.

And its eternal. And it need not be doubted because it is coming. And it is certain.

In the case of Lazarus, Jesus didn't leave his hope to the afterlife. He wanted him to experience hope, now. Jesus called Lazarus forth out of the grave and he gave him life, now.

and that is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. It looks like hope, now.

It looks like life in the midst of death.

It looks like life, and life more abundantly, here and now, not because of anything that you have done, but only because of what Jesus' has done.

and I think that sometimes, we get so caught up looking toward the blessed hope that is coming, that we forget about the hope that is here right now.

but if the foundation of what we believe is built around a waiting game then we will miss out on what the entire gospel mandate is.

guys,

Jesus talked about the end times... a lot... but he talked far less about how to prepare for the end than he ever did about how to live now. Because yes a new Kingdom will come...

But the message of Jesus is that the Kingdom of God is here now.

it is at hand.

Jesus is calling on his people, the church, the *ekklesia*, to join with him in the renewal of all things.

But for most of us, we don't understand the gospel in that way. We only understand it in so much as we have something to look forward to, and while we wait for our blessed assurance we get to go to this country club type of place one day a week that we call "a church"

and we don't understand that the message that Jesus gave was so much bigger than that.

Hope, is much bigger than that.

The message of the Kingdom of God is actually about citizenship.

You see, for most of us, when we accept Jesus into our heart, we think that we are inviting Him to be a part of *our* lives... We think that he is joining us to give us a better life. But what we don't realize is that when we accept Jesus, we are accepting all of him...

and in all actuality we are joining *with him* and *with his mission* and *with his redemptive plan* for mankind.

It means that we stop drawing a line down the center of our lives dividing Jesus and "the church things" into one category, and all of the "practical areas of our lives in another area.

Don't we do that?

Jesus is inviting us to be citizens in his Kingdom and with that comes Jesus literally dwelling in the center of our circumstances... in the center of our marriages and our finances and our jobs.

Jesus wants to make all of those areas of your life whole, but he can't work in the areas that he has been separated from. But the gospel message is that your marriage can have restoration, now. That the bitterness that you have felt toward someone for so long can be lifted... NOW. The anxiety you feel from being over worked and yet you still feel like you are under producing and never going to live up to your potential... that weight can be lifted, NOW. That the sickness that has been eating away at your body is

bound in Jesus name, and was crucified with Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

But it takes understanding that when you become a Christian, your life is no longer your own. All of these areas belong to Jesus. It is the only way that he can make them whole.

You can't give Jesus your heart, and your job, and your finances... but not your marriage.

You can't give him your family, but not your career.

By accepting citizenship you are entitled to all of its benefits and you are expected to abide by all of its laws.

Jesus Christ is inviting us to leave everything behind and to get on board with what He is doing, here and now.

and when we accept that invitation we are accepting the role of ambassador here on this earth for his glory... we are accepting that we represent the King and if we are going to represent the King then our lives had better look as much like the King as possible!

as ambassadors of his Kingdom living in this one, we have the job of shining *his* light and living the hope of Christ in our world.

Let me say it one more time. WE ARE CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND AMBASSADORS TO THIS EARTHLY KINGDOM.

we have been given citizenship by the blood of Jesus Christ.

and that matters... especially when we are living in a place here in our world that puts so much of an emphasis on who is actually a citizen and who is not. Who is legal, and who is illegal. Well I have news for you church, your citizenship does not belong to Detroit. It does not belong to the United States of America.

We are so concerned with the future of our nation... of our world. Of the political climate and where we are going... we are so concerned with the government and what decisions it makes and how it rules its people.

and there is nothing wrong with working to bring about real change in the political arena... there is nothing wrong with concerning ourselves with what is happening in the state... Jeremiah tells us to concern yourself with the welfare of the city. We should care what happens to this place because the reality is that the way our city and our nation are ruled will have an impact on the welfare of the place. It is okay to care about those things, as long as you always remember, as a Christian, you are first and foremost a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

and that Kingdom is here now.

And as an ambassador, your job is to spread the hope that is found here and now in Jesus Christ, to a people who are living in deep darkness, but don't have to live that way any longer. I have said it already today, a theme verse for us for 2016 is Isaiah 9:2, and it says "those who have dwelled in the land of great darkness, have seen a great light." and that light is Jesus... and we are the ones who shine it.

John 1:4-5 says "In him was **life**, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Jesus' life has put something in you.

It is a light.

And what John's gospel is saying there is so profound... he says "darkness can't overcome this light..."

you have to understand this...

You have a light, and it shines in darkness. You are an ambassador to an incredibly dark place, and the truth is, your life, and your walk with Christ, it will not be without opposition.

Darkness is going to try and overcome you. But it can't, if you keep shining. It can't put out the light. It can only give you reasons to turn off your own light. I have said it 100 times before and I will say it until I am blue in the face, the only tool that the Devil has to work with in your life are lies. He can't do anything but lie to you, but that's all he has needed throughout history to get a lot of people to put out their lights.

Darkness can not be what overcomes the light. It is not possible.

The light may feel small in the midst of a room full of darkness, but there is nothing that this void of light can do to void your light.

If you have a light shining, any type of light... no matter how dark the room is it can not put out that light. You can turn the light off and it could be really really dark. The batteries can run out, and it could get dark... If you have a candle lit, you could blow the candle out but even then it was breath... or wind that put it out... darkness in and of itself is void of the ability to put out any sort of light.

The government can't put out your light. They can try. In some countries they try very hard. And maybe that will come here. The laws that they pass, they can not put out your light. They can try.

But that is what makes the verse we started with in Isaiah so powerful... because this light is so powerful, that it even has the government on its shoulders. Paul and Silas turned the world upside down, because of the way that they shined.

The early church was so attractive because everywhere they went they just kept shining. People were persecuting them, they just kept shining. Paul got thrown in prison... he just shined brighter from there.

That is what the kingdom is all about.

And Jesus modeled it perfectly. He healed the man with the withered hand, and they knew they had to stop him... but he just kept shining.

He moved on to Lazarus, and he raised him from the dead in an unconditional example of love that he had for his friends that proved with clarity that the light that he carried could not be put out. He could not bare seeing them so broken, and so hopeless in their circumstances, and so in the presence of many of his critics he stepped out and did something that had not been done before.

Yes, he had raised people from the dead before, but Lazarus had been dead for four days. He had already been buried. He was already in the tomb. They had already mourned and some had likely even begun to move on. And he raised him from the dead.

And many who saw it saw a light like they had never seen before, and they believed in him.

but for others, who despised Jesus, it was just to much. and the bible says that the religious leaders, in that moment they realized, we have to stop him. and it says in John 11:53

So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

Raising Lazarus from the dead came at a cost. and it set into motion a journey toward the end of the human life of Jesus.

The life of a man who went about doing good. Bringing hope to the darkest places, breathing life into the most dire circumstances. The life of a man who came to this earth to establish a new Kingdom... and in this new Kingdom, Lazarus can come forth after spending four days in the tomb.

In this new Kingdom, you don't have to live like a slave to the old Kingdom. In this kingdom there is freedom.

Our world is in so much need of hope.

Earlier this week Justin picked me up at the church and we went for a drive, and he drove me back through the neighborhood that he grew up in... some day I will have him do it again and we will film it so you can see it and you can hear his stories, and you can hear the love in his broken heart for

his family and his friends as he tells the history of a neighborhood that it seems never quite found its hope.

we drove down the streets and he just told me story after story after story of all the ways that hope was snuffed out in a moment for so many young kids who were always searching but never finding what they were looking for.

And we drove through the street that he was raised in, and I listened and looked around as he showed me all the houses on the block that various members of his family and his friends had owned for generations... but through various difficulties and industries leaving and people not able to keep up anymore, the houses all sit empty today. Boarded up. Most of the block sits empty. Boarded up...

And I cant help but think of other times that I have driven through some of the old historic neighborhoods, filled with large beautiful homes that for years were a symbol of what Detroit was all about. A hope that people were able to create through their own hard work and careers. An American dream that drove the economy here...

but when that dream left Detroit, it took its false sense of hope with it.

and I look around now, as all of these houses to this day sit empty... yet they scream of stories and memories and times when things were better than they are now.

and for so many people here, that is the story. Life used to be something.

But now the house is empty. Now it is condemned. Now all your family is gone. Now there are no job.

If your hope is in the renewal of Detroit, then it is going to disappoint you. If it is in your family, it is going to let you down.

People will do great things, and they will do awful things.

The city will bounce back, and before long it will eat people alive again in a different way than it has in the last several years.

Because that is the nature of this Kingdom. Its a place that will hurt you to help itself. and that is our world.

But Jesus came to establish a new Kingdom.

and in this new kingdom, yes the house is empty, but he wants to fill it again.

In this new Kingdom, Jesus wants to bring life to literally everyone.

The Kingdom message is so powerful because it can look at person who has forever been far from God and yet it stands with open arms inviting them right back to him.

No matter how much hope slips away...
we will forever be people who still have it.

We can debate all day long about end times doctrine... we can read it all laid out in scriptures as to what Israel's fate will be, and as to what the church of Jesus Christ will become. We know what the end is. But what we don't know are the pages in between.

I call them "The stories of now."

Detroit's story is not written yet. Your story is not written yet. My story is not written yet.

Maybe the house is sitting vacant. And maybe every time it rains it gets worse and worse, and it feels like it rains every single day.

But block by block, and city by city, person by person, Jesus is inviting us all to be citizens in a Kingdom... and when you accept that citizenship, everything changes.

Hope becomes inevitable.

Because the God of the universe paid for the hope of mankind with his own flesh and blood.