

# Hope for the Heart

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**Sermon Series: The  
Difference Jesus  
Makes**

**John 14:1-6**

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The season of Advent comes to a close this evening in wonderful Christmas Eve services, with the tremendous encouragement of the music of Christmas, of Pete preaching, the lighting of candles and singing Silent Night. Of course, Advent is all about anticipation—the preparation for, and the expectation of, the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus, who is a baby in a manger no longer. He stands among us at this moment, in this place, in his risen power so that we may become aware of his presence and promises and entrust our lives to him anew.

I have always especially loved the humor of Christmas, such as the little boy who, after hearing the Christmas story, when asked, “What are the gifts that the Magi, the Wise Men brought to Jesus?” he replied, “Gold, frankincense, and humor!” And there is good humor and a great spirit on this special day. There was the little girl who, when asked how her Christmas was, said, “Best Christmas I ever had. I didn’t get a single thing I needed!” A brother and a sister were spending the night at their grandparents. At bedtime, as the children knelt beside their beds to say their prayers, the brother began praying loudly. “I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE. I PRAY FOR A NEW NINTENDO. I PRAY FOR A NEW IPOD.” His sister leaned over, nudged the younger brother, and said, “Why are you shouting your prayers? God isn’t deaf.” To which the little brother replied, “No, but Gramma is!”

There is a wonderful joy in these Advent days, and sometimes there are other feelings, too, as life is complex, and sometimes we feel “up” and sometimes we feel “down.” A friend of mine lost her husband to a heart attack when

he was only 39-years-old at a very difficult time for her. Now, eleven years later, we just received a Christmas card with the picture of her next to the man she will marry next month. It is pure and simple joy to look at that picture.

In contrast, I received an e-mail this week from one of my three closest friends from Yorktown High School. Norman Lewis now lives in Colorado with his wife and near his five grown children. Last year, he was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig’s Disease. He has been doing fairly well, but in his note to me he said, “The doctors are giving me three to six months to live and the three months is more probable.” How did I feel when I read that? Overwhelmed? Distressed? Wounded? Sad? The right word is “troubled,” troubled because Norman is a dear friend about to leave us. And, although through our mutual faith in Jesus we will meet again, grief at his leaving is a troubling experience.

Now, if you were to face a situation like that and wanted to offer the loved one who is leaving you, perhaps leaving permanently, some parting words from the Bible, what words would you offer? Perhaps from Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for Thou art with me.” Or perhaps John 11:24: “I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me will live, even if he or she die.” Those would be wonderful verses to share, but for me, I have long experienced the words of John 14:1-6 that I just read as the most comforting words ever spoken in all of history and eternity. They are the words I shared with Norm.

“Let not your hearts be troubled,” said Jesus. Well, you and I know what it means to have a troubled heart about a loved one leaving or troubled about other things. In the case of the disciples, Jesus had just

***...Jesus has prepared a place for you and for me, and at the right time he will return for us and carry us to our very own place with him.***

told them he was leaving them and for the disciples that was devastating troubling news. On top of that, Jesus had told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times, so the disciples had plenty to be troubled about; just as you and I, today, have plenty to be troubled about. So, Jesus responds with a very good word: Let not your hearts be troubled! Trust God, trust also in me. Trust God, trust also in me. That is the most comforting hope for the heart ever offered. Then Jesus offers more hope for the troubled heart: “In my Father’s house are many living places and if it were not so I would have told you for I go to prepare a place for you.” And then he offers even more for the troubled heart. “And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself that where I am, there you may be also.” That is hope for your troubled heart. Jesus makes it clear that he is with you and me right here, right now, and that, ultimately, we will be with him where he is.

Curtis Bradford recalls crawling into bed on a Christmas Eve when he was seven years old, so excited that he could not get to sleep. He said, “I lay there until I was sure my parents were sleeping and then crept down to the Christmas tree at two in the morning. I began to play with my gifts—a cowboy outfit, a puppet, other toys. Filled with excitement, I emptied my stocking and begin to eat the candy, the apple and the orange. Suddenly, I hear a noise and turning, there I saw my father standing, looking sternly down at me. For a fleeting moment fear shot through me, but then Dad broke into a smile, settled himself in the recliner, and listened while I showed him everything, explaining how my toys worked, how to move the puppets mouth. Sleep began to creep over me and Dad picked me up, carried me upstairs, and tenderly tucked me into bed. I will never forget that Christmas Eve.”

The years flew by and now, on another memorable Christmas morning,

Curtis, grown, married, with children, found himself again by his father’s side. Curtis says, “My Dad lay paralyzed from a car accident and from cancer. He weighed less than 100 pounds and was in constant pain. He wanted me to dress him so he could watch the family open presents. He had me shave him, telling me how to adjust the razor as his beard grew in this way and that on his face. I dressed him and carried him to the den where the family was waiting. For fifteen minutes he joined in the fun, but finally the pain overwhelmed his joy and in tears he asked me to carry him back to his bed. As I gently scooped my frail Dad in my own strong arms, suddenly I remembered that night long ago when he had carried me to my bedroom. Now it was my turn to carry him. He asked me to play the tape recorder by his bed and together we listened to the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel.”

“In my Father’s house there are many living 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.” So for Curtis and his father, the experience of sharing a home together and of trusting Jesus with their troubled hearts was experienced together. The great good news of Christmas is really all about the fact that Jesus Christ has prepared a place in his home for you and for me. Just like our own parents carried us to bed, so Jesus has prepared a place for you and for me, and at the right time he will return for us and carry us to our very own place with him.

Indeed, it is just after Jesus says, I go to prepare a place for you, that he makes one of his wonderful “I am” statements. “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me.” Now much has been said about what it means for Jesus to be the way, for Jesus to be the truth, for Jesus to be the life. Much more has also been said, and said wonder-fully, about what has been called, “the particularity of Jesus”—that there is only one way, one particular way, for any of us

***The fact is, our loving God is the God who will not rest until you call Him your home.***

to approach God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and that is through Jesus. However, the aspect of this “I am” statement I want to lift up this morning is simply that through Jesus, God welcomes you. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Christmas Eve isn’t just about Christmas carols and wonderful candles and the joy of being with God’s people, as wonderful as that is. It is about coming to Jesus—personally, directly, immediately, and knowing his strength and guidance for today and his promise to one day receive you to be with him where he is.

One of the greatest things to learn about Jesus Christ is that he wants so very much for you to know him, that he loves to reveal himself to you so that you see him with your eyes of faith, and come to appreciate him, and depend on him and follow him as the Lord of your life. He wants you to face him and to embrace him. This is the underlying message of all of his great “I am” statements. So he says, “I am the bread of life, I am the door, I am the good shepherd. I am the way the truth and the life.” You could take Jesus to be saying, You are invited to approach me and know me as the bread of life, the door, the good shepherd, the way, the truth and the life, and indeed he is the approachable Lord. But Jesus takes it a step further. He isn’t just waiting for you to approach and come to him. He is approaching you, coming to you right here, right now. Out of love for you, he is pressing you to face him and to embrace him.

Some years ago, I enjoyed a visit to the wonderful city of Jerusalem. One afternoon I was strolling down one of the narrow streets of the area known as old Jerusalem when this Palestinian fellow came up beside me and began to walk next to me—his shoulder pushing lightly on my shoulder. His arms were stretched out in front of him, and from the tips of his fingers to his shoulders,

all sorts of beaded necklaces were hanging of every imaginable color. “Sir, would you like to buy a necklace for your wife?” he said. “Only eighty dollars.” “No,” I said. He pressed me and I said, “No, no, no.” I kept walking. He kept walking, his shoulder pressing my shoulder. “Here sir,” he said, “just hold this necklace, see if you like it.” “No, no, no, no,” I said. We kept walking, the price slowing dropping—eighty, seventy, sixty, fifty, forty. Finally, I stopped and faced him. We had probably walked 300 yards together. “No, I am not going to buy a necklace from you.” I set off again, he set off with me. Thirty dollars, 25, 20, 15, 10. Finally, the price reached two for five dollars. I thought I have two daughters and these will be great Christmas gifts.

“OK,” I said, “I’ll take the purple one and the blue one,” and pointed to two necklaces up by his shoulder. “Oh, no,” he said, “Sir, these by my fingers, two for \$5 but up here twenty dollars apiece.” Off we went walking again. Eventually, I bought the two necklaces for \$5 apiece. Who knows what they were really worth, probably five cents, but by then I had been having fun. Few people in America really sell you, really pursue you, really hang in there with you like that man had hung in with me. I must have walked him a good half mile from where he started, or he walked me! He just pressing me, approaching me until I turned and approached him. My daughters loved their necklaces!

Later, when I thought about that experience, I thought, how interesting, how that simple Palestinian peddler is like the Lord Jesus, staying with us, never taking “no” for an answer, pressing us, approaching us, until we say, “yes” to him, face him and embrace him who is the way, the truth, and the life. The fact is, our loving God is the God who will not rest until you call Him your home. Jesus Christ wants you to become aware of his presence in your life right now. He who says, “Let not your heart be troubled. Trust God, trust also in me,” is the one who is present before you and pressing you right now. So

***May this be the Christmas of your life in worship this morning and this evening as you kindle or rekindle your experience of the reality of the presence and love of Jesus in your life. Let not your heart be troubled!***

that, with your eyes of faith, you would see him, appreciate him, believe in him, and determine to follow Jesus as your Lord.

Stella Thornhope was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died a few months earlier after a long battle with cancer. A few days before Christmas, she felt terribly lonely—so much so she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon, the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. “Mrs. Thornhope?” “Yes?” “Would you sign here?” She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, “What’s in the box?” The young man laughed and opened up the flap. Inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, “This is for you, Ma’am. He’s six weeks old, completely housebroken.” The little puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity. “Who sent this?” Mrs. Thornhope asked. The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, “It’s all explained here in this envelope, Ma’am. The dog was bought last July, while its mother was still pregnant, as a Christmas gift to you.” The young man gave her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*.

In desperation she again asked, “Who sent me this puppy?” As the young man turned to leave, he said, “Your husband, Ma’am. Merry Christmas.” She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He affirmed that one day they would be together again. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden

furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor’s house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of Joy to the World, the Lord is Come.

Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. It never occurred to her to do anything but to welcome the puppy into her life. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness. “Little fella,” she said to the dog, “It’s just you and me. But you know what? There’s a box down in the basement I’ll bet you’d like. It’s got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there’s a manger scene down there. Let’s go get it.” Her story reminds us that our Lord shines light in our darkness and offers hope to the troubled heart.

The one who said, Let not your heart be troubled. Trust God. Trust also in me, stands before you right here, right now. Whatever is going on in your life at this moment, you can know for sure that God loves you, that Jesus is walking with you pressing you to face him and embrace him, that through your believing in Jesus, God is always thinking positively about you, wanting the best for you. May this be the Christmas of your life in worship this morning and this evening as you kindle or rekindle your experience of the reality of the presence and love of Jesus in your life. Let not your heart be troubled!

Lord Jesus,

I ask You to come into our lives. Take charge of our lives and make us the kind of persons You want us to be for this moment and forever. We do confess our sins and thank You for Your forgiveness and assurance of eternal life in Your name. We expect now to receive the power of the Holy Spirit that we may share this faith, strength, joy and love with others in Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Merry Christmas!***

