

“Our Hope in Action”

Psalm 89:1-4, 14-18, 46-52; Matthew 1:18-25; 1 Peter 4:1-11

Last week Peter showed us that we are in the world, though we don't belong to the world. He showed us that we are in this situation together, and, most importantly, that we're in this situation *in Christ*. And this gives us incredible hope even in the midst of great sorrows and suffering.

This week, Peter shows us that simply *enduring* is not enough. In fact, just getting by is not a mark of real Advent hope. In fact, Peter shows us that it's not even enough to leave behind our evil human desires (2). It's not enough simply to give up the things pagans do (3): indulging lusts and hard partying and the rest. These are simply our Christian “nos.” But every Christian calling, and every true Advent experience, demands a “yes.” Advent hope doesn't just call us *away* from one life; it calls us into a new life. If you have hope within suffering and sorrows, then that hope is *active*.

So this week, Peter teaches us about our hope in action. Because Advent is coming — because “the end is near” (7) — Peter says it's time to act like it. Peter shows us what that looks like.

It looks like

- 1-Happy Hospitality
- 2-Generous Giving
- 3-Sincere Speech
- 4-Stewardly Service

1-Happy Hospitality

When there's not a pandemic, Advent is a time for parties. People deck the halls with boughs of holly, bake cookies, pour prosecco, and have people over to celebrate. We can expect these parties—as hosts, as guests.

And Advent according to Peter is also a time of welcome. But in biblical Advent, hospitality is not so much about parties. Peter calls us to practice the ancient act of hospitality. Hospitality in the Bible means welcoming the one who surprises you by showing up when you don't expect it. Verse 9: “Practice hospitality.” He means we must be in the habit of welcoming the

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surprise guest. We must cultivate the heart-habit of openness to those who need an open heart and an open home.

Advent hospitality doesn't have anything to do with fancy baking or fine wine or even perfectly straightened-up homes. In the Spanish-speaking world, it's the attitude “mi casa es su casa.” My house is mine, sure, but it's mine *for you*. You are *welcome*.

Mark Labberton has said that there's a big difference between “No problem” and “You're welcome.” When you are generous to someone, and they say “thank you,” you get the choice: am I going to say “no problem” or “you're welcome”? If I say “no problem,” what I mean is “for *now* you haven't been an utter inconvenience. But there's a limit to what I'm willing to give you. I'll let you know when you and your needs have become a problem.” But “you're welcome” means just that: “It gives me joy to open my heart and purse and home to you.”

Peter says (9) our hospitality must be given without *grumbling*. Saying “no problem” is like saying “I am ready to grumble the moment you become a problem.” Grumble-free hospitality, though, gives welcome without a sense of grudging reluctance. It says “mi casa es su casa” and means it. Sarah and Abraham ended up cooking for angels without exactly knowing it because they instinctively welcomed their surprise visitors. Hebrews 13 says that when we show hospitality we also might be welcoming angels without knowing it. And the Lord Jesus says that whenever we welcome the surprise visitor into our hearts and homes, we welcome Jesus himself. When we *don't* extend that welcome, we have left Jesus out in the cold.

If we take seriously that Christ has come in his first Advent, and is coming again soon in a second Advent; if the most important thing to us is that we are expecting his unexpected arrival, and are ready to welcome him, then our lives will be Advent lives, lived in the loving readiness to welcome another. Our Advent hope in Action means we offer hospitality.

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2-Generous Giving

What else marks us as a people with Advent hope in Action? Peter says (10) generous giving. We saw hospitality is much more than planned parties; it's also a readiness to welcome whomever, whenever. Same with giving. There's nothing wrong with planning your giving. But the true test of a generous Advent heart in action is that we are always ready to give.

There's a lot of talk in the Christian and secular worlds about “using your gifts.” But Peter might say that it's the non-Advent heart that thinks and talks about “my gifts” and how I'm going to give and use them. But the Advent heart knows that gifts are only gifts when they are received in order to be given— in Advent time, there's no time to *possess* our gifts. Peter says (10) “use whatever gift you've been given to serve others.” My gifts—my money, my skills, my intellect, my education, my energy, my health—are not *for me*. Who are they for? They are *for others*.

It is not the exercise of our gifts that should give us Advent joy. Rather, we experience great delight in the Lord—the giver of all good gifts—when we see someone else *blessed* by our generosity in giving. To be obsessed about your gifts is actually a possessive and consumeristic way of living. You're being as greedy with your giftings as the greedy person is with gold. Instead, delight in the service of others through the use of your gifts. Have the same delight that the poor widow had when she put everything she had—even though it was just two little coins—into the offering box. Jesus noticed and praised her. And Jesus loves to see us take what we've been given and pour it into other people. He loves to see it, because it shows him that we've caught the Advent spirit—we anticipate the overflowing, abundant renewal of all things in Christ at his second Advent.

Here's a New Year's resolution for us all. Let's make 2021 the year in which we look at every good thing we have and say “this is a gift, given to me. Thank you, Lord. Show me quickly how to give it to someone else.”

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3-Sincere Speech

The third thing Peter says happens when Advent has turned into Action among us, is that our speech, and not just our skills and our stuff, becomes a gift. The gift of speech itself is God’s gracious gift in a powerful form (10). And so (11), we speak sincerely.

Take what we said about the difference between “no problem” and “you’re welcome,” and translate that difference into all the things you say. Peter says that whenever we open our mouths, we’re meant to be prophets and sages and gentle shepherds—as if we were speaking the very words of God.

This should both embolden and terrify us! It should terrify us, because ... who wants the responsibility of speaking for GOD!? But it should embolden us, because we were made and redeemed exactly for this: to speak as a woman or man made in God’s image.

Andrew Peterson has a song about this, and the climactic line is this:

When your spirit is hovering
Over the deep
In the image of God
Just look into that darkness
And speak

And say
Let there be light
Let there be love
Let there be music

With our children, our parents, our colleagues, our fellow church folks, our rivals, our friends: is our speech saturated with sincerity? Is it Advent speech—words that are appropriate for this age in which we know that Christ has come and Christ is quickly coming again?

I know I have some trembling and some repentance to do.
I’m guessing you do, too.

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Let’s sanctify our speech and tether our tongues to Advent time. Let’s give gifts of grace and truth, love and mercy, whole-heartedness and hope, with our speech.

4-Stewardly Service

So Advent Action involves happy hospitality instead of a grudging “no problem.”

Advent Action calls for generous giving instead of the hoarding of gold and giftings.

Advent Action means speech sanctified and sincere.

Finally, Peter shows us that Advent Action calls for stewardly service.

Look again at verse 11. Serve, and do it in the strength of God. You and I are (10) stewards of all God’s gifts and graces. So when we move into action with Advent hope, we recognize that we are not the owners, but we also not mercenaries. We aren’t the ones who possess God’s gifts, but we are also not just “hired guns.” We are *stewards*. The Father has sent the Son into the world, not to be served, but to serve. The Son stewarded the Father’s estate, managed the Father’s property. And did it so well.

But now the Son has entrusted the stewardship of his Father’s estate into our hands. For now. And he’s coming again to gather up his Father’s assets. And so the Advent question for us is: will we work for ourselves? Or will we exercise stewardly service on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ?

David Brooks has written a book recently called *The Second Mountain*. In it he describes the first mountain as one that we climb in order to boost our education, our career; maybe to find love, but at minimum to build a network of supporters. But at some point we crest the summit of the first mountain and we realize that there’s a valley, and a second mountain. This second mountain is about significance. It’s about service. It’s about stewardship. It’s not about us. The second mountain is climbed by giving your life over to something much bigger than you. To speaking up for others, and not just for

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yourself. To channeling gifts rather than hoarding them. This second mountain is about action. We can even say “Advent Action.”

Brooks is a Jew, but has in the past several years recognized that Jesus is the answer to the Jewish Advent hope. He says “I feel Jewish, but once you read Matthew’s gospel and the Sermon on the Mount, you can’t un-read it.”

Stewardly service is what we do when realize that life is more than climbing the mountains of success. We serve because he first served us.

Conclusion

Jesus has (1) suffered in his body. There’s what his service to us looked like, ultimately. Jesus is God’s happy hospitality toward us. He didn’t suffer for us and say “no problem.” He lived and died and rose and reigns for us in order to say “you’re welcome!”

Jesus is the generous, giving heart of the Father overflowing into our lives. He spills out of heaven and floods our world with grace and truth. And we are all soaking wet with his generosity. Saturated with his saving grace.

Jesus is the sanctified, sincere speech of his own Father. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. At various times and places, God spoke to us by his prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken by his Son!

Jesus is the steward of his Father’s estate, and serves us in his Father’s name.

Advent Action springs from Jesus the Son’s Advent Action toward us. All our hospitality, generosity, speech, and service is just a small stewardship and imitation of the saving Advent Action of the Son toward us.

Let’s commit ourselves this Advent to Jesus— to his happy hospitality, his generous giving, his sincere speech, and his stewardly service.

Amen.