

The “word of the year.” It’s one we’ve heard the just about daily since March: **pandemic**. And with that word, 2020 introduced us to words, phrases, and concepts that we’d never before had to use in our day to day lives. The vocabulary of health professionals has become personal: **Contact tracing. Social distancing. Herd Immunity. Flattening the curve. Sheltering in place.**

But in a year defined by these new words that carry an immense weight, we wanted to spend December and this season of Advent returning to a word that we all know but maybe don’t return and reflect on enough: **HOPE**

We might say it all of the time, but most of the time we use the word hope in our culture anymore, it’s synonymous with wishful thinking.

But scripture shows us that hope in its purest essence is an expectation- and active, not passive expectation for what God has promised. It’s a trustful looking forward to the faithfulness of God.

The Advent season leading up to Christmas is certainly a season of this hope in God’s promises. Especially the promise of a coming savior. But advent isn’t simply four weeks of extended Christmas. Advent is a season unto itself, one of hopeful waiting, even an aching amidst the conditions that made Christmas necessary – sin and disease and depravity and death.

And this posture of hope-filled waiting is crucial for us to return to each Christmas.

But for *centuries* and countless *generations* leading up to his birth- God’s people were in waiting. Both active and anxious waiting. Sometimes hopeful, sometimes seemingly hopeless.

All we have to do in our Bible to get to the Christmas story this time of year is to turn a page from Malachi, the last book of the OT, and you’re at Matthew. Jesus is here. We have to remember that the gap from Malachi’s prophecies ending in 450 BC to the coming of Christ was nearly 500 years. It’s known as the intertestamental period.

We remain enchanted by Christmas as it comes each year. But can you imagine the pull toward disenchantment as the promised Messiah seemed to be less and less a reality with each passing generation?

In life we will all feel this pull toward disenchantment.
Where waiting on God begins to feel like wasting life.
Where the brokenness feels hopeless.
The division makes you feel despair.
A diagnosis makes you disillusioned.
Maybe you feel it now... especially after the year we’ve had.

Tonight I want to tell you – if that’s you... you aren’t alone in those thoughts... They’re present in books of the Bible and they’re present at times in the lives of Christians. But tonight if that’s you, I also want to tell you – this Christmas season is for you.

The OT prophets spoke hope-filled messages of this coming messiah to a people exiled and losing hope.

And here we are. At the tail end of a year that has tried and tested us in unique ways. Both as a nation and in ways unique to each one of us.

But I believe these prophetic messages still speak to each one of us.

And tonight I want to consider the prophetic hope handed to us by Isaiah. Specifically two images he uses.

Aristotle once said – **“The soul does not think without a picture.”**

And whether you’ve heard that quote or not, you’re probably all familiar with the phrase:

“a picture is worth 1000 words”

That isn’t far from reality. We remember pictures long after the words have left us.

Scientists say 90% of the information retained in our brain is visual.

People think using imagery. People learn better using imagery.

That’s probably why visual aides have been found to help learning by 400%

It’s almost like the God who created the brain knew how to best communicate.

“The soul doesn’t think without a picture.”

Tonight I want to look at two of these images of hope that have resonated with me personally and spiritually over the past couple years for our family.

...trusting the Holy Spirit to take what’s been personal and make them practical and applicable for each of us

The first is in **ISAIAH 6 – A STUMP**

verses 11 & 12: *Then Isaiah said, “Lord, how long will this go on?”*

And he replied, “Until their towns are empty, their houses are deserted, and the whole country is a wasteland; until the Lord has sent everyone away, and the entire land of Israel lies deserted.”

This all speaks to the coming time of exile for God’s people.

Now-- *unlike* the Israelites-- we haven’t been exiled or sent away. Honestly in 2020 we’ve experienced the opposite – we’ve been told to stay at home. But in an ironic twist, we’ve spent more time than ever at home ...and yet so much of our lives feels displaced.

Yet Isaiah chapter 6 ends with a potent and powerful few words:

“Israel’s stump will be a holy seed.”

“Coppicing”

The regrowth that can come out of stumps is called a “coppice”, and producing a system of harvesting growth from carefully cut stumps is called “coppicing.”

Jesus tells us in John's Gospel that God is a gardener and he prunes us. God is a sovereign gardener that's in the business of treating stumps like seeds (no matter how they got there). He is into coppicing.

Because you see this practice coppicing - of cutting a tree down to the stump – it's also about what happens underground where we can't see.

It allows the root system to expand in a new way..

The expansion of roots like this makes the area impervious to erosion and resistant to flooding.

The enemy would love for our losses to pile up until we lose hope, but it backfires when it strips everything that distracts us away until we're reminded of our unshakable foundation,

...and our roots go even deeper into Christ.

...That's the life in our roots, the cornerstone of our faith and hope.

So the stump that looks dead? It's a seed.

That thing in your life that you're ready to give up on? It still carries a seed of hope.

If it's rooted in God, and his purposes and his promises - there's always hope.

What does this picture of a stump have to do with Christmas?

Isaiah uses this same imagery in Isaiah 11 to prophetically point to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ – ***“Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot- yes, a new branch bearing fruit from the old root.”***

And we know from genealogies in Matthew and Luke that it is indeed out of the stump of David's family – and the branches of his eventual family tree – that Joseph comes to pledge himself to Mary, who has the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus Christ. But another woman in the Christmas story became miraculously pregnant that we often forget about. Not a virgin birth. But birth from a seemingly barren womb.

Mary's cousin Elizabeth

Elizabeth's **family tree** was a **stump**, and she and her husband were so **“well advanced in years”** as it says in Luke that a child seemed like an expired dream.

Luke 1:36-37

And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is?

Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant!

Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.

Luke says in verse 24 of the same chapter that when Elizabeth became pregnant that she went into seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy. She stepped into seclusion until her 6th month. This means there were people who didn't know what was going on and were still calling her barren when she was up to six months pregnant!

When I read Luke 1:36 I'm challenged each year to ask the question again with where I'm at that year...

What am I calling barren that God is ready to see bear fruit?

What am I calling expired that God still has expectation for?

This is why a second picture that Isaiah uses to give us hope in Isaiah 40:31 is so meaningful to me. And that picture is the eagle. It says:

But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.

They will soar high on wings like eagles.

Let me explain why I connect that verse to what we're talking about with stumps and Elizabeth's family tree...

*When I was a kid, **bald eagles** were set to go the way of the dodo bird.*

They were endangered and almost extinct.

I'm in my early 20s commuting from NNews to my job in WMB, and as I'm driving down 64 I look up and see what looks to be a large bird with a white head. I can't look away and struggle to keep my eye on the road.

Is that a bald eagle?? In Virginia? My mind couldn't fathom it. It seemed impossible.

Maybe you're looking at me right now like I'm an idiot. Like... duh.

Well that's what my coworkers looked at me like when I arrived to work all worked up about seeing a bald eagle like it was front page news.

Because what you probably know, and what my coworkers knew, is bald eagles were taken off any endangered species list in the late 90s, and they've since rebounded.

But somehow I had missed the memo entirely. I didn't realize they had rebounded.

In my mind there were still only a few left on the planet and I just saw one.

Here's the thing: my thinking they were nearly extinct I was operating from an expired perspective.

We see a similar case with Elizabeth.

People called her barren. But they were operating from a flawed perspective.

They saw a barren stump, God saw a stump that was a seed - a tree yet to bear fruit.

Where are there things in your life and perspectives in your life that need an infusion of hope again? Be it a relationship, even marriage, a job, or finances...

And I've never arrived at hopelessness. But it's so easy to drift into cynicism.

It's the more acceptable distant cousin of hopelessness.

The perspective of "it is what it is" and the expectation that what I see now is what I can expect more of. A perspective that displaces hope and faith.

And when I drift this direction...
Eagle imagery speaks to me again.

If we start reading Isaiah 40 in verse 28 it says:
*Have you never heard? Have you never understood?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth.
He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding.
He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless.
Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion.
But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.*

In 2014 a photographer's images of a crow riding the back of an eagle went viral.
Biologists didn't bat an eye, and provided a quick explanation. As the largest birds of prey, eagles are harassed nonstop by birds of all species – especially crows.

What the eagle DOES is so key to us.
The eagle doesn't respond by deviating from its course, or fighting with the crow.
The eagle doesn't waste its time and or energy on the crow.
It simply opens its wings and begins to rise higher in the sky.
The more the eagle elevates the harder it is for the crow to breathe...
...and ultimately the crow lets go, due to lack of oxygen.

The lesson this teaches me as a proverbial eagle from Isaiah 40:
Stop focusing on the crows and focus on Christ. That's how we elevate and rise above.

2020 brought us a small army of crows... legitimate cares and concerns that can become a weight on our back, threatening to displace our hope.
We carry fears for health.
Fears for safety.
Fears for relationships.
Fears for finances.
Fears for the future.

These are the crows that settle in on our back.
And if we aren't careful these legitimate cares and concerns can displace our permanent hope in God.
How do we ascend like an eagle and get them off our back?

Isaiah 40:31 (AMP)
***But those who wait for the Lord [who expect and hope in Him]
Will gain new strength and renew their power;
They will lift up their wings [and rise up close to God] like eagles [rising toward the sun]***

How do we elevate like eagles until our fears can no longer come along for the ride?
We put our hope in God again.
We stop focusing on the crows and start focusing on Christ.
As this version says: “Wait for the Lord.”

May we remember that unlike God’s OT people, we no longer have to wait for Christ to come.
Yes he has come and he’s coming again.
But in the meantime- in the present- he’s opened the door for US to COME into communion.

And he’s extended an invitation in Matthew 11 that is so timely coming out of 2020:
“COME, come to me all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

*May we be a people that RSVP to this invitation daily.
That cast off crows and burdens as we turn our focus instead to Jesus.*

You see the word Advent in the original language literally means “coming.”
But in our Advents and Christmases we get to not just look forward to his coming again...
We get to **remember** that he already came.
We remember his life, death, and resurrection.

And tonight, it being the first of the month, we have a special opportunity to remember Jesus the way he commanded us to – through Communion.

May we be a 1 Peter 3:15 people –
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have
May we be a people that live with such a hope, that transcends every season and circumstance...
so much so that we’re having to share the explanation for it.