

November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**Advent 2020 Week One: Hope is an Unexpected Gift**  
**Psalm 146**

Psalm 146 is the first of the five final songs that conclude the Book of Psalms. A lot of the Psalms are attributed to King David, who we're going to be studying in our next Thursday night Bible study series starting this week by the way! David is known as the greatest King in Israel's history because he was so different than any other King in the past or future. He was humble, honest, faithful, trustworthy, compassionate and he owned up to his mistakes. So the way the Book of Psalms is laid out gives the reader a picture of what's going on in David's mind from the time he was fleeing from King Saul through his ascension as King of Israel. In the earlier Psalms we hear about the writers' griefs, shame, sins, doubts, and fears. But we also hear about the *people of God* throughout *their* defeats and victories, and their ups and downs in life too. These last five Psalms, though, is sort of the light at the end of the tunnel. This is where we get to hear about the hope of God's people -

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them;  
who keeps faith forever;  
who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the strangers;  
and upholds the orphan and the widow.

King David and the people of Israel had been through some bad times, but now the tide has turned. It's time to say "hallelujah!" and that's what these last five Psalms in Israel's song book are all about.

Here's a question for you – How would you describe our life's song book over the last year? What sort of songs do you imagine are included here? "Love Hurts?" "Paint it Black?" "Mad World?" "Bridge Over Troubled Waters?" "Blue Moon?" "Comfortably Numb?" Maybe they aren't all sad songs. Some of them may be encouraging. "Pick Yourself Up." "Survivor." "Shake it Off." "Let it Go." This past year has been one that has rocked our world in good ways and devastating ways. Some of the good things I can think about in the midst of this pandemic is how creation started healing again ... we started to see waters clear up, animals returning to long-forgotten habitats, for a little while before the summer fire season at least, the air started getting clearer. When people had to take a pause, creation took time to sing praise! But the other reality is that people suffered with topsy-turvy decision making. We weren't sure who to listen to from day to day as communities and leaders hurried to make decisions that affected our well-being and challenged our ability to hope. What's that phrase from verse 3-4 of this Psalm?

"Do not put your trust in princes,  
in mortals, in whom there is no help.  
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;  
on that very day their plans perish."

No matter who is in charge, we can't put our trust in human leaders. We just can't! It doesn't matter which side of the political spectrum you're on. "Do not put your trust in mortals!" Politicians die. Leaders die. All die and return to the cosmic dust from which God created us all. And often, plans die with them. It would be easy to stop here in the psalm. So. Easy. But James Mays, a commentator on this book, notes that, "Hope based on what dies is doomed to disappoint." And this means that

in the midst of our very real, very confusing, very troubled lives we find ourselves living right now, God's faithful care is here! Because God rises up in response to misery. God sends agents of justice, of hope, of help, of mercy. God is the source of reliable hope for all generations— healing the damage to creation including humans.

Here's a little exercise I want you to try. We all have a little internal voice that likes to tell us how hard things are. How defeating life can be. How messy things get. This little voice is a thief. What's that little thief voice trying to steal? It's trying to steal our hope. The first week of every Advent season is dedicated to hope. And part of taking a hopeful stance during Advent season ... especially after a year like we've had ... is to recognize that thief and remind our true voice that there's more than one way of looking at the world. This is called reframing.

Here's an example of what reframing looks like -

My Thief Says: "This season is just too hard to face with the pandemic."  
But Hope Says: "This season will take different effort, but I'm committed to learning something new about myself and my community."

See how that works? The thief tries to steal our hope, but we open the door for hope to draw the line and say, "No! You can't move me!" So here's what I want you to do: If you've got your paper and writing utensil, draw a line down the middle of the paper. Then on the left side of the line write – "My Thief Says." Then on the other side of the line write, "But Hope Says." Go ahead and let the thief have its' say. You can't shut the thief up. It's going to say what it says regardless. But what I want you to do is allow for the chance for Hope to enter in! Then when it's time for Prayers of the People, Mary's going to follow up on this. So be thinking of this. What does your thief say, and what does hope say?

There's one more thing I want to show you today to open up that door to hope. This is something I want our kids out there to do too. In fact, I think you kids probably understand this a lot better than we adults do, so maybe it's something you can do to remind the people in your home how important it is to have hope.

Not having hope is like this sponge. It's dry. It's rough. It's flimsy. When we're feeling worn out spiritually ... we're a lot like this sponge. But you know what can help? A hope infusion! So if you've got a sponge at home, do this. If you're feeling spiritually dried up? If you're feeling helpless or hopeless? Take a sponge and pray for hope. Then I want you to put it in some water like this. See what happens? It grows! It softens up! It soaks up that water! Think of this water as God's spirit giving you hope. When we let our dried up spirits be filled with God's spirit, we can grow and soften up, and then ... (squeeze the sponge) the same hope that fills us up can spill over into other areas of our lives. Even when it's life that's giving us the squeeze!

Will you pray with me?

God of Hope, we turn to you in a year when hope has seemed fleeting and far away. Throughout time, You have been our ever-present help and hope in times of need and we are calling on You, most Faithful One, to fill us with Your hopeful presence again. In the space of this time together, may the stories of assurance and steadfastness once again rekindle our hearts, minds and souls as we come with our Advent-Ready selves. Move through us as we engage with the prophets and stories of old. Inspire us as we trod a familiar path to the stable. Lead us out into a weary world to be the bringers of hope again, we pray. Amen.