

The Virtues of Christmas: Hope
by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

O Lord, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Scripture: Romans 15:13 (NRSV)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – *The Virtues of Christmas: Hope*

It was one of the darkest of days for Britain during WW2. France had just surrendered to Germany. Prime Minister Winston Churchill convened the British cabinet for an emergency meeting. He laid out the harrowing facts in brutal honesty. Britain was now standing alone.

A silence fell upon the room at the completion of his briefing. Despair, fear, resignation were written on the faces of the British leadership. Churchill looked around at his dispirited company.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I find it rather inspiring.”

Hope. Hope is brutally honest about **present reality** ... but hope never gives up **future possibility**.

There’s something about Christian hope that not even the darkest shadows can quench. And that “something” is that God is alive and God is present. No individual, no situation is hopeless as long as our hope is in the crucified and risen Christ, who brought about the death of death by his death.

When it comes to hope, **Abraham** in the Bible comes to mind. We not only need the **faith of Abraham**, but the **hope of Abraham**.

Genesis tells us through **faith and patient endurance** Abraham inherited the **promise** from God that he would be a **father of a great nation**—even though he was a **childless octogenarian**. Abraham, “Hoped against hope. He knew that he was as good as dead—yet he believed God’s promises. And it was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.”

King David also shows us how to live into hope, when he cries out in the midst of hardship: "You O Lord are my hope."

And it was **Peter** who encouraged his suffering and persecuted flock: "Christ is in you—the hope of glory." And then he reminds them that salvation is a "rebirth into a living hope." Christ's coming—both his first coming to Bethlehem and his second coming is our "blessed hope."

And remember Paul, who mentions the three greatest virtues in 1 Corinthians 13? Do you remember? **Faith, hope, and love.**

Hope is a beautiful word. And we Immanuel, are a people of hope—even when everything around us seems hopeless and we feel hapless.

We hear a lot of sayings about hope:

- Hope springs eternal in the human heart.
- Cross my fingers, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.
- Knock on wood.

But to really understand what hope is, we need to first know what it isn't.

To be hopeful isn't to be **Pollyanna-ish**. The word Pollyanna comes from a 1913 children's book by Eleanor H. Porter, **Pollyanna**, about a young girl who tries to find something positive in every situation — a trick she calls "**the Glad Game**." Hope is different—it takes it to a different level—being so much more than wishful thinking or putting a positive spin on things—going through life playing the Glad Game.

Hope has the **courage to grieve loss and grapple with reality**—while not being defeated or entirely defined by bad things that happen. The Christian virtue of hope has some muscle and scrappiness to it—infusing us with divine staying and sticking power through the adversity and setbacks that come our way.

Your hope is only as good as the object your hope is placed in.

How does the song go?

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name
On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

The good news is that the **God of hope** gives us the **gift of hope—and he isn't stingy with it**. The hope God gives is an abounding and indomitable hope, that brings joy and peace along with it. But we do have to open this gift up and not leave it wrapped under the tree.

In the Hebrew Scriptures hope can be literally translated as “**stretching out towards,**” or to “**wait for**” or “**long for.**” Hope is a relationship word, an interactive word. Hope is rooted in a deep sense of trust—a reliance upon God in times of not knowing if things will come together or not.

Hope holds on to God’s promises to us when we’re in the dark:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with a hope.” ([Jeremiah 29:11](#))

Hope is the willingness to believe that God’s plans and promises for us are good—even *when it seems like God’s plans are more like schemes against us. Or that God has broken or just plain forgotten his promises to us.*

Hope and faith are sacred siblings. Hope is an **active waiting, trusting, and believing** in God. Instead of taking things into your own hands, hope entrusts the situation into God’s hands.

Despair has been defined as: “the belief that tomorrow will be just like today.” Hope says “no” and shakes off despair—giving it the Heisman stiff arm.

The latest research has found that hope has three parts to it—**goal, pathway, and agency.**

Goal: I know where I want to go, I have a promise to hold on to. God has given me direction and destiny. I have something to look forward to.

Pathway: God can and will guide me along the path to take—even if there’s presently an obstacle in the way or I’m lost in the jungle. Hope knows that the pathway won’t always be a straight, uninterrupted line. Sometimes the obstacle is the pathway. Hope believes that God can use Plan Bs and Plan Cs as pathways to get us where we need to go.

Agency: God will help me stay the course until I’ve arrived. I shall overcome. I will not come undone. And when I fail or fall, God will pick me up and lead me on. God my strength and my hope will help me carry on or if need be, carry me home.

The book of Hebrews says that hope is an anchor—a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. The anchor was one of the most common symbols that Christians used in the early church. The anchor reminds us that **we can be anchored**—even in the midst of the **winds and storms of ill-fortune** and the **crashing waves of health challenges** or **doubts and fears about what’s next.**

Hope gives us **stability** in the midst of **instability.** The **anchor of hope** keeps us from **losing our moorings** or **crashing into the rocks.** You can’t see the ocean floor that the anchor rests upon, but you feel the effects of it. **Unseen hope grounds us** when we feel like we’re lost at sea.

Laura Hillenbrand’s bestselling book ***Unbroken***, which later became a movie, tells the inspiring story of Louis Zamperini.

In **May of 1943, Leut. Louis Zamperini, an Olympic runner** and his crew **crashed into the Pacific Ocean** in their **Army Air Forces bomber.**

Search planes missed them. They were without water for days at a time on their raft. Their only companions were **sharks** that circled them every day.

Louis knew that the three survivors on the small raft **needed hope to survive**. So they had to **keep their minds sharp**.

Louis peppered the two men with questions—everyday was like a **TV quiz show**. They talked about **food recipes**. They shared their **stories, sang hymns**. They even sang Christmas songs like **White Christmas** as a **Great White Shark** circled them. They **talked about their futures**. They **imagined** themselves back in the world again—**creating happy endings**.

Louis was doggedly defiant against despair. **In the midst of deflating rafts. Lack of food. Enemy aircraft firing at them.** They were at sea for nearly **50 days** on a small raft. At one point Louis had a **spiritual experience—hearing an angelic choir singing over him**. He alone heard the chorus.

Amazingly they reached land. By this time they'd **lost 50% of their entire body weight**.

Unfortunately, they landed on **Execution Island**. So they went from their raft to...a **prison camp--experiencing unimaginable cruelty and torture**. But they were eventually set free and returned home to the States.

Louis had a hard time adjusting back into regular civilian life, like so many soldiers. He couldn't get back into **track & field**. He'd become an **alcoholic**. His wife was about to **divorce him**.

Louis dodged a lot of bullets throughout his life, but now he seemed defeated, hopeless for the first time.

Until his wife went to a Billy Graham crusade.

Billy Graham was just starting up his ministry at the time. His ministry motto was: "**Anchored to the rock, but geared to the times.**"

Louis's wife dragged him to the next meeting. The message angered him. He was getting ready to leave—but then he had a deep sense that "**infinitely broad, benevolent hands were watching over him all along.**"

Then Billy said, "**if you suffer, God'll give you the grace to go forward.**"

That sentence transported Louis back in time to his raft on the Pacific Ocean. He remembered the **prayer he croaked with chapped and sun-burnt lips, "If you save me, I'll serve you forever."**

Instead of leaving, Louis went forward. He recognized and believed that Jesus had been his anchor all along—and that he would continue to be for all eternity.

He went home that night—**poured all of his liquor down the drain and threw away everything that was a part of his ruined years.** For the next half-century Louis would serve Christ and be involved in camping ministries.

As an older adult he returned to Japan and forgave his torturers.

Hope is something **outside of us**, something **ahead of us**. But hope's also something **we experience internally**. Christ is our hope and he gives us the courage to harbor hope, even when our port is nowhere in sight. Christ will pilot us safely to shore.

Amen.

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