



Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and he shall be called Immanuel, (God with us). In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, beloved, we hear the good news of Jesus, our Immanuel. And I'd like to start out by sharing a story that I've often used at Christmas, but maybe it's even better for Advent because that's all about the light of God's own hope and God's own love dawning in our world. I took the story from Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent who's now a Presbyterian minister. He told it in a book published in 2002 called "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning."

And the story's all about the Sorak family. These were Serbian Christians living in a mostly Muslim region in war-torn Bosnia. And they had been indifferent to leaders who called for ethnic cleansing, and because they failed to embrace the project of a greater Serbia, they were branded as traitors by their fellow Serbs. Later, the Serbian army besieged their city during a war. In that conflict, the couple lost both their sons. The first died in a car accident. The other was taken away by Muslim police in the middle of the night, and he never came back.

Five months later after their son disappeared in the middle of the siege, his wife gave birth to a baby girl. The mother was unable to nurse her child. The city was being shelled nonstop. There were severe food shortages everywhere and infants, together with other sick and vulnerable people, were dying in large numbers. For five days, the family was only able to give the baby tea to drink. She was getting weak. In fact, she was dying. But on the fifth day, just before dawn, a man arrived at the door with half a liter of milk for the baby. It was their neighbor, a Muslim farmer who was keeping a cow in a field outside the city. He was milking it at night to avoid sniper fire. He came back the next morning and then the morning after that, and then the morning after that, and so on, always with milk for the child.

Now other families on their street began to insult the farmer. They told him to give his milk to Muslim children only and to let the Christian children die. But he kept coming back. He never said a word, the grandmother said. He refused our money. He came back for 442 days until my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter left for Serbia. Think about that. Four hundred and forty-two days.

According to Hedges, the family said they could never forget or forgive those who took their son from them, but they could not listen to other Serbs talk about Muslims anymore or even to recall their own sufferings without telling about the farmer and his cow. And we will never know what combination of religious belief and simple human decency motivated that farmer. But I believe, I really believe that he was responding to God's invitation to love. And the inability of the family to talk about their sufferings, or to hear others badmouthing Muslims without repeating his story is evidence of God's grace in their lives. It is a sign of the hope that God alone can give us.

"Let hope thrive." That's what the sign on the nurses' station said. Let hope thrive. I was down in Grosse Pointe to visit our son Danny, who as some of you know, has been in the hospital just about every day since we arrived in Michigan right before Thanksgiving. Danny is 24 years old and has significant developmental disabilities. It's not uncommon for him to be hospitalized, usually for extreme constipation. Because Down Syndrome affects every single cell in his body, Danny is prone to many different kinds of disorder and disease. When he was about 12, he had major surgery on his spine to correct curvature. And maybe it's because of the current fears and uncertainties in our country, or because it's Advent, or because our family is in a time of change and dislocation, or because I'm privy to the sufferings and struggles of so many other people, but these words spoke to me: "let hope thrive."

What do these words mean for me and my family? What do they mean for the other people we are called to love? What do they mean for the call I've just accepted to serve among you as one of your clergy? What do they mean for all of us here at Christ Church Cranbrook? What do they mean in the surrounding communities where we are called to serve God and serve our neighbors? Let hope thrive.

At first, I assumed these words had their origin in the fact that the hospital where I read them was founded by the Roman Catholic Church. One of Danny's nurses was even a nun from Nigeria. But then I looked it up. "Let hope thrive" is in fact a trademark of the Select Specialty Hospital system. It is a Pennsylvania corporation that does business in several different states. Other doctors and nurses at the same hospital were Jews and Muslims or people of other faiths, or of no particular faith.

"Let hope thrive" is a corporate slogan of a for-profit hospital, but it is one that speaks to Christian themes. And that reminds me of something that Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, who helped shape the church's witness against the Nazi regime once said about secular parables of the truth. In a moment of humor, he joked that God could speak to us through "Russian communism or a dead dog." Anything, any person can speak to us about the reality of God, and that's because

it is all God's world. It all belongs to God, not just the Christian parts of it. And so when we follow Jesus out into the world, we expect to find his spirit at work here. Jesus is real and he is at work in the world He lived and died for. He is God with us in the flesh.

God is real. God is with us. God is real and victorious and alive, and that is the only explanation for the great, great love we experience. Whether that's here in church or out there in God's wider world, God is never without a witness. No, not even in the most secular of places, not even in the most seemingly God forsaken places. God is with us laboring to give birth to the new creation, and so hope thrives here. Faith, hope, and love thrive here. These three, even though it's sometimes very, very hard to see. Peace and joy thrive here too. So too do mercy and forgiveness. We've all experienced these things. So too do compassion and friendship and joy. They thrive here. In a world too often ruled by greed and violent contempt for our neighbors, God is teaching us to live as neighbors, how to live as siblings. Even now, God is calling us to become a single human family.

God is teaching us and God is giving us the power to become fully human, fully alive, just like Jesus is. God is teaching us and giving us the power to love each other just like Jesus did and does. God is calling us to move past our self-centered behavior. God is calling us to forgive and help one another. God is giving us good gifts. And these good gifts can thrive here because God, the living God is the generous giver. That's what God is like. Again and again, God proves to be faithful and generous in our lives. God is at work in all things.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote in a poem, "Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his." God keeps promises to a thousand generations. God never gives up on any of us. God shows us the new and better way of love. God keeps on showing us that way even at our lowest places. God invites us to serve our neighbors. Especially those who are weak or vulnerable, especially those who are of little account in the eyes of the world. God calls us to welcome strangers and even to love our enemies. For as Pope Francis once taught, God has no enemies, only children.

Hope thrives here because Jesus lives. And where Jesus lives, faith, hope and love abide. Here at Christ Church Cranbrook, where Jesus is alive, we kicked off this holy season with a message of hope and a profoundly moving sermon entitled "God's Waiting Room." Christopher Bahrke shared about the difficulties we all face when we have to wait. The sermon was powerful, so powerful. Many of us heard it. It was powerful because it was so honest and so vulnerable. He began with an experience that many of us have: we get frustrated in traffic or in line, but then things got personal and extremely real when he shared with us about waiting for medical tests when something wasn't right with his health. Christopher told us how he finally got an appointment that he needed thanks to help from a friend.

Toward the end of his sermon, he said the following words. I found them so compelling that I looked them up. I pulled up the video and made a transcript. Here's what he said: "That connection with God and each other, that communion that we do here every week is so important because it can change your life. It may not change what's going on. There's stuff probably going to happen that's not going to be pleasant. But what has changed for me," he said, "is my appreciation that I have a loving God that shows up in the most random ways through the most random people. There is hope for all of us. There is hope for compromised and hurting people. There is hope for you and me because God keeps showing up. God shows up even when there is no quick fix or easy answers. God keeps on showing up through the most random people and things. God is the one friend who never lets us down. God is on our side."

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we're coming to the end of a long season of waiting. In one way our waiting is nearly over. In another, our journey is just getting started. Advent is important because it is God's waiting room. We are preparing our hearts for God. We are preparing a mansion for God, the old prayer says, God, who promises to live inside us. We are preparing our hearts for God who is always coming to us, unexpected and undeserved. But at the same time, our God is always already here.

As Christmas approaches, many of us feel our losses more intensely as well as our shames and fears. We feel like we're not enough somehow, and yet God has chosen us. God has said to us, whoever you are and however you are hurting, you are enough. I love you. You are my beloved children. We need to be reminded of that. We need to be reminded that our hope is in God. We long for God to show up because so much is wrong in our world. So much is wrong in our individual lives and relationships. We need to come to God for healing and transformation.

As Father Bill reminded us recently, Advent teaches us that we cannot save ourselves and the triumphant God of so much popular religion can't do the trick either. Only the birth of a child, only God's new life will do. And so once again, even though we've done it most of our lives, many of us, once again, we make our pilgrimage to Bethlehem, we come to the cradle of Christ to see what God has done. We come to His cross, we come to God empty handed, or we do not come at all.

How easily our Christmas celebrations distract us from this simple truth. This season, many of us will go deeper into debt. Some will snap at our loved ones, strain our friendships, or even say words we can't take back. Others will get overwhelmed with anxiety as we chase an impossible dream. The excesses of Christmas can numb us to what it's all about as we scramble to please God and please other people. This can obscure the one thing that really matters: God, with us in the flesh.

Today's gospel begins with an act of mercy. Mary is pregnant and Joseph knows the baby isn't his. It is a very human story. But he is a good and righteous man, and so he is unwilling to expose his beloved to disgrace and the violence in their village. Joseph's decision to be merciful, as important as it is, is not enough. It's more than many of us would do, but it's not enough. It only becomes enough when the angel speaks. "Fear not," the angel says, "Do not be afraid." How many times in the Bible do we hear that message from God or an angel or the risen Christ? Do not be afraid. "Fear not," the angel says, and that changes everything. And then the angel quotes the ancient prophecy. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel." That is the meaning of this child. "You will call him Jesus, where he will save his people from their sins."

These are words for us to hold onto in dark and scary places. They're words for us to hold onto whenever we feel like we are far from God. They speak to us of God's decision to be with us and for us in our flesh. Although they are spoken at the beginning of the life of Jesus, these words are echoed at the very first Easter. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he says. "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations. And remember, I am with you even to the end of the age."

And so we pray to God. We cry out to God, the hope of the nations and their savior. For we have lost our way. "O come desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind. Bid thou our sad divisions cease and be thyself the King of Peace." God has no enemies, only children. God loves us and is with us always. O come, O come Immanuel.

Amen.