

AT FIRST LIGHT

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on January 4, 2015**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hope Is a Pervasive Theme of Christmas

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas. Now I know that all of you are pretty much of the opinion that Christmas was over a long time ago, so let's get on with it. This is New Year's, not Christmas anymore. But according to church tradition, there are twelve days of Christmas, and today is number eleven. That's why we have two Sundays of Christmas this year.

Today I want to talk about one of the themes that is pervasive throughout the Christmas story and the Christmas traditions. The theme is hope. Look at the banners on the balcony behind you, and the very first one is the theme of hope. We light a candle for that theme at the beginning of the Advent season, so it's appropriate to talk about hope for a little while.

Can Hope Offer Anything of Substance?

Let me give you a few examples: During the last several days, my wife and I went to Brooklyn to see our new little granddaughter. We decided to return home yesterday, and we were on a bus returning from New York City on Route 17 from 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. yesterday.

Here are some of my hopes while on that long ride: I hope we can get home alive. I hope the driver knows how to handle the bus in all of this slush, sleet, freezing rain, and snow. I hope there's good tread on the tires. I hope the weather doesn't get any worse. To sum up, I hope we stay on the road, that we don't slide off and flip over and die. That's what I was thinking for four hours. That's a lot of hoping.

Hope takes some mundane forms, actually. We hope our favorite team wins, which we of course always do. We hope we can find a decent parking spot, but there's more to it than that, as all of us know.

More importantly a lot of people are seriously discouraged with different facets of what's going on in our world, whether it's the environment or the economy or politics or wars of one type or another. There's plenty to be discouraged about. So can we hope for anything of more substance than just a better parking spot?

Mythology in the Bible and in "Lord of the Rings"

Let me give you some further examples: I'd like to start off on a mythological level. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Verse 5 in the prologue of John is one of the most famous and most well-known passages in the entire Bible. It gets to us at a gut level. Whether we understand the words or not, we sort of get what dawn means in the darkness.

There's a scene in "Lord of the Rings" in which the protagonists' warriors are about to enter a horrible battle, and the situation is pretty dire. They're going to lose. It was the battle of Helms' Deep, and just prior to that battle, Gandolf, who is in the process of leaving, says to the assembled, ultra-discouraged, losing henchmen, "Look for me on the fifth day. Look to the East at the break of dawn." Then he rides off.

Now there are five days of all-out hustling in preparation for war and then the beginning of the war. Nobody remembers Gandolf's promise. They're in the middle of this bleak war, in retreat. They're backed into a corner, about to die, about to be overrun. On top of all their difficulties, it's dark, and it has been raining all through the night.

Just then, right at the peak of their bleakest moment, dawn erupts. This is why Tolkien is so loved as an author, he touches the mythology of the situation. He touches the paradigm of it. Somebody remembers to look to the East, and there on a hill, Gandolf has assembled an army that will turn the tide, an army unknown to them. Help from an unknown quarter, arriving at dawn in the East. The mythology of it, the symbolism of it gets you whether you understand the dynamics of the war or not.

Hope in the Face of Death

If I might speak personally for a moment, here are some additional thoughts about hope: I had a chance over the last few days to look over some facets of my life. I've been doing this since my mom died, and it seems like the right thing to do at this point. So I've been looking it over, and if I could make one conclusion about my life, my career, it has been one of overriding benevolence. I can look back and say that many things that could have happened didn't. They would have been disastrous to my life.

Specifically, there have been four positions that I applied for, wanted desperately, and pursued to the best of my ability. I didn't get these positions, and in each case I am very lucky that I didn't.

One in particular: Before I came to this church, I applied to a community church in Los Alamos. The congregation was more than 50 percent physicists. If you look at that church and compare it with my resumé, it would have been a great match, I thought. I didn't get the job, however, because I blew the interview. But I looked back and monitored that church's website for over a year. I took stock of the person they hired and saw the troubles that caused his downfall. He lasted only about eleven months and didn't even make it to the one-year mark. As a result, I thought maybe God is looking out for me after all.

This incident brought to mind something I learned in history class a long time ago. President Buchanan – you remember that guy? – was known to have the best resumé of any President, but he was one of the worst, arguably *the* worst. My reaction was that I should pay attention to this.

There are different facets of hope that I want to give you this morning. There's my story, and there's "Lord of the Rings."

Some Statistics of Hope

I haven't yet come up with an Einstein quote on this subject, but let me give you still more thoughts about hope. I have nine statistics to share with you for all who are occasionally discouraged. These are about our world and our culture. Consider:

- ☞ **One. Teen Pregnancy.** In 2012 there was a total of 305,400-and-some babies born to women ages 15-19. So 305,000 in 2012 for a rate of 29.4 per thousand, which is the lowest since such statistics have been compiled and six percent lower than in 2011. Really the lowest-ever for teen pregnancy. *Source: Center for Disease Control, CDC.com.*

- ☞ **Two. Combat Deaths** are at their lowest point in a hundred years, averaging lately around 55,000 combat deaths worldwide for both sides of the combatant armies per year. Fifty-five thousand happens to be half what they were in the 90's and a third of what they were during the Cold War. Wait a minute. During the Cold War, we weren't actively fighting; we were just mad at each other. No, a third of what combat deaths were during the Cold War and then a hundredth of what it was during an actual war like World War II but half of what it was during the 90's. *Source: Foreign Policy.com.*

- ☞ **Three. U.S. Tax Rates** are now lower than nearly three-quarters of all the other countries of the world. *Source: P.V.S.*

- ☞ **Four. Renewable Energy Sources.** Solar energy and wind energy now account for 22 percent of the world's electricity. That's a lot. In addition, the ozone layer is recovering. It is expected to climb back up to the 1980 benchmark level by midcentury. *Sources: Renewables, International Energy Agency; ozone layer, U.N. Environmental Program.*

- ☞ **Five. The U.S. Deficit** has been cut by more than 50 percent since 2009 as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. *Source: Office for Management and Budget.*

- ☞ **Six. Extreme Poverty in Third-World Countries.** Since 1990 the number of

people in developing countries, the third-world-type countries, living in extreme poverty has halved from 43 percent to 21 percent from 1990 to 2010. Do you know how many lives that affects?

 **Seven. Reproductive Health, Social Empowerment, and Labor-Market Equity.**

According to the United Nations, in a comprehensive study of these factors, there has been a 20 percent decline in observable gender inequalities worldwide from 1995 to 2011. This is one of my favorite factors of hope. I didn't know the U.N. keeps an Inequality Index. *Source: U.N. Human Development, Gender, and Inequality Index.*

 **Eight. The Worldwide Child Mortality Rate** has halved since 1990. *Source: Relief Web.com.*

 **Nine. Gas Prices** are down sharply.

I find the list amazing because I get upset when watching the news, and I don't hear these stories of the ways in which the war is less than what we had thought. The other factors listed above also do not receive publicity of the hope they deserve. Lives are being saved right and left in so many different, unsung ways.

Jeremiah, a Depressing Book on the Fate of the Jews

Now let me give you another example: The story that Janet read in her scripture lesson, part of the story anyway, comes from Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah is a depressing book of the Bible. If ever you're feeling down, read something more uplifting.

This story is set in the years immediately prior to 587 BC, which was the year that Jerusalem was finally conquered by the Babylonians. That led to the deportation of everybody who was able to walk, a 400-mile marching trek on which many died along the way, to the center of Babylon, to the Southeast.

Babylon had grown very strong under King Nebuchadnezzar the Great. You might have heard of him. He was building a great empire, and the thing you do if you're a powerful despot is that you conquer people and swallow whole regimes, never mind their will to resist.

So Nebuchadnezzar first swept up to the North, and conquered part of Persia, then assailed the West and took control of Assyria and Syria. After that he headed South along the edge of the Mediterranean to grab Israel And after he'd finished off Israel, the plan was to head over to Egypt and put that nation under his thumb. Well he got Israel, both the northern and the southern kingdoms. But he stopped short of Egypt, having run out of steam at that point.

The Siege of Jerusalem and the

Deportation of the Jews for 160 Years

So in the 580's, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. The inhabitants had raised their city walls and were hunkered down. Disease was always a problem, especially cholera, and food and water were always difficult to obtain. So the king had to wait and try to smoke the defenders out until finally they couldn't take it anymore, and the siege led to the destruction of Jerusalem. It had been under siege for about two years at the point of Jeremiah's writing of his book.

In this book there are three chapters of what is called the Book of Consolation. It's three chapters of good news in the middle of an accounting of this horrible siege and the way in which the Jews were all going to lose and be conquered by the Babylonians.

Jeremiah Buys His Cousin's Field

What happens in this part of the story is that Jeremiah has a cousin who owns a field a couple miles outside Jerusalem, where the Babylonian armies are. Jeremiah's cousin decides he's going to play the destruction of Jerusalem smart and plans to sell that field, as if anybody in their right mind is going to buy a field that cannot be accessed, and by the way, what are you going to do with the money? Can't spend it on anything; everything is being rationed within the city walls. Money is worthless. The field is worthless.

So this cousin comes up with the idea that he's going to sell his field. It's in a little community named Anathoth. Jeremiah, being a relative, has first rights to buy the field. It's the rule at this time that if somebody in the family wants to sell something, it must be offered first to the family, which has the right of first refusal. If nobody in the family takes up the offer, then the seller can sell the goods or land on the open market.

Jeremiah says, "I think I'll buy it." Everybody knew Jeremiah was an idiot because he kept talking about how things are going to be bad, and you know they're really not going to be bad because the king has told everyone that everything will be fine. Thus everybody thought poorly of Jeremiah, and this seals his reputation as an unmitigated idiot.

In saying he is going to buy that field, he makes a big deal about it. He says, "I want all the dignitaries to be brought in." Jeremiah calls a council, with all the big shots of the community in attendance, and he has two deeds drawn up. He pays the asking price to his cousin and makes sure that everybody signs the two deeds. It's all as legal as possible.

Then he takes one of those deeds and rolls it up and places it in an earthenware jar like the Dead Sea scrolls so it would last a long time. Then Jeremiah goes on to echo the God of Israel by repeating that "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought and sold in this land."

The armies of Nebuchadnezzar finally break the city walls. Jerusalem is conquered, the deportation takes place, and the city is in ruins. One hundred-sixty years pass before the Jews are allowed to return – approximately the same amount of time that elapsed between our Civil

War and today. Possibly some descendant of Jeremiah, perhaps a great-grandchild would be able to inherit that property, but probably not. The field would likely have been destroyed by then.

Nevertheless, Jeremiah gave the Jewish people a sense of hope.

**The Light Shines in the Darkness,
But Darkness Cannot Overcome the Light**

We can have hope on a short time frame, like finding good parking spots or who wins the next game. But that's not really the way hope works. Hope works on a longer time frame, such as over the course of a decade or a few decades. Some of those statistics that I gave you were from 1900 to 2000, so over the course of a century might be a better cause for hope. And here's something else, 160 years that we see in this biblical story, a story of hope.

My message to you this morning is simple, and that is that we have an iconic, mythological story of light breaking into the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. So it is over the span of your life, however many decades that might be. Over the span of the generations, over the span of the life of a country, over the span of the arc of our years, however we understand them.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

Amen.