

# A Tangible Hope

Part 2 of Sermon Series:  
*A Geography of Salvation*

a sermon based on

Isaiah 11:1-10 – Romans 15:5-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

and delivered on  
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Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)

at  
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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It was the summer between fourth and fifth grade that I saw it – *Star Wars* – what’s now called *Episode IV – A New Hope*. Have any of you seen it? or heard about it? It was still a novelty when school started up that fall, none of the kids in Mr. Humphry’s fifth grade class understood the awesomeness. How could they? They hadn’t experienced it. Fortunately for my siblings and me, our dad was a sci-fi nut. I think we got to see it during the first showing in Peoria.

The movie has been out for forty-two years, so I don’t think I’ll be giving away any spoilers. If you remember, the movie basically starts out with two droids, C3PO and R2D2, landing on a planet in search of an old Jedi knight – Obi Wan Kenobi. The empire has taken over the galaxy and is prepared to cinch its final victory with a nearly complete death star.

Things are dire. Hope? *Hope* not much more than wishful thinking. Then Luke teams up with Obi Wan, Han and Chewbacca; and the death star – the empire’s \_\_\_ – is destroyed. Hope is restored not as wishful thinking but with tangible proof. That hope would lead not only to the return of the Jedi and their spiritual insight and power – but with the ultimate defeat of the empire.

Welcome to Advent as we await the next episode in the *Star Wars* line, *The Rise of the Skywalkers*. Just kidding. Sort of. Susan and I will be heading to the theater in about a week and a half to see that movie; but there is a connection.

In that first *Star Wars* movie, hope was needed and in short supply. That’s where Isaiah and Israel found themselves as he wrote the words we heard today. Last week, we read his words speaking about God’s holy city sitting on the highest mountaintop for all to see and inviting all people and peoples to salvation; and we acknowledged that our view of that salvation can be obscured at times. In those moments of trial and difficulty when you can’t see the goal, hope can fade – it can turn to wishful thinking – it can vanish.

Unless... Unless there is something to hold on to and to remind us that our hope is real.

When Isaiah wrote this passage the kingdom that David had built up was divided. Israel – the northern kingdom was constantly being invaded. Corruption and injustice flourished amidst the growing disobedience to God’s intention. People were losing hope.

So, he offers this oracle of hope – a vision toward hope in Christ. Paul points us back to that vision when he explains the hope that has not only been restored to Israel but offered to all people as he reflects on that passage.

Isaiah tells people that there will be a sign coming to prove that the hope is real. There will be a sign that will show God’s intention for harmony in creation. He uses imagery of predators and game lying together and living in peace. This is symbolic language establishing the fullness of God’s intention for people in their various quarrels. But he also offers a tangible sign of hope, a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, a twig/a branch from his root. Jesse was the father of King David.

Although that tree had been cut down, a stump remained; the roots remained there obscured by the earth, but there ready to restore life.

This time of year can be hard for so many people. We bring in these beautiful evergreen trees into our home and decorate them with this anticipation of joy. Yet at the same time there may be something missing, drawing our attention to the bare patch or that lonely stump left in the field.

I once got home from the 11:00 pm Christmas Eve service, only to receive a call from the nursing home that a parishioner had just died. We don’t usually keep that sort of date close to us, but for Harriet’s family, the anticipation of Christmas morning is a reminder of her death. Fortunately, she and they walked in faith. What about widow’s facing the first Christmas without their spouse, children facing the first Christmas without mom or dad? What about the couple either struggling to keep their marriage together or having it stripped away as they try to maintain some semblance of joy for the sake of their children? Wishful thinking? Or hope?

What about those in prison? As we mailed our Christmas cards this week, will that card sent to my cousin bring hope that we remember him and still love him, or will it inflame his despair that he will spend several more Christmas morning behind bars? These are the big ones.

There are the smaller challenges. Can I afford to visit my family this year? Disappointment at not being able to find the perfect gift; challenges at work, where maybe the hope is only to keep that job until after the holidays to avoid letting others down. People need hope. We need hope.

We need hope – not wishful thinking – but a hope that we can hold on to until we can once again see that invitation – that promise – of salvation. Where will it come from?

In her sermon on this passage from Isaiah – it is from the Hebrew Bible, after all – Rabbi Margaret Wenig recounts the story of some Austrian Jews who had lived through the horrors of a concentration camp in Buchenwald. In their imprisonment, they held on to a vision of settling in Palestine – the Holy Land – the Promised Land. There they would start a kibbutz – a religious commune focused on family and farming. And they did. Even though they were beaten down, even though they were all but dead, that kibbutz became a reality. That peaceful community endures even today as kibbutz Netzer. *Netzer* means *twig*, as in a twig shall sprout from Jesse. It's a tangible sign of hope.

We have another tangible sign of that hope. A shoot did spring up a branch did arise – when Jesus was born. Maybe we don't see lions eating with oxen or wolves lying with sheep, but there are signs of his promise growing around us. Even in our worst moments as human beings, there are now rules for warfare. It used to be anything goes. In the face of disease, we have vaccines and medicines that are shared with even the poorest places on earth – not perfectly, but on our way.

If you are going through some struggle today and feel beaten down and nothing but a stump, remember this people prayed with you today. You are not forgotten. Cling to this hope and accumulate those signs. Look for them in the good will of a Christmas card – even one from your dentist. Look for those tangible signs of hope, when someone says, “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays.” Be slow to dismiss those encounters as nothing but wishful thinking.

This summer, I was talking with my next door neighbor. Somehow the conversation turned to the condition of the lawn. She mentioned that one of my predecessors would let the parsonage lawn get out of hand quite often. But that when the lawn did get mowed, she allowed this woody weed to remain and would mow around it. To the neighbor's surprise, that twig that started out from some roots that had been left in the ground, is now a full grown mulberry tree. It provides a snack for me when I mow. The neighbor makes some pie. It all came from something that was there but not easy to see.

It would have been easy to mow down that twig. It would have been faster. It might not have even seemed important. But then, where would I get my mulberries? God is offering each of us hope this season. For some of us, it may not seem like it's enough. Hang in there. Nurture the hope that you've been given. Nurture hope in others, send out that card, make that call, share a cheerful greeting. Allow God to grow it into the fullness of hope.

When Luke Skywalker destroyed the death star, he didn't destroy the empire. That took a few more movies, and even then. But when God sent his son Jesus to us, to live among us to allow human beings to raise him, he took away any power that Satan had over us that we don't give him ourselves. By living among us, dying for us, and rising again, Jesus destroyed the power that sin and death had over us.

That shoot from Jesse's stump, that twig from his roots, lives on. The promise is growing if not yet fully revealed. So, hold on to those tangible signs of hope, let them sustain you when the promise is obscured, but know that God will lead you to salvation. AMEN.