



Devotional Booklet

Week Four | A New Hope



St. Hilda's Church

Advent Devotion | **Week Four**

A NEW HOPE!

Isaiah 7:14 ^(NIV)

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:2–5; 6-7 ^(NIV)

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

The month of December has a festive holiday mood with shopping for gifts, feasting and cheerful songs and dazzling decorations of tinsel and glitter, leading up to celebrating Christmas. But for some, Christmas could be emotionally overwhelming: who can understand their suffering of personal loss, or pain caused by illness or anxieties over uncertainties of the future? Headlines in the newspapers warn us: “Brace yourself for a riskier world in 2024”, even as we read of wars and extreme climate conditions. In these volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous times, what is there to be so joyful about?

Perhaps the backstory of the carol, “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day” written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, could help us not lose sight of what Christmas truly means.

This is not the typical, happy carol we’re accustomed to singing. Written on Christmas day in 1864 during the American Civil War, it is a personal faith story of finding hope at Christmas amidst the backdrop of bleak despair. Mr. Longfellow was no stranger to tragedy. His first wife died after a miscarriage. In 1861 his second wife was burned in a tragic fire and she later passed away. Longfellow’s face became so scarred from becoming burned when he tried to save her that he could not shave thereafter. Three years later, Longfellow received a war telegram stating his 19-year-old son Charley had been severely wounded in battle while serving in Lincoln’s Union Army. Surgeons warned that Charley could face lifelong paralysis.

Mr. Longfellow had much to be bitter about (verse 3). [*The lyrics of the carol is appended below*] Yet as the church bells reminded him of the true meaning of Christmas (verse 4) - that there is HOPE for mankind because our “help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121).

That HOPE shone a ray of light into the darkness, turning Longfellow’s night into day (verse 5) so he could confidently say, “peace on earth, goodwill to men”!

In ancient times, the prophet Isaiah also lived in volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous times, with invasions from Assyria, kings who did evil in the Northern kingdom of Israel, and weak and powerless kings in Judah. Yet God gave Isaiah a vision of HOPE (Isaiah 9: 2-5) that is often quoted at the Advent season.

The reason for this HOPE of joy and peace is because of the birth of Immanuel – God living with us – born of a virgin (Isaiah 7: 14; 9:6-7).

Life – no matter what era – is filled with volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity. Looking at this world without Immanuel (God with us) turns our lives into bleakness, and our future is dark without hope. But when we who believe in Jesus, born of a virgin, we can look at this world through the eyes of Immanuel (God with us), and we will see His light shine through the darkness. Our hope in God is never wasted (Romans 5:5). At “just the right time” (Romans 5:6), God fulfils his promises (Luke 1:68-74).

Christina Ratnam

Reflection

What, in your circumstances, causes you to feel weary and troubled?

How does knowing that Jesus is Immanuel – God lives with us – bring HOPE in these circumstances?

Prayer

*Heavenly Father,
During difficult seasons of life, it's easy for me to be discouraged; in those hard times, help me place my hope in You. And in every season of my life, help me share with others the peace found in life with You. Thank You, God, that You are near. You're always by my side. I'm grateful for Your comfort in my pain and for Your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Christmas Carol

I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day

Verse 1

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Verse 2

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Verse 3

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said:
“For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Verse 4

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Verse 5

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

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