

If you had to describe the Gospel with one word, what word would you choose? Perhaps you would choose "salvation," because "Christ has come to save the lost." That'd be a pretty good word. Perhaps you would use the word "comfort," because we hear in 2 Corinthians chapter 1: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction." That would also be a pretty good one. Maybe you would use a word like "peace," like Jesus says in John 14: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you." Or maybe even the word "love," because as we all know from John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." Those would all be very good words to use to describe the Gospel. But the word that I want to use today is "hope." The Gospel brings us hope in the midst of a hopeless world.

Because Israel in our Old Testament reading, Christians, certainly needed to find some kind of hope. They were living in pretty dark times. Because in Isaiah's day, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, destroyed and taken away out of their home. And the Assyrians also had invaded the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah, and very nearly captured the city of Jerusalem. And more than that still, God was telling them, "You're going to be taken away into exile too, just like your brothers were, unless you repent of your sins." They needed some kind of hope, something to hold on to, to give them light in the midst of that darkness.

But unfortunately, Israel turned very often to false hopes, the things that they thought were going to help them, but ultimately proved empty. Some of them, for example, turned to other nations, saying that, "If we just ally ourselves with these nations, they'll come in and help us and fix this problem that we're in." Some of them turned to military strength, saying, "All we need to do is build up the army or build up our walls, and then we'll be good to go." Some of them twisted God's Word, making it say things that he had never said. Like when people said, for example, that, "The temple is here among us, so that must mean that God is never going to punish us for our sins." That was a false hope. These were all false hopes. And they led the people astray. They weren't good enough. They needed something else, because all they did was leave them just as hopeless as before. Where could Israel turn to find real hope in the midst of a hopeless world?

Christians, we also live in a time that many people consider to be hopeless. Many Christians too, but especially those who don't have Christ. They think that life is pointless. That life is something that is empty and hollow. They feel alone and isolated in the world, as if they don't have any real purpose. And so to fill up that sense of emptiness, to fill up that void which they feel in their lives, they also turn to false hopes, to something that they think is going to help them. Some people in the world, for example, turn to drugs or to alcohol, thinking that those things will make them feel better. You can just look at the reports in our nation. Drug abuse is growing every single year, even in this state. And we're in the middle of an opioid crisis, people who are taking prescription pills or prescription painkillers, thinking that they'll somehow feel better, if only for a short time. But these things don't really help them, because they leave them feeling worse than before. That's why they're addicted, right? Because they're trying to find that high to come back to, that thing that they remember, thinking that somehow they'll find happiness in that way.

There are many who also turn to entertainment as a way of distracting themselves, so they don't have to think about their problems, so they don't have to think about what's going on in their lives. Some of them, for example, turn to movies or YouTube videos. A constant stream of entertainment, so they don't have to think about anything else. They can just sort of unplug from the world and forget about all their problems. Some of them turn to gaming as a way of feeling accomplished. If I can accomplish something here, then I don't have to think about how I haven't accomplished anything in my life. Some of them turn to social media, because they feel lonely, saying, "Maybe I can connect with people in this way." But it ironically leads them further and further apart from one another. And those things would be okay, if they weren't being abused, but there's also plenty of people who turn towards sinful entertainment. Pornography, for example, especially young men in this nation, trying to find some kind of pleasure, so that they can fill up that sense of emptiness. But the problem with these things, Christians, is that they are unfulfilling. They leave them feeling empty. Because if they were fulfilling, they wouldn't keep coming back to them. If you eat food, and you feel full, you don't keep eating. But because these things don't fill up, they leave them coming back again and again and again. They are a false hope for peace in this world.

Some people even turn to seeking fame. "If I can just get people to notice me, if I can just get people to look at me, then I'll feel like my life is worth something," they say. "As long as I have those hits on YouTube, as long as I have those likes on Facebook, as long as people notice me, then I feel like I'm doing something with my life." But what happens if you don't get that fame? Or worse, what happens if you get it and then it goes away? It doesn't help us, Christians, to try to base our lives on the attention of other people.

And these are false hopes for us, because they don't fulfill that sense of hopelessness. They don't take it away. And they leave us feeling just as hopeless, just as in the dark as before. Because they are the world's attempts to fill up that void. But being from the world, they aren't good enough. We need something else. The world needs something else in order to feel peace and hope.

And Christians, it is the Lord who has come to bring hope in the midst of a hopeless world. Because the Father has sent us his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring hope to all people. And not just to Israel, though they certainly needed it too! But as we hear in verse 6 of our reading, the Father says to the Son, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Jesus is the servant sent into the world to give us hope. And to not be just the hope for one people, to not just be the hope for the nation of Israel. Because that would leave everybody else out in the dark with no hope at all. But Jesus has come to be the light of the nations, to bring hope to all people. No matter who they are, no matter where they are, Jesus is the light that reaches into our lives to give us peace and joy, a peace beyond all understanding and a joy which will never come to an end. Jesus tells us and tells the world too, "There's a better way. There is a way out of this darkness. There is hope when all seems hopeless." Because he has overcome sin and death! He has overcome the darkness of the world! Jesus lives, Christians! And because he lives, we know that we will live with him too. Because he lives, our lives have meaning. Because he lives, we know that we will live with him in the future too. And because he lives, he is light to those who are still in darkness. Because

Jesus has come, Christians, to bring joy to the unhappy. Jesus has come to be the friend of the friendless. Jesus has come to remember those who think that they have been forgotten. And Jesus has come to be light in the midst of darkness.

And all of that's important for us to remember today, especially as we consider the mission of the church. Because Jesus has sent you, each and every one of you, to bring that message of hope to a hopeless world. Jesus sends you to your friends, Jesus sends you to your neighbors, Jesus sends you to those who are on the outskirts of our community, to bring them a message, that, "There is a better way. There is hope in the midst of hopelessness. There is light in the midst of darkness. There is a way out of these troubles. So come and see what God has done for you!" And when we bring that message, Christians, to our world, others will come and worship the Lord, because Jesus is the light of the world.

So go! Go to your friends. Go to your neighbors. Go to your community. And tell them, "Come, friend! Here is light for you!" Because Jesus is hope for a hopeless world.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, your Son, Jesus Christ, has sent us into the world to bear testimony to the hope that is within us. We pray that you would strengthen us for that task, so that we know that you are with us always, even to the end of the age. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.