

Today, we continue the series of From Gloom to Hope as we study the Christmas story.

The last two weeks we talked about the challenges and gloom we may face in our lives; and why we need hope. We said that hope is what sees us and carries us through the dark times of life. And that this is the Christmas story: there is always hope of a better tomorrow because God chose to be with us and gave us the power to overcome darkness. That is our hope.

Today, we are taking the next step. What if we say we believe in a better tomorrow yet don't act like it. We want our future to be better, but we don't take the actions today to contribute to it. It is like us wanting to live a healthier life, and we read all about it but don't follow any of the recipes and instructions—we wish for it without any meaningful actions to make it happen.

Now, that's a challenging statement. But is it true? Do we sometimes mistake hope for wishful thinking? Imagine God saying, "I wish the people who walked in darkness could see a great light" but didn't do anything about it? What a different story we would have in our hands.

The question for us today is this: Is our hope wishful thinking or do act on it?

This is a serious question because often we may find ourselves hoping passively, meaning, hoping for God to "fix" everything, yet our participation in that process is minimal. It is like wishful thinking without any meaningful engagement on our part. And here is the issue: hope is not only a belief but also something that needs to be embodied and acted on.

This we know so far: God brought and gave us hope. Now what? What do we do about it? In John 1:12-13, we have this statement about Jesus and us,

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

In this chapter, the apostle John teaches about the nature, character, and actions of Jesus. Jesus is God, and he is the one (as prophesied by the prophet Isaiah) that would bring light to our lives to defeat darkness, as it says in verse 5, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

But here is the part where today's message is focusing on, "he gave [us] power to become children of God."

This text is telling us that when we welcome Jesus into our lives, we are transformed into children of God, which means that now we belong to the light and are of the same nature as the light.

The apostle Paul expands on this saying,

"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light."

Paul is making the distinction between our old ways of living and the new ones as disciples of

Jesus. And he says that as children of light, we are no longer controlled and guided by darkness.

Can you see what's happening here? Everything is coming together now. Isaiah talked about God bringing light to our darkness by God choosing to be with us; John explained that even further by telling us that Jesus is the light that defeats darkness and that by choosing and welcoming him, we are changed into children of God. Paul is saying that this becoming has a purpose, not only to dwell in light but also to live as "children of light."

This brings us back to what I said a moment ago: hope is not only a belief but something that needs to be embodied and acted on.

Isn't this the hardest part of being a Christian, to live according to what we say we believe in? To fully embrace our faith in such a way that everything about us reflects the nature and character of Jesus? It is the hardest practice we can imagine because we continuously face opportunities to act on our faith or fail to do so.

Every single story in the Bible about heroes of faith overcoming great and impossible odds teaches that these men and women accomplished greatness because they made every effort (although sometimes they failed but didn't give up) to act on their faith—on what they hoped for because of what they believed.

Hebrews 11:1 makes this simple yet profound statement, **"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for."**

This leads me to believe that to live as children of light is not only about dwelling in the light, meaning being passive just avoiding the bad, but to actively engage with the world by acting on our faith doing the good.

This is hard practice because we can lie to ourselves making us believe that we can't do good or worse, that we are doing "enough." But here is the one we may relate more to: wishful thinking. We say, "I hope the church grows." "I hope see children and new families in our church again." Or "I hope we have roast beef for dinner." (I do mean the latter one.)

However, when I speak of hope in this sermon series, I am talking of something more profound than wishing. Did you know that hope can be either a noun or a verb? When we use it as a noun, we are talking about the conviction that we believe that the future will be better despite what is happening today. When we use hope as a verb, it means acting as if the future will be better than the present—emphasis on "acting."

And this is the bottom line of today's message, understanding hope as a verb and not only as a noun is critical because hope is more than just a belief. Hope leads to action. When we have hope, we live differently, acting as if the future will be better. And every action we take, we do to make it happen. And guess what? The future does get better because we act on it.

The opposite of hope is despair (gloom), and it can be a verb as well; as such, despair is choosing to believe and act as if the future will be as bad or worse than the present.

How are we acting? And this is not a rhetorical question. I want you right now to look at

yourself and challenge you with this question: how are we acting?

For example, think about how you treat people (your family, friends, neighbor) and how you engage with them through conversations. Or think about how you make decisions for yourself and/or your family, even your church. Are you acting on despair or hope? Are you acting as if the future will be worse or better than the present?

Now, that is challenging.

Christmas is the story that reminds us that God looked at us with hope. God saw beyond our darkness and acted on what we would become through Jesus. I don't know if we can say that God had faith in us (which I don't think would be wrong), but God had hope for us. God saw what we would become through Jesus and didn't hesitate to act on it. And that is why we have Christmas because God gave the first gift.

My friends, how are we embodying and acting on this gift, the hope God gave us? We believe "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? Or is that just something we say without giving it any thought?

I finish with this. I know there are many reasons to be in despair. We have had losses and disappointments along our way, and we get discouraged. We can tell ourselves the future will be better than the present and act accordingly, or we can convince ourselves the future will be as bad, if not worse than what is happening right now, and don't do anything meaningful with our lives.

That is why we need to have hope and act on it. Hope is about not giving up and knowing that tomorrow will be better—even if it takes a little while. Despair will tell you, "Why keep trying? Nothing will change." But Hope will say to you, "come on, get up, we are not done yet, the best is yet to come, keep going!"

The plain fact of the matter is that it takes courage sometimes to choose hope, but that is what people of faith do. And that is what we are. We believe.

I invite you today to act on hope. Make every effort to live as children of light. Be confident in how much God loves you—he has proven that and more! Be confident in knowing that the light in you overcomes the darkness outside you.

Let's all act according to the things we are hoping for. Amen.