

A Christmas Memory: A Christmas Hope

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

James Lowry
First Presbyterian Church, New Bern, North Carolina

Well, it's official.
As of today,
it's the most wonderful time of the year.

Today is the day to make the formal announcement
of the start of the season.

No matter that they decorated the stores
soon after Halloween
or maybe even before;
it's our Jesus whose birth we remember...

and whose coming we await...

so we get to say
when the Advent Season officially starts.

Today is the day!

Let the season begin!

I warn you
any shopping you did before today
may not count...

at least that's the argument I give
for doing all of my shopping at the last minute.

I think I'll go this afternoon
and get the boxes of Christmas decorations
off the top shelves
in the guest room closets.

Oh, what memories are in those boxes!
I don't know how it is with you
but we never throw any Christmas decorations away.

We just keep adding new ones...
adding new memories.
Digging through those boxes

is like digging through the past:

There's the Christmas of '48, for example.
That's the year I got an electric train and a watch.
In those days nobody ever got more than one big gift.
I think Santa must have made some wrong assumptions....
It's what he got for shopping too early....
I think there must have been arrangements for a train
 when it turned out a watch is what I wanted.
I got the train and the watch...
 watch wrapped in a peanut brittle box...
 Santa had a sense of humor back then...
 Westclox...
 could hear it ticking all the way across the room.

Oh, what memories.
Oh, what hope!

Then there was the Christmas of 1970.
That's the year we had a three-year-old
 dressed in red pajamas
 so excited she couldn't sleep
 and a new-born
 nestled in our arms like baby Jesus.

Oh, what memories.
Oh, what hope!

Then there was the Christmas of '86.
That's the year daughter, Nichols, was dating what's-his-name.
It's the first year we had extra feet under the table
 for dinner on Christmas Eve.
 Never will forget ole what's-his-name.
 Think his name started with a "J"
 or some such letter as that.

I'm teasing, of course.
He was a nice young man.
His name was Jason.
I would like nothing so much
 as to hear he's graduated from
 college
 and doing well...
 maybe even married...
 to someone else's
 daughter.

Oh, what memories.
Oh, what hope!

So, now, which is it for you?
Is Christmas for you
mostly a memory;
or is Christmas for you
mostly a hope?

More to the Advent point,
is *getting ready* for Christmas,
for you,
mostly a *journey* into the past;
or is getting ready for Christmas,
for you,
mostly a *journey* into the future?

Is Christmas a memory
that takes you back in time
to the grandest memory of them all...
a memory wherein
you dust the cobwebs off the cockles of your heart
and chisel the rough edges off the corners of your soul
so you can *remember* once more
the little town of Bethlehem?

Do you remember
the shy young couple just barely in their teens;
the tired innkeeper doing the best he could;
the angels singing;
the shepherds keeping watch;
the bright star shining;
the wise men giving;
the cattle lowing...

“The little Lord Jesus,
no crying he makes”?

Or, is Christmas mostly for you a hope...
a hope that takes you to some sure tomorrow
and the grandest hope of them all...
a hope wherein
you dust the cobwebs off the cockles of your heart
and chisel the rough edges off the corners of your soul
so you can hope once more
for that day
when the earth *shall be* filled with the glory of God

as the waters cover the sea?

Do you hope with certainty just now
that some day
swords *shall* be beat into plowshares
and spears into pruning hooks
and on that day
there will be no need to send troops to Kosovo
or any place else...
ever?

Do you hope with certainty these weeks before Christmas
that some day
a banquet *shall* be spread
and no one will go away hungry...
hungry of body or
hungry of soul...
ever?

Do you hope with certainty in these days
that some day
every tear *shall* be wiped away
and death *shall* be no more
and there *shall* be no more mourning
nor crying nor pain anymore...
ever?

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free.”

Well, now,
which is it for you?
Getting ready for Christmas,
is it,
for you,
mostly
a journey into memory; or
is it,
for you,
mostly
a journey into hope?

Careful now!
Don't answer too quickly;
and, whatever you do,
don't say *both*.
Both, of course,
is the obvious and right answer.

Our journey of the season
is both into memory
and into hope;

but it's far too early in Advent
yet to give the easy and obvious answer.

We must live,
all of us,
for yet a while
in the tension of the question.

We must draw deep breaths,
all of us,
for yet a while...
breathe the air,
both thin and thick,
that blows between
what we remember so clearly and
what we hope so dearly.

Jesus said it would be thus.

Jesus said
we must live each day
in the tension between
what we remember and
what we hope:

Each day must be like Noah building an ark;
Each day must be like a man plowing a field;
Each day must be like a woman grinding grain;
Each day must be like all of us
doing
whatever it is we daily do
to live as God wishes us to.

In the days of our lives,
said Jesus,
doing whatever it is we do,
we must live in the tension
between that which we surely remember
and that for which we surely hope.

We remember Bethlehem.
We hope for a new heaven...
...and a new earth.

It is in that very tension,
said Jesus,

that our lives
and our work
find meaning
and purpose...

and *faithfulness*...

faithfulness
to the God of our memory and
to the God of our hope.

Ah, but hear this good news.
The time in the tension does not have to be tense.
How does the Advent hymn go?

“He will give to all the faithful,
his own self for heav’nly food.”

That’s it, isn’t it?
Here in what we do today...
here at this table
what we remember and
what we hope
are joined
inseparably
together.

Here at this feast
we taste the memory of Christ
and
we taste the hope of Christ till he comes.

That’s it!
This is the place to begin the Advent journey.
What better place than this table?

After we have tasted the memory and the hope
then we can go home
and get out the decorations...
plan the parties and the feasts
wrap the presents
and address the cards...

Oh yes, address the cards.
Be sure that some of your cards
have a picture of what we remember...
of Mary and Joseph and Jesus

and wise men and shepherds and angels...

Be sure also some of your cards
have a picture representing what we hope...
a picture of a lion eating straw
(you've seen cards like that)
with a lamb snuggled comfortably under the lion's chin
and a little child leading them...
a peaceable kingdom.

Better yet,
Send your very best friends one of each.

No, that's not fair.
Send one of each to everybody on your list.

Notes

¹ Adapted (along with an anthem) from Isaiah 11:9

² From Isaiah 2:4

³ Image adapted from Isaiah 25:6

⁴ From Revelation 21:4

⁵ From Matthew 24