

“COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS (#1): COME HOME TO HOPE”

(Mark 13:24-37)

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1. Read CEB Text: Mark 13:24-37 and Pray.
  
2. In 1939, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released the blockbuster hit movie "*The Wizard of Oz*." And probably the most famous line in it was one that the main character Dorothy said as she clicked her ruby slippers together (say it with me)... "*there's no place like home.*"
 

A--That's right. *There's no place like home.* And at some point or another in our life, probably every one of us has identified with these words.

B--They reflect a deep longing in each of us for a place to call "home" -- a place safe from the struggles and stress of life, where (at least ideally) we fear nothing, and in which we're perfectly at ease and free to be ourselves.

C--And even though this feeling is timeless, it's especially prominent during the days and weeks leading up to Christmas -- the season we Christians call "Advent."

D--We hear it in songs like "*There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays*" and "*I'll Be Home For Christmas*," and they echo our own inner longings for "home."
  
3. And yet, in a very real sense, "home" is not a *physical* place at all, but a state of mind which captures the deeper, often unspoken yearning within each of us for an intimate relationship with the God who is *beyond* this world.
 

A--And even though that relationship is available *throughout* the year, again the Advent-Christmas seasons offer a special opportunity for us to find our way back "home."

B--So, this season, God is inviting each of us away from the "rat race" of the holidays and back "home" to the true meaning of the season -- to "*Come Home for Christmas.*"

C--That's the title of the series we'll be sharing in over the next few weeks, during which we'll explore five spiritual postures/attitudes that can help us cope with the holidays by refocusing on the true meaning of Christmas.

--II--

4. We begin today by looking at the first of these spiritual postures/attitudes: **HOPE**.

A--You know, our individual lives today are often filled with troubles and struggles: worries over money; over our children; pain from a hurt caused by a friend, spouse or family member; a paycut or loss of a job; and so on.

B--And not only do we have to face personal stresses, but today's world itself is likewise filled with things that threaten to overwhelm us with fear and despair: war, terrorism, senseless violence, tragedy, sickness, and other things.

C--My point is that -- whether by stresses from *within* or stresses from *without* --both as individuals and as a society, we are in desperate need of *hope*.

5. And I want us to notice that *that is precisely* what Jesus prescribes as the antidote for the turmoil of *his* day in today's scripture from Mark 13.

A--The first part of the chapter (Vss.1-23) describe various coming challenges: destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; the coming of war, violence, earthquakes, famine, persecution & false Messiahs, all culminating in what's described in Vss 24-25: "*In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets & other heavenly bodies will be shaken*"

B--But then, notice Jesus' words in Verse 26: "*Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power & splendor, [and] he will send the angels & gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth... to the end of heaven.*"

C--In other words, in the midst of turmoil & distress of life, Jesus says there's always hope!

6. Now, there's no evidence that Mark intended Jesus' words here to apply to any other time than his own (which would have been about the 60s A.D./C.E.).

A--But even when God's Word is initially written to address a *specific* time, place and circumstance, there is always a sense of *timelessness* about it that the Holy Spirit uses to apply its message to *other* times/circumstances -- and that's certainly the case here.

B--Like our own, Jesus day was one where people were nervous and fearful about the state of their world, and about their future in it.

C--But just as his words here in Mark offered hope to readers back *then*, so the Holy Spirit uses his words to offer this *same hope* to us *today* in the midst of whatever personal and/or corporate troubles or difficulties that *we* may be facing.

7. So with that in mind, then, I'd like to share three things that today's scripture seems to suggest we need in order to experience biblical Hope.

8. First, it suggests that biblical hope requires **A CHOICE** -- a conscious act of the will.

A--Remember that in the first part of Chapter 13, Jesus describes all kinds of bad things that will happen before his coming again, but that in the midst of it all, he says in Vs.29 that, "*When you see these things happening, you know that he [i.e., Christ] is near...*"

1--In other words, don't let bad or troublesome things overwhelm you or drive you to despair, but instead, consciously *choose* to have hope, even in the midst of what appears to be evidence to the contrary.

2--Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann: "*Hope is... a decision against despair.*" <sup>1</sup>

3--And 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Henri Nouwen once explained that "*Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying 'yes' to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying 'yes' to a hope based on God's initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work, and not mine.*" <sup>2</sup>

B--So if that's true, then Hope should affect our outlook on life and our interaction with others, as 19<sup>th</sup>-century author G. K. Chesterton once wrote: "*Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst in them. Hope opens doors where despair closes them. Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot be done. Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God & the basic goodness of [humanity]. Hope 'lights a candle' instead of 'cursing the darkness.'* Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities. Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism." <sup>3</sup>

C--You see, the Hope we have at Christmas is not a "pie-in-the-sky" utopian optimism, but a conscious **choice** not to buy into the cynicism, despair & "Ba-Humbugs!" of our world

9. And yet, today's scripture also suggests that biblical hope requires **FAITH**.

A--That's really what Jesus' short parable is about in Verses 28-29: that in the same way we have faith that summer is near when we see the sprouting green leaves of a fig tree, so we can have faith that God is near when we see the things Jesus describes in this passage -- turmoil, he's saying can simply be a reminder of God's *faithfulness*.

B--Back in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, Saint Francis of Sale wrote, "*Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life in fear; rather look to them with full hope that, as they arise, God, whose you are, will deliver you out of them.... Our Father will either shield you from suffering, or he will give you strength to bear it.*" <sup>4</sup>

C--Biblical hope, you see, creates **Faith** which allows us to see & trust the hand of God at work in our lives *even when* circumstances appear otherwise. <sup>5</sup>

10. Finally, today's scripture suggests that biblical hope also requires **RESPONSIBILITY**.

A--Jesus words in Vss. 33-37 are an invitation for us to take personal responsibility for turning hope into a *reality* in our world: "*Watch out! Stay alert!...*" he says, for "*you don't know when the head of the household will come... [lest he] show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!*"

1--In other words, biblical hope is not simply sitting idly by, wishing for better things to come along.

2--Instead, it's an active *watching* in *confident expectation* -- as one author put it, "*Hope is faith holding out its hands in the dark.*" <sup>6</sup>

B--Bible scholar John Hayes says that... "*Grace [and hope] do not mean an automatic exemption from the distress[es of the world.] Rather [they should] produce [in us] a prayerful watchfulness and a freedom from indulgence and anxiety about things.*" <sup>7</sup>

C--So, if we want to have biblical hope (to be free from the burdens and anxieties of the consumer driver holiday) then we need to take spiritual **responsibility** --to spiritually "*watch out*" and "*stay alert*" for God's presence and hope in our midst.

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11. You see, given the hectic nature and frantic pace of our contemporary culture, the Advent-Christmas holiday is always a time of emotional stress and challenge for many people.

A--And even though our pop culture tries to sell us on the idea that this should be a time of emotional *high*, ironically the reality is that it's more often a time when many people's emotions/spirits are at their *lowest* ("*It's [NOT] the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*" for many!)

B--And yet, Jesus' words here remind us that God offers us a way through (not "out," but "through" all of this) -- **the way of HOPE**, which requires (1) a **conscious choice** of will, (2) the employment of **faith** and trust, and (3) a sense of **responsibility**. <sup>8</sup>

C--So, whatever stress or challenge you or I may be facing this holiday, today we're invited to "come home" to one of the true meanings of Christmas... to "*Come Home to Hope.*"

12. [PRAY]

13. [Suggested Traditional Closing Hymn: #196, "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"]

**ENDNOTES:**

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination, cited in Reuben P. Job, A Guide to Prayer for All God's Minister's, p. 246). With the same idea, writer James Harnish says that hope is *"the deep, inner certainty... that God will fulfill what God has spoken.... that against all odds, and in spite of everything the world calls evidence, God's kingdom will come, and God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. [It's] the often unseen guarantee that in spite of all the world's violence and hostility, one day the nations >shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, [and that] nation shall not lift up swords against nation' (Micah 4:3)"* [James A. Harnish in Christmas Reflections from James Moore, Reginald Mallett, J.Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohney (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), "Come Home for Christmas: Come Home to Hope," p. 138].
- <sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen in New Oxford Review (Nov. 1986). Christianity Today, Vol. 31, no. 18.
- <sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), cited Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5928.
- <sup>4</sup> Saint Francis of Sales (1567-1622), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5907.
- <sup>5</sup> *"Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it"* (Rubem Alves, Leadership, Vol.9, No. 4). As John Calvin once put it, *"Hope is nothing else but the constancy of faith"* [Calvin (1509-1564), cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry#5946]. In a similar vein, German theologian Jurgen Moltmann explains the relationship between faith and hope this way: *"Faith binds man to Christ. Hope sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ. Hope is therefore the 'inseparable companion' of faith. ... Without faith's knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man finds the path of true life, but it is only hope that keeps him on that path"* [Jurgen Moltmann in "Theology of Hope," Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 12].
- <sup>6</sup> George Iles, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #5920.
- <sup>7</sup> John Hayes, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C, Advent-Epiphany, p. 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Author Vern McLellan summarizes all three of these points in saying that *"Hope is [consciously choosing to] put faith to work when doubting would be easier"* [Vern McLellan, The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs and Wacky Wit (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996)].