

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Advent Week 1—Images of Hope

For our first week of Advent we looked at three images (prophecies, actually) of Hope from the prophet Isaiah, and saw how Jesus fulfilled them...and continues to fulfill them.

The first image of Hope is from Isaiah 9:2—*A light in the darkness*. (Contextually, you might want to go back to Isaiah 8:11 and read through 9:7.) Without the light of God’s revelation, “darkness” is an apt description of the human condition. In the early part of Matthew’s Gospel (4:12-16) Matthew explicit links this passage from Isaiah to Jesus to demonstrate that Jesus is fulfilling this prophecy/image. Additionally, in John 8:12 and following Jesus self-identifies as the “*light of the world*”. Jesus understood His role as the fullest revelation of God’s truth and love—thus, the light of the world.

The second image of Hope is from Isaiah 35:1-2, 6-7—*A stream in the desert*. (Contextually, you might want to read all of Isaiah 34-35.) Apart from relationship with our Life-sustaining Creator, dryness is a fitting description of the human soul. The psalmist picks up on this in Psalm 42:1-2, “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*” Twice in John’s Gospel we see Jesus pick up on this imagery. In John 4, in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus said, “*Everyone who drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*” Likewise, in John 7 Jesus said, “*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.*” (verses 37-38). Jesus understood His role as the Giver and Sustainer of Life—thus, the living water.

The third image of Hope is from Isaiah 32:18—*A secure and peaceful home*. (Contextually, this is a tough one. We could probably go back all the way to chapter 28. But it will probably suffice to at least see 32:18 in light of the entire chapter it’s in.) We were created to live with God; apart from God we are lost and wandering, and far from peace and security. Jesus understood His role as the one who would lead us home. In John 14:1-2 Jesus said, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*” This image of dwelling with God as the safe and secure place we were meant to reside is littered throughout Scripture. For example, in Psalm 90:1 Moses wrote, “*Lord, You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.*” In Psalm 91:1-2 we read, “*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’*” We can also see this idea of “at home with the father” being the ideal situation in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)

The closing chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, wrap up by picking up, yet again, these three images of Hope:

*-“I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it **light**, and the Lamb is its lamp.” (Rev. 21:22-23)*

*-“Then the angel showed me the river of the **water of life**, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...” (Rev. 22:1ff)*

*-“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the **dwelling** of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.” (Rev 21:3)*

I would recommend reading Revelation 21-22 to catch a beautiful picture of what we are hoping for, of where our faith in Christ is leading us.

Hope, by its very nature, is future-oriented. And we, as time-bound creatures, are firmly planted in the present (even if we can reflect upon the past and imagine the future). This creates a “now, but not yet” phenomena which naturally puts us in a place of waiting, with resulting tension. Scripture calls us to a future based upon God’s activity and promises in the past. Trusting God to bring about that promised future is crux of faith and hope. Being actively obedient to God’s revealed will in the present is the crux of faith and love. Faith, Hope, and Love are beautifully and powerfully interwoven in the Christian life.

But while we are in this waiting period, we are not called to passively wait, but rather to actively wait. In II Peter 3 we read, “*You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God **and speed its coming.***” (II Peter 3:11b-12a) Did you catch that? How we conduct ourselves in the present, what we busy ourselves with here and now, has the potential to speed up the coming of the Lord. This being the case, it does beg the question, how badly do we want the future God has in store for us? (For a hint of what we ought to be doing in the here and now to speed the process along, might I suggest checking out Matthew 24:14. (To say this another way—we should never disconnect Advent from Mission. They are not disconnected in God’s mind, so we don’t want to disconnect them in ours either.)

Q. As you consider the images of Hope: moving from darkness to light, moving from drought to flourishing, and moving from wandering to home...which resonates with your soul, which is most meaningful to you? Explain.

Q. If you were to think of the three images of Hope on a spectrum (see below)...

Darkness-----Light

Drought-----Flourishing

Wandering-----Home

...and as you reflect on your life, and perhaps the condition of your heart/soul, where would you place yourself on the spectrum? Explain

- Q. Describe how you have looked for hope in the wrong things/places at times in your life.
- Q. Are you presently struggling with hope? Explain.
- Q. Describe the time in your life when you felt the most hopeless. How did God bring you out of that? (**HG Leaders—it's possible the someone might be experiencing hopelessness right now. Please be careful and sensitive.)
- Q. As you've experienced Christmas in the recent past (say, the past handful of years) would you describe it as a time of renewed hope? Explain.
- Q. What are you/we doing to help bring about the future God has in store?
- Q. How is Christmas both a result of, and a tool for, Mission? (Remember, the Church—that's us—doesn't exist without Mission...so how does Christmas tie into all this?)