

A SERMON PREACHED ON DECEMBER 2, 2018, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE

Here we are, at the first Sunday of Advent, on our way in just a few weeks to Christmas Day. Though it be true that Christmas is just 23 days away, the truth is that we celebrate it much longer. Giant Food store had the decorations and the candy on their shelves by August this year, and preachers will admonish their congregants once again with the wish that it would be wonderful if we could celebrate the spirit of the holiday all year round. Many in the crowd bemoan the commercialization of Christmastide, however, like the husband in this story called *For the Man Who Hated Christmas*, written by Nancy W. Gavin: His wife writes:

"It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past ten years.

It all began because my husband, Mike, hated Christmas. Oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it – overspending and the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma – the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties, and so forth. I reached for something special, just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son, Kevin, who was 12 that year, was on the wrestling team at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes.

As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford.

Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I was just hoping one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids – all kids. He so enjoyed coaching little league football, baseball, and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes, and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed a small, white envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done, and that this was his gift from me.

Mike's smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year. And that same bright smile lit up succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition – one year sending a group of

mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The hope of the recipient for what was in that little white envelope for most became the difference between a Christmas celebrated rather than forgotten.

The white envelope soon became the highlight of all our Christmases. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning, and our children – ignoring their new toys – would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the small, white envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to a dreaded bout with cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on one of its taller branches. And the next morning, I found it was magically joined by three more. Unbeknownst to the others, each of our three children had for the first time placed a white envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing to take down that special envelope. We now see how hope interlocks its arms with joy to present the truly special events of our lives. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit will always be with us.”ⁱ

On the other end of this story stands Advent when in effect we begin to prepare room for the Christ child in our hearts. We see this by the gospel lesson chosen for today from *Luke*. Hope calls itself forth and makes itself known when the angel reports to Mary that she will have a son who will be called Jesus. We all know the story, as we've heard it probably at least every Christmas of our lives, which for some of us is a long time! The birth of a child, of course is a hopeful moment for most parents. The birth of this child, who is the Christ for the many, the long-anticipated Savior of the World, means a variety of things to an entire variety of people, but for most it is the fulfillment of the promise that God is near us and will be present to us always. It is, in fact, an always giving gift.

Today, Christians all around the world – in churches and in homes and in refugee camps and on the streets – will light the first candle, the Hope candle, to open Advent, the traditional season of preparation for the coming of the Christ-child as well as the reminder that Christ is coming again.ⁱⁱ As the theme for this Sunday is hope, one might stop and wonder how it is that Christ is the hope of Christmas (other than it bears the hope of his name). It has to do with the light, you see. The prophet Isaiah tell *“us the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows – light! sunbursts of light.”*

In her Advent series for this year, the writer Sarah Bessey writes from her southwestern Canadian home about the coming of the light. She tells us...

“...Already, we are living in the days of the winter darkness. We wake up to starlight, the moon hangs overhead well into the day, and we pick up our children from school by the sunset, we eat by candlelight or lamplight every night. We curl up in blankets and we serve piping hot comfort food to each other. The days are often grey here, too, on the Pacific south coast. This was new to me ten years ago when we first moved to this area. A prairie kid by birthright,

November days were a diamond blue light of sunshine, bright and hard, reflected off the first piles of snow, refracting and dazzling. We filled our souls up with that light before the sun began to set in the short turn of the days; yes it's dark now but tomorrow it will be bright again.

Instead now I'm caught between the ocean and the mountains, so the days are grey and the clouds are often low. It's not unusual to have the lamps on for the entire day, moving from a black night to a dark and grey drizzle of a day and back into darkness, always cold, always damp.

We've grown used to it, many of us even love it. We have acclimated to the darkness, redeemed it with books and candlelight and coziness and pots of soup. We move through the day with our shoulders hunched against the rain, our hoods up to protect our hair and our ears until it feels like we are moving underwater, the sounds of the street muffled and a wash of water at our feet.

We think we're fine, we think it's good, we think weather doesn't matter that much to us, and we are used to it, after all there are parts of it that we love! We find each other in the darkness and we redeem it, baptize it with our imaginations, absolutely, but then.... Oh, then comes the day when the sun rises in the sharp brittle light of near winter mornings when there are no clouds in the sky.

Oh, on that day.

Light! Light!

Oh, look at that sunshine!

On that day, we fling open our blinds and we wash the windows from the inside, we sweep our floors because the light has shown us the dust of our comfort. We bundle up in our woolies and we stride out into the sunshine, grins on our faces. We go to the park and we walk with our hoods down no matter how cold it is. It's always a bit colder without the clouds; sometimes the wind will take our breath but we stand out in it anyway. "How about that sunshine?" we crow to one another at the grocery store and the school pick up line and the office. "Oh, what a great day!" We call each other to meet at the playground or the walking trails. "You've got to get outside today," we say coaxingly to the ones who hate the cold.

We are wide awake after the grey comfortable slumbers, we can see our breath and we can see the light, and we feel alive, alive, alive again. The light has swept away our torpor and our dull coziness, bracing us awake.

And then when the spring comes and the days grow longer and the clouds light altogether....well.

Then, in those days, we fling the windows wide open even though it's still a bit too cold outside and the wind sweeps into our homes, the cold swirling into the corners. A few short months ago, this very temperature sent us running for our mittens and heavy coats; now after months of deeper cold, that number on the thermometer feels like a balmy day, worthy of t-shirts.

We feel a compulsion to clean and to sweep and to make our spaces sparkle like the light. We prepare our homes for the arrival of the light and the warmth like fancy people prepare their

homes for big parties. Doesn't someone have a bottle of champagne somewhere? We are all unbuttoning and unwinding and unfurling and then we are tipping our faces up to the light with our eyes closed against the brilliance, still seeing the light through our lids, feeling the promise of warmth and growth and life again.

So there is a metaphor for you.

This Sunday, light a candle named Hope at your table with your people because it is still dark outside.

But it won't be night or dark grey days forever and right now, there are glimpses of the Kingdom still breaking through.

There is light enough by which to live: speak hope...."ⁱⁱⁱ

"There is light enough by which to live. Speak hope." Did you know that this is the Salvation Army's moniker? "We Speak Hope to those who need it most" it says on the t-shirts their workers wear.^{iv} As much as I don't agree with their social policies, who can deny the impact of their community action projects?

This year, pin your hopes on the nativity story, so that others can know the light of Christ also, and rejoice! And Join us at the Manger, Saturday at 2, as we reenact scene and sounds of Christmases past.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ <https://www.wanttoknow.info/i/christmas-stories/meaning-of-christmas>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.salvationarmycarolinas.org/charlotte/make-a-contribution/we-speak-hope>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://sarahbessey.com/advent-hope/>