



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Come to God—Is This Really Good News?” James 5:7-11; Isaiah 35:1-10

In Hank Ketchum’s comic strip, Dennis the Menace got things a bit confused when he went Christmas caroling with his friends. After hearing his blunder at several homes, Margaret could no longer keep quiet. She firmly declared, "Listen, Dennis, we're Christmas caroling so you've got to stop saying, 'Trick or Treat!'"

A pastor wrote, a German family recently joined the church. The children's music director asked the German children if they would like to help out with the Christmas program. The children excitedly said they would. The director said she was glad because she needed some more shepherds. At the next practice for the program, the children came with their two dogs on a leash. The, director asked the children why they brought their dogs. The children answered, "These are our German Shepherds."

That reminds me of my fraternity brother, Hans. Hans had been in this country most of his life. His parents came here from Germany before Hans was born. His father was some sort of diplomat, I think. By the time I knew him, with his curly dark red hair and twinkling eyes, he could have been Santa Claus’ apprentice. But by then, we were both studying in the same college, and he was a full-grown adult and had no belief in God. he thought the whole notion of God was, well, silly. Hans loved classical music—especially organ music and English madrigals and motets and church music, too, if a boys choir was part of the ensemble. He had a killer stereo system, and loved to crank it up so that, as he said, he could hear the high voices distinctly, and feel the 32-foot organ pipes with notes so low, you could not hear them directly, but you felt them as they rattled your belly. As a member of a good German family, Hans also brought with him the national love of beer, and never missed a chance to go out with his friends for a study break on weekends.

Hans was a few credits shy of graduation, so he was taking some summer classes to catch up. He was a good student—a smart and very pleasant fellow, if a little odd at times. He just enjoyed taking his time in college, and without the draft hanging over his head, he had the luxury of taking more time than the rest of us. In those years, we were sending our young men to Vietnam. This diplomat’s son was exempt. But he was fiercely against the war, which just seemed to get worse and worse. You can imagine how armed conflict involving a draft of our men would fully occupy the thoughts of young people of draft age.

As I said, that summer Hans was in summer classes, and through his frequent visits to one of the college town bars, he met a gal that he really liked. They started dating through the summer, and Hans was more and more captured by her beauty and intelligence. He realized he felt more strongly about this woman than any woman in his life; she filled something in him that was missing without her. He began to imagine spending his whole life with her. I caught him shopping for a ring one evening, so I knew he was getting serious. He had not taken her home yet to Chicago, where his parents lived, attached to the diplomatic mission there. But I wondered if he was going to ask her, soon.

Hans was talking about her all the time—I'll call her Sandy. It was “Sandy this” and “Sandy that”. I guess Hans was a real European romantic, for you could read him, each night at dinner in our fraternity house, whether he and Sandy were doing well, or whether they had hit some bump in their relationship road.

Summer term was ending, and there would be a two-week break before fall classes. Hans was now set to graduate mid-year, it looked like, so he was signing up for his final classes as I was signing up to begin my Junior year. I came home with the huge class list—as big as the telephone book for a small town.

When I got back to the house, Hans was in his room, and all the lights were off—not unusual during the summer, because there was no air conditioning in the old building. But I could smell his cigarette smoke, and we generally did not smoke in our rooms. It was a very old wooden house, and this was before smoke alarms. So I peeked in.

Hans was sitting in a captain's chair, looking ahead. He did not look up at first, as though he was unaware of me at the door. Then he turned my way, and I came all the way in. “What's up?” I said.

“Sandy doesn't want to keep dating me,” he said glumly.

I was stunned. “Really? What happened?”

He paused, as if the words—any words to answer that question—were caught in his throat and he didn't have the energy to get them out. “I dunno,” he said. “Something about wanting to ‘move on’. What the hell does that mean?” And then he let fly with a string of what I assumed was profanity in German. Then the room was quiet again.

“Did you see this coming?” I asked, not knowing quite what to do now.

Another pause. “No. Honestly. Not at all.”

“Do you think she's just having a bad day, or just unsure, or nervous or something?”

“Stop it!” he yelled at me. “Stop it! This is the worst day of my life. No one loved me like she did. Don't you dare give me hope. Hope is what Pandora let out of her box, along with all the evils of the world. Hope was supposed to be some kind of compensation for all the evils that came out.” (Another series of German curses.) “But hope is the worst. It keeps you going and going and going when there is no chance in hell of any good coming of it. Don't you dare try to give me hope!”

“Hey—I'm no ‘Dear Abby,’” I said. “I am sorry. I don't know what to do.”

“There's nothing to do,” he growled. “Just leave me alone.”

I was concerned about him, and it was almost dinner time, so I left. “You want the door open?” I asked.

“I don't care,” he said.

Now, this happened at the end of that summer, but Christmas is also a time with a lot of disappointments, and they can be bitter, too. Sometimes the holidays get our hopes up so high,

there's no way real life can match what we've constructed in our heads or hearts. The difference between our hopes and reality is the height of our disappointment. And just "the Christmas time of year" can make us remember losses earlier in the year, and we feel them afresh.

Hans had crashed. Hope had died in him. He had lost faith in himself, and trust in the woman he was getting ready to marry.

People without hope are the living dead.

A young man who killed eight people at an Omaha, [Nebraska](#) mall before taking his own life was a troubled child, his mother said Thursday. Maribel Rodriguez told ABC's "Good Morning America" that Robert Hawkins was taking Ritalin, a drug given to hyperactive children, and the anti-depressant Zoloft when he was 5. From 2002 to 2005, he moved through a succession of foster homes after allegedly threatening his stepmother. Hawkins had broken up with a girlfriend and lost his job not long before the Dec. 5 shootings. He left a note that suggested he wanted to be famous for something but also said that he did not want to "be a burden" on his loved ones. (UPI December 13, 2007)

People without hope are the walking dead, and they can take down other people with them. People without hope are people without God in their lives, for God is the source of hope. Open your Bibles with me to Isaiah chapter 35. I'm going to read verses 1-10. Listen with me for God's Word of hope this morning. *[text]*

And now, here is the brother of Jesus named James, writing in his chapter 5, verses 7-11. As Isaiah was given God's Word of hope, James sings a similar song, but in a new key, with some practical advice. Listen for the Word of God. *[text]*

Hope. Good news! All creation will echo the glory of the Lord. In dead places, LIFE springs up! With all the bad news in every day's news, we can't pay attention very long without a rising disgust—and if we have hope, a rising desire for God to make things right, for it is beyond our control.

And as our world chugs along, from one dreary year to another, James tells us, "keep your hopes up!" God is near! And yet, he also counsels 'patience'.

Boy, that's hard, but James should know. He writes to fellow followers of Jesus who are under persecution. The pressure from Jews and Romans in the Jerusalem area is brutal. His people are asking their spiritual leader, "How long?"

James doesn't give them some flip answer; he gives them faith. And he encourages them to do what they can in a world that is out of control—treat each other well. You can do that, he writes.

There may be no sign just yet of God making all things right. But remember, he writes, farmers go through that, every year. They plant seeds--and until the rainy season comes, there is no sprout to cheer them. Everything looks dead. They must wait; but then, in due time, the harvest is glorious. And also, Job went through a time that seemed like it was forever, when all he could see was that his life was over. He contended with his so-called friends who were not giving him any relief. He held his ground. He called out to God. And God answered. God connected. God restored.

That's Christmas! God answered people's cries for justice. God connected—not just sending a message, but by coming among us as “a message on two feet” in Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth we celebrate December 25th. God restored hope of all who came to Jesus, and God does that now.

I saw this article in *The Sacramento Bee* yesterday. There's a Texas outfit called The World Bible Translation Center. Their niche is to produce Bibles in foreign languages that are designed for people in those lands who are not well-educated. They aim for a third-grade reading level, in order to connect with people who—like most of us—have some trouble grappling with the odd vocabulary, events and people in conventional, literal Bible translations.

The World Bible Translation Center hired a Chinese scientist to produce the translation they wanted in simple Chinese. When the man began, he was a confirmed atheist. By the time he finished his translation, he asked the organization's director, Dale Randolph, to baptize him in a hotel bathtub in Thailand, where he had been working.

An atheist—a man with no connection with the Living God and with no hope—had become a “hoper” who had experienced the good news of God and had come to God for LIFE.

Our God brings hope to dead places. He brings resurrection out of rock-bound tombs! If 9/11 are the numbers of despair, then 3/16—as in “John 3:16 are the numbers of hope. [Max Lucado] God love the world. God gave. We believe. We LIVE!

One of the other things you can count on at Christmas is many repeated showings of the movie, “It's a Wonderful Life,” with Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. This is one of the best-rated and most beloved films ever made, and it's likely to play even more frequently this year because of the Hollywood writers strike. But, if you know the story, it's the loss of hope, and the gift of hope restored, that drives the plot and the characters. No wonder we want to see it again and again.

What hope has died in you?

Come to God, the giver of hope. God does not promise to make it, in the words of a damage repair company, “as if the disaster never happened”. God does not promise that. But God gives life, life with meaning and purpose, calling us to service and sacrifice out of love—like God Himself. And through the power of God's Holy Spirit living in us, God provides the power to do just that.

Is there a dead place in you? Or, perhaps someone you know has this dead place in their heart—a disappointment that sits like a rotten piece of fruit in the center of their soul. How might you BE good news to them? How might you bring them to God? How might you let them lean on YOUR faith, YOUR hope, when they have none?

In the Hindu religion and in many local animist religions, god is a being to be feared. In such places, The World Bible Translation Center doesn't call their translation “The Bible”. Instead, their book is called, “The God Who Loves the World.” God loves the world now. God loves you. He proved that by getting involved, not just sending more messages--or worse, abandoning His creation.

Coming to God is the BEST news. We come to God for hope, for LIFE!
In her poem, “In December Darkness”, Ann Weems wrote,

The whole world waits in December darkness
for a glimpse of the Light of God.
Even those who snarl “Humbug!”
and chase away the carolers
have been seen looking toward the skies.
The one who declared he never would forgive
has forgiven,
and those who left home
have returned,
and even wars are halted,
if briefly,
as the whole world looks starward.
In the December darkness
we peer from our windows
watching for an angel with rainbow wings
to announce the Hope of the World.

(Ann Weems, “In December Darkness”, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* p. 15)

How will you BE and BRING Good News to someone this season? Could you start by bringing someone with you tonight to our “Letters at Christmas”? What a gift you could be to someone, even today!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on December 16, 2007 by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]