

THE GIFT OF HOPE

As most of you KNOW, though SOME may not, Diane and I are GRANDPARENTS. Our son, Ryan, and his wife, ANA, who live in Miami, gave birth LESS than a year ago to *LEILANI Deane Ellis*. And it's been GREAT to have Leilani in our family, although we don't SEE her enough. I don't know if this happens to OTHER people, but when I hold an INFANT, and especially Leilani, I get filled UP with emotion! I just can't HELP it! The FIRST thing I feel is NOSTALGIA for the time when my OWN children were infants. I MISS that time in our lives. I ALSO feel a powerful sense of AWE and wonder because, to me, it's a MIRACLE that something so BEAUTIFUL and intricate, PERFECT and precious, can come from such TINY, microscopic CELLS. Thirdly, I feel overwhelmed by a HUGE sense of RESPONSIBILITY. I mean: HERE'S this completely VULNERABLE, dependent BABY, needing lots of love, care and ATTENTION, and whose whole LIFE depends on the kind of SECURITY, love and VALUES she receives during the NEXT few years. It's an AWESOME responsibility!

HOWEVER, the STRONGEST emotion I feel as I hold a newborn is HOPE! For ME, babies MEAN hope! ALL through college, I vowed NEVER to bring a child into this SICK and broken WORLD. SO, when it came time for Diane and me to DECIDE whether or not to HAVE children, I really had to STRUGGLE with it! Well obviously, we decided to HAVE children! WHY? We REALIZED that we DO have HOPE for this world! And we have HOPE because of our FAITH! You see: we KNOW in our hearts that this world is ultimately in **GOD'S** hands. And thankfully, OURS is a LOVING God! OURS is a REDEEMING God! OURS is a God who works for GOOD at ALL times and in ALL circumstances. And with faith in THAT kind of God, we CAN have HOPE, and our children are SYMBOLS of our HOPE!

You know: hope is SO important, and SO powerful! As LONG as we have HOPE, we can accomplish all SORTS of things, and endure all SORTS of trials and struggles. In fact, if you'd like to see the POWER of hope, just look back in HISTORY at some of the world's most DOWNTRODDEN and hurting people, because THAT'S where HOPE usually shines BRIGHTEST! LOOK, for example, at the SLAVES in the old SOUTH, who KNEW, day in and day out, AGONY and abuse, TORTURE and dehumanization, at the hands of their SLAVE-OWNERS. Well, they found that they could SURVIVE that HORROR as long as they had HOPE. And THAT'S why the SPIRITUALS they sang are some of the most HOPE-FILLED songs this world has ever known.... LIKEWISE, those who survived Hitler's HOLOCAUST in the 1930's and 40's TELL us that it was their HOPE that kept them ALIVE day after day in the DEATH camps!

Closer to home, people who beat CANCER tell us that they WOULDN'T have if they had lost their HOPE! OR, when WE have been deeply HURT by a FRIEND or loved one, the ONLY thing that enables us to FORGIVE that person and try to RECONCILE our relationship is the HOPE that they WON'T hurt us AGAIN. Or, when a MARRIAGE or family is being torn APART because of VIOLENCE or addiction, CONFLICT or infidelity, it is ONLY by HOPE that the couple can decide to stay TOGETHER and try to WORK on their PROBLEMS! Likewise, IF and when they KNOW that their marriage is OVER, it's only by HOPE that they can decide to END their relationship and try to REBUILD their broken lives! Yes friends: HOPE is POWERFUL! It can motivate us to **DO** and **ENDURE** and **SURVIVE** all sorts of things!

And THAT'S why I LOVE our Scripture Lesson from Psalm 107. The author KNOWS just how powerful hope IS! And of COURSE he would KNOW it! He's a HEBREW, and the Hebrew people of HIS day had experienced and endured the EXILE! They had LITERALLY been FORCED from their HOMES and land, and often SEPARATED from LOVED ones, and CARTED off in HERDS to a STRANGE and foreign LAND, where they were forced to SERVE a CRUEL and ABUSIVE people! And had it NOT been for their HOPE that God would somehow SAVE them, they might NOT have survived the exile at ALL! But, they DID have hope, and they DID survive! And the Psalmist sings out SO beautifully the TRUTH that WHEN we are hurt, WHEN we are lost, WHEN we are darkened by depression, or WHEN we are imprisoned by ADDICTION or illness or BROKEN relationships, HOPE allows us, and even COMPELS us, to TURN our hearts to God and RELY on God for HELP and comfort, COURAGE and strength!

Well friends: LIKE those Hebrews, WE are a people of FAITH who place our HOPE in God, and who remember that hope is POWERFUL! In fact, what THIS church has recently ACCOMPLISHED because of YOUR deep FAITH and HOPE is an incredible WITNESS to the POWER of HOPE that is based on FAITH. I mean, not ONLY have you endured several PERSONNEL issues, some of them MISCONDUCT, which can literally TEAR a church APART, but you have DARED to TALK about them, DEAL with them, and get yourselves in a place where you are READY and willing to trust NEW personnel and MOVE on, with a GREAT deal of HOPE for this church's FUTURE. And WHILE you were doing all THAT, which would have been MORE than enough for MOST churches, you've also DARED to run a capital FUND drive and BUILD an ADDITION to make this church ACCESSIBLE to ALL people. And you've done it SUCCESSFULLY! And all I can say about you and what you done is WOW! I'm in AWE of what you've done here, which is ONE reason I wanted to JOIN you! Yes, you KNOW about HOPE based on FAITH!

Well, TODAY is a day to CELEBRATE hope, because today is the FIRST day of the season of ADVENT, and the most PRECIOUS gift of Advent IS the gift of HOPE. In fact, we cannot truly HEAR the Advent message WITHOUT having hope! Unfortunately, however, AS I talked about LAST week: in this *Santa Claus CULTURE* and *TINSEL society* of ours, it is very DIFFICULT for even COMMITTED Christians to HEAR the message of Advent and to remember WHAT this holy season is REALLY about! It is NOT about HUMAN generosity, HUMAN happiness and HUMAN friendship, as most people THINK these days. No! It's about the AMAZING and astonishing GOOD news that GOD Almighty -- the Creator and Sustainer of the UNIVERSE -- has ENTERED human history, JUST as Jeremiah predicted, and has ENTERED it in DISGUISE -- as one of US -- and PITCHED a tent in OUR neighborhood! And by COMING to us in this way, God's loving INTEREST in our human life and DESTINY has been made abundantly CLEAR! BECAUSE of Jesus Christ, we KNOW how MUCH God LOVES us, AND to what EXTENT God will GO in order to SAVE us from ourselves and our own ILLUSIONS!

Moreover, the SAME Christ who was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago is STILL with us, in RISEN form, and still ASKING to be born in EACH of our hearts! And THAT'S why we sing during Advent, *O Come, O Come, EMMANUEL*. The word, *Emmanuel*, simply means: *God is WITH us!* And IF God is WITH us, then WE can be people of HOPE, REGARDLESS of our circumstances. You see: We OFTEN feel at our wit's END, like SAILORS tossed about in a HURRICANE. And this world OFTEN seems to have gone CRAZY! Our PLANS and dreams OFTEN lie BROKEN and SHATTERED before us! And we OFTEN find ourselves feeling DOWN, BRUISED and ALONE. Well, WHEN this happens to us, BOTH the Psalmist, AND the season of Advent, REMIND us that God has DELIVERED us in the past and GOD will deliver us AGAIN and again and AGAIN! No matter how FIERCE the storm; no matter how DARK the darkness; God WILL stand WITH us, REDEEM our pain, and HELP us build a NEW life out of the shattered pieces of the OLD one. Yes, God loves us THAT much, and the GIFT of Jesus Christ PROVES it!

SO, how can we NOT have HOPE when we have FAITH in such a GREAT and LOVING God? Frankly, I DON'T know how people DO it who have NO faith. But thankfully, we DO! And therefore, we CAN have HOPE, regardless of the circumstances of our lives. And MOREOVER, we can USE our hope in order to make a DIFFERENCE, just as YOU in this church have USED your HOPE over the past few years to PREPARE yourselves to move ON into a whole new FUTURE. Yes with HOPE, EACH of us can make a DIFFERENCE -- in our FAMILIES, in our WORKPLACES, in our CHURCH and COMMUNITY, and EVEN in our NATION and WORLD! After all, it is HOPE that enables us to hang that AIDS quilt in our church, even as that DREADFUL disease CONTINUES to ravage so many parts of this world. And it was HOPE that empowered my WIFE and 25,000 OTHERS to gather 2 weekends ago to protest the *School of the Americas* at *Fort Benning*, Georgia, even though that U.S. military school remains OPEN and continues training soldiers from Central and South America, who CONTINUE to go back and violate human rights and perpetuate human suffering -- in Colombia and OTHER countries -- just AS they have in so MANY Latin American countries through the years. HOPE is ALSO why we CONTINUE to PRAY and WORK and VOTE for PEACE, even as the UGLINESS of WAR continues to DESTROY land, SHATTER lives and MARR international relations. Yes, friends, HOPE empowers us to go out and MAKE a DIFFERENCE, even when it appears that no one CAN make a DIFFERENCE! Yes, HOPE based on faith is one of the most POWERFUL forces on earth! And so, EVEN as we CELEBRATE and give THANKS for it on this Advent Sunday, we ALL need to be USING it to make a difference! And it WILL, thanks be to God! Amen.