

A Stainless Steel Audi A8 Isaiah 40:1, 3-8
 Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 2nd Sunday of Advent (December 4,) 2011

^{40:1} Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ³ A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

What do you want for Christmas? What are you hoping for? If money were not object what would you hope to receive?

As I prepared for this sermon – generally – some three months ago, I had a distant foggy memory of a special car that I found once upon a time. I don't know if it had been on the internet or in a magazine. It was a car specially built for one of the sheiks in Saudi Arabia. The whole body was made of stainless steel. It told the price tag. My current memory does not tell me now what it was, but I remember that it was up in the six digits.

I remember that it was – at that time – and still is today – the epitome of outlandish consumeristic opulence.

Now, THAT is something to whisper into Santa's ear, while sitting on his lap!

THAT is something to HOPE for!

Or something to WISH FOR. There is a difference – a very, BIG difference between WISHING and HOPING:

Henri J. M. Nouwen captured a significant distinction when he said that "WISHING" is different from "HOPING." We Christians are a people of Hope; Jiminy Cricket ("When you wish upon a star ...") and the dreamers are creatures of wishfulness.

Wishing is making a list, checking it twice, allowing God to find out who's been naughty and nice, and then giving all the "wishes" to those who have been nice.

Hoping is believing that the God of Resurrection is still at work in God's creation, and that God's Will shall be accomplished. It is where God still takes dead ends and turns them into new beginnings.

Hope is different from Wishing, in that Hope is open-ended. Wishing is only satisfied when God does "it" the way we want it.

Wishing will often disappoint us. Hope does not. [from Chapter 9, "Wishing and Hoping" of *Free Us for Joyful Obedience*, by Monty Brown]

Hoping is based on the notion that “All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Although HOPE always come into play during times of uncertainty, it is based on the reliability of God’s Promise.

Adrian Peterson may be the best running back in the NFL, and has been since his rookie season when he broke all kinds of records. I once read that to watch Adrian Peterson run was like this:

“the way Peterson squared his shoulders toward the goal line and ran straight toward it, not wasting time with lots of cuts from side to side ... is like Peterson was already in the end zone in his mind and his body was just fighting to catch up.”

This is HOPE when we accept the certainty of something, and just let our bodies live into it.

The Promised Hope of Advent is that God has already provided the final result; we have HOPE because of that Promise. We just now have to live into that which is already accomplished.

Even when we don’t know what it is.

But we DO know something about WHAT IT IS LIKE.

It is part of something MUCH BIGGER.

And that HOPE is never dependent on how well WE can do. Rather it is based on WHO and WHAT God is.

Isaiah tells us – when asked to say a word of comfort: **What? What comfort? We are all like grass; WE just wither and fade. Ah, yes! But the WORD OF GOD will stand forever!**

HOPE when grounded in God – is something that is already accomplished – even if we don’t know what, nor when.

I read a book earlier this year called **UNBROKEN**. It’s written by Lauren Hillenbrand, about a fellow named Louie Zamperini, who was a track star, in California. Many folks

thought he would win the 1936 Olympics. But, as circumstances unfolded, it came to pass that his training and conditioning was for a much bigger race – a race for survival.

Zamperini's B-17 crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Only he and two other crew members survived, Phil and Mac. They survived for longer than anyone has survived a plan crash into the ocean – well, at least two of them did. Louie and Phil. All three were in similar physical condition, but there was one very, very big difference. Mac had no hope. Phil was deeply engrained with a strong religious faith. Louie developed one through their ordeal. Mac only despaired. Mac's despair was almost contagious. But Louie and Phil fought it off, through prayer and singing of hymns. Mac died en route to being rescued. Louie and Phil had hope; Mac had only despair.

What makes the difference?

There are two things, of which I am certain.

1. What it's connected to

2. Memory

(1) What it's connected to. Like Grass compared to God's Word – as Isaiah paints the contrast. **“Our lives have meaning, purpose, direction, and HOPE because they are connected to God's story. ... HOPE for Christians is built upon the notion that our gifts and talents are only of use when they are placed in the service of something bigger.”**

Let me repeat that, because I want you to remember it when I give you examples.

“HOPE for Christians is built upon the notion that our gifts and talents are only of use when they are placed in the service of something bigger.”

If all we are interested in is getting something as close to a Stainless Steel Audi 8 as possible, then it's all about ME / US. And that's just not big enough to sustain anything as large as HOPE.

(2) The second thing that makes a difference is **MEMORY**. When we come to that place where the tragedy of circumstances prevent us from seeing HOPE in the present or future, it is the MEMORY of God's faithfulness that alleviates us from despair. When we remember how great has been God's Providential Care and Goodness, it's a lot easier to

trust that God will continue to connect us to something bigger now and in the now to come. When we remember how great has been God's Providential Care and Goodness in prior times, it's easier to claim that HOPE as already accomplished. We just have to live into it.

I hope you will forgive me for telling you a story that I told some of you six years ago. But it has permanently etched into my soul just how important this HOPE thing is.

June 20, 2004, I was in Belfast, and got to observe a special worship on the Antrim Road, whose congregation was Protestants and Catholics. The cause for such an unusual event? (And if you've not been to Belfast, it's hard for you to imagine just how unusual such a gathering is.) The people gathered together were the parents and other family members of the **TWENTY-SEVEN (27) TEENAGERS IN BELFAST WHO HAD ALL COMMITTED SUICIDE SINCE CHRISTMAS DAY 2003 – LESS THAN 6 MONTHS BEFORE.**

27 teenagers committing suicide in one town in less than 6 months! "How? Why?" I asked those questions over and over. And over and over, I kept hearing the same answer: "**THEY HAD NO HOPE.**"

But, on June 20, 2004, when the Protestant and Catholic parents of HOPELESS CHILDREN planted a tree, and then EMBRACED ONE ANOTHER, there was more than just their tears that watered the planting of that tree. I could see that – at least for these gathered there, those whose grief was unspeakable -- that a river of hope was beginning to spring up.

Being part of something bigger. Having a Memory of God's Providential Care lived out, to provide us Hope when present vision does not see a way out. These are the tools. I said I'd provide illustration.

I originally was going to share a story illustrating both of these principles that I read about. And then I thought, "No, I don't need to do that. I have stories that I've seen myself."

I know a woman – a woman who was diagnosed years ago with cancer. She has undergone more different kinds of chemotherapy that I can count. One works for awhile and then loses its effectiveness, and the she goes on to another. She has taken chemotherapies that weren't invented when she first got her cancer.

It has not always been easy – just surviving. Chemotherapy eats away at your body. But in all these circumstances, she is making her life part of something much bigger than just her survival. And she is remembering how faithful God has been in her life. Whenever you ask her how she is, her answer is always couched in the words, “Thanks be to God.”

She is giving me and many others a memory of what HOPE looks like. She is giving me and many others a vision of what’s its like to be connected to something much bigger than just merely herself or her survival.

I know a man who has been diagnosed with cancer. He’s been through so many different kinds of treatments and therapies. Each one works – for awhile. And then it loses its effectiveness. Not so many people know about his cancer. But he’s never given up.

He keeps trying to do as much with his life, to help others as he can. He’s worried more about taking care of his wife and family and providing for people in his community. And he keeps going on and on, from one treatment to another. He also is taking treatments that were not invented when his cancer was first diagnosed.

He’s connected to something much bigger than his mere survival. He’s giving those who know him and his situation a memory of how HOPE gets lived out, of how God is active in his life.

I wouldn’t trade my friendship with EITHER OF THESE HEROES OF GOD’S UNFOLDING STORY for a stainless steel Audi 8.

ADVENT – the season that is centered around the whole notion of WAITING. Waiting is not something that any of us like so much. But when the waiting is done with HOPE – not mere WISHING – then we are as connected to God’s Kingdom as Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary were when the angel came to bring them the news of what lie ahead for them.

Each one of us will come to those forks in the road where we must choose between HOPE we cannot see in the moment and DESPAIR which is so easily apparent.

I hope that you are prepared to choose the right road. It will depend largely on whether you have a memory of being connected to something bigger than you and your wishes.

Make those memories now.

- 1. Pay attention.**
- 2. Make a note of how God's blessing has touched each day. You are building memories.**
- 3. Give thanks at each meal, with each phone call, text message, email, or Facebook message for the person on the other end.**
- 4. Whenever you approach ANY sort of threatening circumstance, stop and remember the last time God delivered you in a way you may have not even anticipated, from some struggle. Remember and anticipate it happening again.**
- 5. Look for the ways each day that your life is connected to something bigger – how God works through your life and the life of those around you, for a greater purpose.**
- 6. At the end of each day, give thanks.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.