

Hope: More Than Wishful Thinking

Isaiah 40: 21-31

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Fog – Have you ever observed it from your front door? Have you ever walked in it? Have you ever driven your car through it?

The other night I was watching the weather report on KDKA with Ray Petlin and he turned his attention to the existing fog at that time. Instead of saying what the temperature was in Cranberry, in Moon Township, in Bethel Park and downtown Pittsburgh, his map of western Pennsylvania displayed the visibility distance in various places in our viewing area. Some places had 3 miles of visibility. That's how far you could see through the fog. Other places had visibility of 2 1/2 miles. Other places had visibility of 1 1/2 miles and others less than a mile.

I don't like fog. When I awaken in the morning and I see fog I worry for my wife who may have to drive through it to get to work. Looking at fog from my front door is OK. and I'm fine walking in it. But when you have to drive through fog, I don't like it.

I like to see where I am going. Amen! I'm a good driver. (Of course, according to that guy with the deep voice on the Allstate commercials, 85% of us say we are good drivers!) We can't all be right.

I'm a good driver. I'm a defensive driver. When I'm driving I am aware of what's in front of me and off in the distance. I'm paying attention to what's happening on my right and on my left. I'm monitoring what's going on behind me. I know what the side of the road looks like. I am checking my mirrors. I'm maintaining a safe following distance between me and the car in front of me, unless someone is trying to sneak in! No, really, I'll let people in, sometimes, actually not very often.

When it's foggy, my visibility distance is compromised so I can't maintain my speed. I can't see what's happening far ahead.

Occasionally I have been in fog so thick that it's all around me and I can't see or barely can see the car in front of me. That's the scariest of all. When I can't see past my windshield even when my eyes are open, I become disoriented. I don't know where I am relative to the road – where's the centerline and where's the berm? I don't know where I am relative to other cars. I don't know where are the other vehicles. Have you ever driven in fog like that? You have?

And what did you do? I'll tell you what I've done. When I get that disoriented and I can't see anything, my right foot instinctively goes to the brake. I can't help it. I can't see. I don't know where I am going, so I can't keep going. Then maybe I'll pull off to the side, onto the berm, out of the traffic, and I brace for what happens next. And that's how I deal with the mayhem called fog. Cause I hate fog. Fog makes me anxious. Thick fog, dense fog paralyzes me.

So what does fog have to do with hope? How should we define it?

Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Expectation and desire – you don't just want something to happen, we expect that certain thing to occur. That's the norm.

Hope is also a verb meaning wanting something to be the case. My sister and I banter back and forth about the Pirates, Steelers, and Penguins. She's a huge fan. Sometimes we'll talk about an upcoming game and one of us will say, "I hope they'll win but I don't think they will". That's using hope as a verb.

If you are a parent and you are raising your children you might say, "I hope they turn out all right." What do you mean? Are you saying, "Well, I hope they turn out all right but who knows what will happen, It's a crap shoot!" That's wishful thinking. Or do you want to say, "I hope, as in I have hope that my children will turn out all right", because you loved them and nurtured them, you comforted them and guided them, you taught them about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. You taught them right from wrong. You discipline them. You taught them that God knew their name and loved them unconditionally. You have hope they will turn out well! You're confident they will turn out fine, not over confident just confident.

Hope as a noun is more than wishful thinking. It is a feeling of expectation and desire. Hope is accompanied by confidence, that whatever we are hoping for will be accomplished; it will be achieved; it will be realized.

So that's hope. What then is hopelessness? Well, it's the absence of hope, and it can be paralyzing. Think back to the fog. Fog can be disorienting and debilitating. Normal visibility is about 10 miles. So when you can only see 1 mile that is uncomfortable. If you are driving 60 miles an hour and you suddenly hit fog with 1 mile visibility, that means you can only see 1 minute in front of you. In other words, what you now see you'll be on top of very soon. You'd better slow down.

If the fog's even heavier you don't know what to do. Do you keep driving, keep up your speed, make sure you can see the taillights in front of you? Do you pull off or stop? And where it's so heavy that you become disoriented you instinctively put on your brakes cause you don't know what you should do? You are frightened and uncertain which makes you feel unsafe, like you're in danger and you are helpless and hopeless.

That's what hopelessness is like. Hopelessness can be created by our circumstances. We can be so overwhelmed by them, we can be so consumed with them that we don't or we won't allow ourselves to possess any hope, any confidence that things will change or get better.

So let's think about this season of Advent that begins today. It's that season of the year that comes right before Christmas.

This year we'll consider the 4 topics that lead us to appreciate Christmas all the more; hope, love, joy and peace. They were or are anticipated in the run-up to Christmas. They are realized in Christmas, in the birth of Jesus, and we need them now more than ever. We need hope now more than ever.

The birth of Jesus Christ is couched in Old Testament prophecy. In order to understand the full implications of the coming of Jesus It's essential that we have an awareness of the events of ancient Israel and the experiences of God's people in relationship to God. All of that is contained in scripture. The Bible is the history of the relationship between God and humanity, God and us.

God created a people dedicated to himself. These are the Hebrews or the Jews. God watched over them, protected them, provided for them, instructed them, gave guidance to them and demanded their obedience. When they disobeyed, God allowed them to experience the consequences of their disobedience.

Their disobedience meant that they have offended God, they have drifted away from God and they have created a chasm, a distance between themselves and God, a chasm which is the result of sin and disobedience.

It is this chasm that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus overcomes. He came to repair the separation between God and us. The prophet Isaiah spoke of his coming –

For to us a child is born
to us a son is given
and the government will be on his shoulders
and he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Might God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Isaiah predicted the demise of Israel. They would be carried into exile. He also predicted their deliverance and the presence of God in the midst of their struggle.

He pointed to God's love for them and reminded them that God has never given up on them, never abandoned them even when it felt as though he had. Even when they felt hopeless, Isaiah encouraged them to have hope in God.

Isaiah writes,

Do you now know?
Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youth grown tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall.
But those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not be faint.

Hope in the Lord. We have hope in the Lord. So as Advent begins today we are not hoping that Jesus will come. We are not hoping that God will hear our cries for his presence in the world, for relief, for a savior to restore our relationship to God, that God will send his son into the world to save us from sin. That has already happened. We have hope. We possess hope, expectation and desire because God is in our world. God has sent his son to be in our lives.

Today we celebrate hope because even before the birth of Jesus the people of God had hope, they had confidence in God.

Today we need a sense of, an awareness of hope now more than ever. So many things appear to be a threat to our peace of mind. So much threatens our sense of security. If we aren't careful that stuff may overwhelm our thinking and make us feel like a hopeless people.

But that's not who we are. We are people of hope, people who possess hope, people who possess more than wishful thinking. We possess expectation and desire that God knows who we are and that many years ago God sent his son into the world to be with us to save us from sin. We have hope.

Very soon we will decorate our Christmas trees, unwrapping ornaments that we forgot we had; ornaments that remind us of events we experienced like baby's first Christmas; ornaments that were given to us by people we love and people who loved us and love us still. It will be a wonderful reminder.

Likewise, as we unpack this Advent we will be reminded that because of the birth of Jesus we have hope, and love and joy and peace. We're not waiting for them to come home. We've had them all along. They are here and we need to remember that now more than ever.

We are people of hope. We have confident expectation and assurance that God is in control; that Jesus has come to restore and maintain our relationship to God.