

# CHRISTMAS: IT'S NOT YOUR BIRTHDAY 1

## *"It's the birth of Hope!"*

*"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit."* Romans 15:13

This morning we launch a new series titled: Christmas: It's not Your Birthday. Let me tell you where I'm going with this series, and remind you of the 2009 Christmas Challenge. I issued a challenge at the beginning of the month to prayerfully consider having 'half a Christmas'. Susan and I have agreed to spend half as much as we did last year on Christmas, and give the rest to a one time offering on Christmas Eve. It is my hope and prayer that many (all) of you would join us and together create and experience a Miracle of Generosity on Christmas Eve this year. It is my hope and prayer that our joint efforts might raise \$25,000 that we will donate to the Ruth Meiers House. Would you like to be part of a miracle? Would you like to make a real difference in our world right here in Bismarck? Would you like to put some real meaning back into our commercialized Christmas? So would I, so please consider joining us.

Christmas...it's not your Birthday...but it is the birth of hope. Next week we'll discover how Christmas birthed Joy on this earth, the week following how the birth of Christ brought Peace on Earth. Then the week of Christmas we'll consider how Jesus' birthday brought Love to us, and on Christmas Eve we'll talk about the birth of Generosity, as we experience a Miracle of Generosity.

For me, hope has a two-fold significance, and I'll limit our discussion to these two this morning. Because of Jesus' birth, we have hope that our lives can have meaning. Because of Jesus' birth, we have hope that when our lives are over on this earth, they are just beginning in heaven. Because of Jesus, we have hope that we don't have to waste our lives, and we have hope that eternity is a reality. Those are real hopes.

Last August I was leading a Bible Study at the Penitentiary. We were studying the popular book titled: The Shack. Put it in someone's stocking who needs help understanding forgiveness, or someone who needs a fresh look at God! The study guide I was using posed this question, (remember the context): "What is your source of hope?" There, was a thoughtful pause, then one inmate after another described the hope they found in one day being released...in what they'd do on their first day of freedom. Then after a bit of a pause, one young man said: "I have to have a different source of hope – cause it's not likely I'll ever get out!"

As sad as that may sound, I find it an exact description of the situation in which I see so many of us today! So many of us need a different source of hope! So many of us have illegitimate sources of hope; from hoping in our natural beauty, or our enormous earning power, or our political clout, or hoping the Twins re-sign Joe Mauer! So many of us have wrongly assumed that the great hope we have in this life is to be bailed out by the government, or discover a 'perfect' health care plan, or end all wars immediately... are all illegitimate. I want to explore the three basic, foundational, primary, illegitimate sources of hope with you today...all the while reminding us of our one and only real source of hope: Jesus; it's his birthday, and he birthed real hope! The first illegitimate source of hope:

### **1. OUR FAMILY HERITAGE**

Long before Jesus arrived, men and women had been wrongly hoping and believing that belonging to a certain family, or tribe, or nationality, or race...might endear them to God, and thus; provide them hope. We see this in our Jewish ancestors. Soon after being hand-selected by God...they were on their pride-full high horses, demanding that their "special status" as God's chosen ones, be the measuring stick to determine their immediate and eternal standing with God. What an improper source of hope.

And not unlike today. So many people today are placing their present and future hope, in having the right parents, especially if those parents were/are people of faith. So many, even of us, are existing in the hope that being born in a “Christian nation” will save us from eternal damnation or destruction. So many of us are failing to place our faith in Jesus Christ, because our parents were members of this or that church, or our grandmother was always a Methodist, or EUB; heck, we can even point to a preacher dangling somewhere on our family tree! That must count for something! You see, the point is; each of us is responsible to personally discover our only true source of Hope... the birth of Jesus Christ, and the salvation he provides by his death. We have to have a different source of hope than just claiming our familial or national or prestigious heritage. That source is Jesus Christ. Jesus; a baby born in a manger, a savior who died on a cross, our Lord who rose from the dead, our King who is coming again. The second major source of illegitimate hope is:

## **2. OUR RELIGIOUS RITUALS**

Again we can trace our troubles to long ago Hebrew villages where temples and tabernacles were filled with the stench of burning flesh, as our Jewish grandmothers and fathers brought offerings unending to pay the penalty for their ever-present and unforgiven sins. Their hope hung on the altars of religious sacrifices, and left them returning again and again, unforgiven, unfulfilled, and void of any real hope.

We can see it even in the time of Jesus, with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the other keepers of Religious law; the constant butt of rebukes and the steady stream of self-righteousness revealed. They, who majored on the minor minutia of law-keeping, were constantly being rebuffed by Jesus who looked beyond their white robes to the white washed tombs of their hollow lives! There was no life in their law-keeping, no hope either.

Man, it's easy to join the bashing of the Pharisees...until we have to put on their robes ourselves. We've become quite accomplished at seeking an eye for an eye, even while claiming to turn the other cheek. We are quite satisfied showing up for 'church', while ignoring or even scoffing at the worship going on around us. We have become proficient at airing the dirty laundry of sinners all around us, while ignoring or denying that there is any sin left in our sanctified lives. We are experts at figuring how to tip our waitress, while we give God even less. We are relying on our religious rituals of church attendance, bible study, even praying once in awhile...and demanding of God that He make room for us in His big house.

Those things; giving, attending church, studying the Bible, and praying are all good things, and we ought to be practicing all of them...and more. But they are powerless in and of themselves to offer us any hope! Separated from a personal and intimate, and growing relationship with God, through Jesus Christ; they are religious rituals that might make us feel better...but offer us only that slim hope!

My friends, maybe today it's your time to stop playing church, stop playing "Christian", stop living in the illusion of a hope driven by religious practices; and invite Jesus, the babe in the manger, the savior on the cross, the risen Lord, and returning King, to save you, and give you real hope? Here is the third illegitimate source of hope:

### **3. OUR HUMAN GOODNESS**

It is sadly tragic, and unfortunately not an isolated occurrence at the death-bed-side of many over the course of my ministry. I've asked the one dying if he/she is ready to meet God; and more often than not, their answer is: "I hope so"! It breaks my heart, and when I feel prompted to push for a deeper meaning, the majority describe something like this: "Well, I just hope that the good I've done in my life, outweighs the bad, so that God will let me into His heaven."

Without being crass or disrespectful, I've said to them, what I'll say to you now... before I meet you on your deathbed; "your hope can be assured by placing your faith in Jesus Christ." You don't have to rely on your goodness outweighing your bad...you'll never win that balancing act. Remember how God named our works of righteousness as "filthy" rags? We can't offer to God only our human goodness and expect to live with any semblance of hope!

My friends; being good is a good thing; but human goodness is not the standard, and it is not the source of hope! We have hope because we have Jesus!

God saw the ineffectiveness of all three human attempts to discover some kind of hope; family heritage, religious ritual and human goodness. God saw and knew that each and every one of us when given the choice would choose what we thought were the easier way. Now, God decided to send Jesus, and in that manger, and on that cross, and outside that empty tomb; and one day riding on the clouds of eternal Glory, stands the one and only authentic source of hope known to humankind. We can't have hope by being good, or acting religious, or being born in a God-loving family...we can only have hope by inviting, accepting, and living for and with Jesus. All other options are illegitimate.

So you want to make this Christmas different than all the rest? It's not just about spending less and giving more...it's about giving up control, and letting Jesus have his rightful place on the throne of your life, at the center of your being. It's not your birthday, but there is a great gift awaiting you. Make your choice today, now, and begin to live with real hope! Amen

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**The three primary sources of illegitimate hope:**

1. OUR FAMILY \_\_\_\_\_

2. OUR RELIGIOUS \_\_\_\_\_

3. OUR HUMAN \_\_\_\_\_