

Hope Is a Diamond Ring

(ISAIAH 9:2, 6-7 NRSV)

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

³*You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

⁴*For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

⁵*For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

⁶*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named*

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷*His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom. He*

*will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

(JOHN 1:1-5, 10-14 RSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Well, the season is upon us with a vengeance. There's no turning back. Already I've heard that question several times: the one we ask children: "What do you hope to get for Christmas?" It's a question to be wary of. It plays right into the hands of the commercialism and materialism that mar Christmas. As Christians we know "the reason for the season", but sometimes we struggle to keep our focus.

Still, the question reveals a lot. "What do you hope for?" If you know my hopes, you know me fairly well. What are you hoping for?

We hope for PEACE in our insanely-scheduled, busy lives; so we come to church hoping the music or scripture, or the prayers or the preaching will give us a sense of peace.

Or, maybe you hope for SPIRITUAL DEPTH AND FOCUS; you come hoping for an interesting lesson or sermon, something to challenge your mind and make you think about things in new ways—new insight and understanding.

Or maybe the hope is for BEAUTY. There's so much ugliness in the world. Sunday morning therefore becomes a haven, an island of beauty in the middle of a lot of pain and violence and fear and ugliness.

That's as it should be. And yet, sometimes the gospel has a way of confronting us, because we want to start at the point of our hopes and needs; but the gospel always starts with Christ. "In the beginning was the Word." And that sometimes flies in the face of our hopes and needs.

Hope. It's a central theme of the whole Bible. But the story's not a smooth one. It constantly deals with hills and valleys.

On the basis of hope ABRAHAM moved to a strange land. A call and a promise fueled hope for a future in which Abraham and his children and his children's children would share in God's plan to bless the whole world.

That hope was passed from one generation to the next. It almost died in Egypt; but a smoldering ember was fanned into flame in MOSES, this time in the form of a yearning for a land—a place to call home—a place to put down roots.

But first that hope had to overcome repeated confrontations with those Palestinians who had the nerve to fight back when Israel took their homes and land. Hope wilted, then sprang back, energized by the heroic leadership of DAVID; a renewed hope, this time rooted in a nation: military, political and economic power.

The hope burned bright, then faded, choked by political corruption, economic inflation gone berserk, and an apathetic, materialistic citizenry. ISAIAH AND OTHER PROPHETS occasionally breathed life back into it; but only temporarily—life support for a hope that could no longer sustain itself. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar "pulled the plug," and in exile, the Israelites remembered the hope; but mourned its death.

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.² On the willows there we hung up our harps. ³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? (PSALMS 137:1-4 NIV)

Israel didn't yet know their God was a God of resurrection. The plant had died; but in the earth the bulb was there, waiting for springtime, when a new plant would spring up—a sprig out of the root of Jesse—a new hope: God would yet redeem God's people, "When MESSIAH Comes!"

A child goes to bed hungry. His mother pats his hand: "When Messiah comes, there'll be no more hunger!" A beggar clutches his rags in some cold alley: "When Messiah comes" there'll be no more homelessness. A young girl, cries in her pillow: "When Messiah comes", there'll be no more Roman soldiers to rape and pillage.

And then he comes; and he's a carpenter, poor as they, running with prostitutes and tax collectors. Instead of recruiting a rebel army to overthrow the Romans, he tells them to carry the Roman soldiers' packs an extra mile; and he says, "Love your enemy." Instead of establishing a government to erase poverty and hunger, he says, "You feed the hungry." That's not what they were hoping for.

It is the witness of scripture and of history, and of our own lives, that Christ

does come in fulfillment of hope—but he comes "like a thief in the night"—often undetected. He still comes "to his own;" and his own still do not receive him because, somehow, when he comes it's not what we expect. Messiah is not about us.

God's people always have held to a hope that life would be better—*for us*, more meaningful—*for us*; more joyful—*for us*; but when he comes, he tells us to make life better, more meaningful, more joyful—*for others!*

And somehow that's supposed to be "Good News". Somehow that's supposed to mean the Kingdom of God is at hand. That's supposed to be what we've waited for and longed for and hoped for.

Paul writes, "The whole creation stands on tiptoe to see the Sons of God revealed." But when they appear, they're not wearing crowns, but hard hats; they're not wearing fine linen and silk, but denim overalls and work boots.

A man promised his wife a Christmas gift that would dazzle and brighten her life. She just knew it would be that diamond ring she'd pointed out to him so many times.

Just before Christmas his unit was deployed; and so on Christmas morning she and the children opened their presents without him. She saved the large, heavy package from her husband until last, knowing that he took great joy in disguising his gifts. The huge, heavy boxy, she knew, would contain several boxes, each smaller than the previous one. There'd be some bricks for weight; but eventually she'd peel the layers down to one last box: tiny, and wrapped in gold foil, and holding her ring.

Finally, the time came, and with quivering hands she began to tear the paper away from the box. It was a vacuum cleaner box; but that meant nothing. Inside would be a smaller box and a smaller box and a smaller box; and so she tore open the lid and—it was a vacuum cleaner.

There was no joy in Mudville that night. Mighty Casey had, indeed, struck out. She refused to call him that night, as they had agreed; and she cried all night. For the next several days she wouldn't answer the phone. Oh! She was angry!

But, things had to be done. The dry Christmas tree was a fire hazard. Plus, it represented her greatest disappointment; so she took off the ornaments and to put them in their boxes. Finally, the tree was bare, and she dragged it out to the curb.

There were pine needles all over the carpet, so she took that new vacuum cleaner and, cursing it, began vacuuming the carpet. When she moved a large chair she found a small box—obviously overlooked at Christmas. It was wrapped in gold foil, and her name was on the tag. With trembling fingers again, she opened the box, and found her diamond ring.

Oh, all her hopes were fulfilled—as soon as she used all she already had received.