

Good morning! We are in this series called Hindsight's 2020. A phrase we've all used before as we talk about looking back on an event or situation that we never saw playing out the way it did. Looking back, it's as clear as day, but heading into it, no one could have guessed the outcome. This week I was scrolling through the pictures on my phone and came across this picture. My family and I (that's me, Keren, Hudson, and my sister-in-law) were on the beach in January. We handed a stranger my phone and posed for this picture. And then this happened – that wave drenched us! For a lot of people, this is what 2020 has been like...you were standing there thinking, "This is such a lovely day." And then bam! Demolished by a wave you didn't see coming.

For many people, they look back on this year and say it was the hardest year they've ever had. I was talking to a teacher a couple days ago and I asked how things were going. She said she is unbelievably overwhelmed and that the pace is unbearable and unsustainable. She told me she works from 7-8 every day. I jokingly said, "Wow. A whole hour." Kidding! Teachers have been burning the candle at both ends, day in and day out. A friend of mine who works in one of our local hospitals told me that every day there are dozens of nurses out, so patient care isn't what it should be, and the medical professionals are exhausted. Talking to parents who are having to do their job from home *and* teach their kids from home. Talking to college students who didn't get anything close to a normal college experience the last two semesters. It's been a rough season.

We are in this series called Hindsight's 2020, and we are looking back on this calendar year, but not just looking back through the news headlines and through our experiences, but we are looking back through the lens of grace, trying to see where God was at work and discern what he might be trying to teach us and form in us, specifically using the book of Isaiah. And one thing we've been talking about is that, as bad as we may have had it this year, the Israelites in Isaiah's day had it a lot worse. We talked about this a couple weeks ago, but for review, God's people lived in the promised land, and were rather safe and secure there for centuries. Until King Tiglath Pilsar III came to power in the year 745 BC, and began working his way through Israel, conquering and pillaging every town and village along the way.

And the defeat of the Israelites at the hands of the Assyrians wasn't just the result of the size of their armies, it wasn't random or bad luck or the result of military strategies, it was actually the result of God punishing them for their sins. Isaiah 1:2-4: "Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manager, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.'"

The result of great despair. Later on in Isaiah 1, God describes the condition of his people. "From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil. Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as

when overthrown by strangers” (1:6-7). This was the situation for God’s people. Not just for a few weeks or a few months or a few years, but for *decades*. In fact, the vast majority of them never lived to see their fortunes restored. Many of their children never lived to see their fortunes restored. Or their grandchildren! It was a very long, very dark season of despair. In fact, you see the totality of their despair in chapter 8 – turn there with me if you have your bibles open. This is what God says to his people – verse 22: “They will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.”

God was painfully honest about the challenge they were enduring, but in the midst of their very great darkness, God promised to give them hope. Look at the very next verse; this is how chapter 9 begins: “Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan – the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (9:1-2).

Now let’s talk specifically about who is being addressed here. He mentioned the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. These are two of the twelve tribes of Israel. On the map, do you know where they were? Right here (directly left and above the Sea of Galilee). Because of their location in the northern-most part of Israel, they were the first ones to be destroyed by the Assyrians when they invaded from the north. What they endured was so devastating it wasn’t just called darkness, it was called *deep* darkness. They were living in what felt like total cave darkness, where no matter how hard you strain your eyes, you can’t even see your hand right in front of your face. And specifically to these people who couldn’t even see their hand in front of them, God promised to send a great light. He said that the sun would dawn and their gloom would be turned to glory.

Do you know which two cities are located in this region? Nazareth and Capernaum. Those names likely sound familiar. Jesus lived in Nazareth for 30 years, and he lived in Capernaum for 3 years; it was the base for his years of ministry. 700 years before the time of Jesus, God said that his people, living right here, the first to enter into darkness, would see a light and find hope. And the hope God promised to send has a name: Jesus Christ.

Look just a few verses down in Isaiah 9 as we see a description of the light that would pierce through the darkness: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (9:6-7).

That is the Christmas message. Though our world, our culture, and to an extent, our lives, are surrounded by darkness, we cling to the hope that this child God sent to be born in the manger will one day take everything that is wrong with the world, everything that is broken and hurting and unjust and misaligned, and he will make it right. As Christians, that is our hope.

And as followers of Jesus, as we look back on this year, we have to be able to honestly deal with all the challenges we faced and all the darkness we encountered, and yet we never lose hope,

because we know that in Christ, God has entered into our darkness, and he has pierced our darkness with his world-changing life. John 1, describing the birth of Christ, says this: “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:9). That is our hope. And we should never underestimate the power that clinging to that hope.

Let me give you a simple example. Let’s take two men who have identical temperaments. Same personality on the Myers Brigg and Enneagram. Same age. Same professional experience. And let’s say you give them each a job, where for an entire year they have to work in a small cubicle for 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, doing the most monotonous and boring of all jobs. Let’s say their job was simply to remove staples from stacks of paper (which actually was my first job as a teenager). Not a fun job. Can be kind of depressing, even. One of these guys was doing this for minimum wage, so at the end of the year, with all the overtime, he was going to make around \$30,000. The other guy was told, at the end of the year we are going to give you \$30,000,000. Don’t you think there would be a difference to the way they approached their mundane work in their small little cubical each day?! One guy is in there cursing the job and the paper cuts, but the other guy is in his cubicle, huge smile on his face, whistling while he works, because he knows that at the end of the year, his life and his entire family will be changed forever. That’s the power of hope! Human beings can endure unimaginable hardship, *if* they are fueled by the hope that there is a brighter tomorrow ahead.

One more example. Think about what it was like as a Chicago Bulls fan back in the 90s when Jordan was on the team, the golden era for basketball. No matter how far down the Bulls got in a game, everyone always believed the Bulls would win. Why? Because they had Jordan. Every year, no matter who else was in the league, it was a foregone conclusion that the Bulls would win the championship. Why? If you had Jordan, you always had hope! There has never been a player like him, before or since. His very presence evoked not just hope, but a sense of confidence, a sense of certainty that no matter who they were facing, they would win.

Christians are hope based people. And our hope isn’t in getting a big paycheck at the end of the year. Our hope isn’t in an athlete who can help our team win. Our hope is in God himself! Our hope is in the confidence that even though we go through many trials in this life, God has not abandoned us. God has not left us on our own. God has entered into the world. God has overcome the forces of darkness in the world. And God has made a way for everyone who places their faith in him to overcome, as well.

Do you remember when God revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush? This is what God said to Moses: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them (Exodus 3:7-8). Take note of all the verbs in this passage describing God’s activity. He has *seen* their misery. He has *heard* them crying. He is *concerned* about their suffering. He will *come down* to *rescue* them. This is God’s heart. This is his character. And yes, God did this for his people who were in slavery in Egypt. But the ultimate way he has done this for all humanity is through sending his Son into the world on Christmas Day. And God still does this today. No matter the pain or hardship we might be facing, God *sees* us where we are at, God *hears* us when we cry, he is *concerned* about our suffering, and he has promised to *send* his Son into the world again, to *rescue us* and make things right once and for all!

That hope gives us confidence, strength, and endurance as we go through the ups and downs of life. I don't know if you saw this very fascinating research by the Gallup research group. They did a recent survey of thousands of Americans to see how their mental health has gotten either better or worse this calendar year. Take a look at the findings:

Financial situation

Under 40,000: Decreased 6%
Between \$40,000-100,000: Decreased 12%
Over \$100,000: Decreased 12%

Age group

18-29: Decreased 9%
30-49: Decreased 8%
50-64: Decreased 9%
65+: Decreased 10%

Marital Status

Married: Decreased 8%
Single: Decreased 10%

Race

White: Decreased 10%
Non-white: Decreased 8%

Gender

Male: Decreased 8%
Female: Decreased 10%

Church attendance

Never: Decreased 13%
Occasionally: Decreased 12%
Weekly: Increased 4%

Did you see that? **Weekly increased 4%**. The *only* group of people in our entire country who have been able to make it through this year with greater mental health than we came into this year with are those who worship at church every week. Every week, no matter what is happening in the world, not matter the chaos and despair, we are reminded that God *sees* us, God *hears* us, God *cares* about us, and God has already entered our world once to *rescue* us, to bring forgiveness to all our sins and usher in his kingdom, and will come again, to make our world right once and for all.

Dr. Gordon Livingston, a psychiatrist who has studied human behavior for more than thirty years, has written about human happiness. He said, "Human happiness is determined by three

things: Meaningful work. Loving relationships. Hope for the future.” *Hope* is the fuel God designed us to live on.

Andrew Delbonco, the man who wrote *The Real American Dream*, and a non-Christian, offered a meditation on hope. This is what he said: “The heart of any culture is hope. Hope is the way we overcome the lurking suspicion that all of our getting and spending amounts to fidgeting while we wait for death. We must imagine some end of life that transcends our own tiny allotment of days and hours if we are to keep at bay the dim, back of the mind suspicion that we are adrift in an absurd world.”

Life without hope amounts to nothing more than absurdity. If you have no hope beyond this world, then though you hate to admit it, everything we do in this life is ultimately meaningless...it's just about getting and spending and fidgeting until our turn on this planet is done. But if the Christian message is true, then not only are we not adrift on our own, but everything we do in this world, the smallest acts of love and kindness, are infused with eternal weight and value.

One thing I have always found fascinating is how astrology has been influential in many cultures for most of human history. So many societies, for so many years, have looked up to the heavens and assumed that the placement of the stars when you were born has a powerful, hopefully benevolent influence on our universe and the affairs of each person's life. Think about that. For thousands of years, across the planet, people have been looking up to the sky, believing in an impersonal force that will guide us and help us. Christians look up to the sky and believe not in an impersonal force, but a personal being who knows us, who cares for us, who loves us, and has *come down to rescue* us. That is the real reason for hope.

I want to look one more time at those words from Isaiah 9 about what kind of little child would be sent into the world on Christmas morning: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” *That* is the message of hope that we need. That is the message of hope this *world* needs!!

So much went wrong in our lives this year. You can look at the position of our federal government in this political cycle. It's become a joke at best and a catastrophe at worst. But our hope is in a little baby, born in the manger, and one day the government will be on his shoulders. Think about the rise in mental health issues this year. The CDC says diagnosed anxiety disorders rose by 300% in 2020 compared with 2019. *300%*. Substance abuse and suicidal ideation increased by the double digits. When the world is caught up in an emotional whirlwind, we look to that little baby in a manger, whose name is Wonderful Counselor. When we feel weak and helpless on our own, we take hope that he is called Mighty God. When even our families experience crisis and turmoil, we know that he is our Everlasting Father. And with all the conflict, animosity and vitriol we've encountered this year, we remember that little baby is named the Prince of Peace.

We are hope-filled people. And our hope is not a blind optimism. It's not wishful thinking. It's based on a promise God made 700 years before the time of Christ that he would send light into

the world, and on Christmas morning, that promise came true. That light pierced the darkness and overcame it. That light turned our gloom into glory and our despair into eternal hope.