



Date: November 27, 2022

Speaker: Paul McIlwraith

The Gift Exchange – Exchanging Despair for His HOPE

How many of you exchange gifts at Christmastime? Some of you are thinking, *well duh Paul of course that is what Christmas is all about.* For most of us. But, I have learned over the years that people have all sorts of sacred traditions when it comes to gift giving at Christmas.

Some don't exchange gifts and just enjoy time together. *Our presence is our present.* Some only give homemade gifts. Some have a dollar limit. Some have a dollar limit but never stick to it. In some homes everyone buys for everyone and others draw names.

Then there are those who participate in what is known as the *White Elephant Gift Exchange*. Are you familiar with this phenomena? The *Christmas White Elephant Gift Exchange* is when everyone brings a wrapped gift of equal value and they are all placed in the centre of the room. The goal is to walk away with the best present. How is that for demonstrating the real spirit of the season?! How many of you exchange gifts this way?

As you can imagine, this game can really bring out the competitive spirit in some and lead to less than "Christmasy" behavior. Usually it is the result of someone misunderstanding the rules so, to help those of you doing the *Christmas White Elephant Gift Exchange* this year, I went on line and found an official list of the rules. Write these down or take a picture of the screen to avoid any problems this year.

Christmas White Elephant Gift Exchange Rules

1. Each person brings one wrapped gift to contribute to a common pool

The gift exchange organizer should provide information on what type of gift people should bring and the dollar amount.

2. Each person draws a number to determine what order they will select a gift.

Number 1 selects first through to the number of people you have participating.

3. The people participating all sit in a circle so that they can see the gift pile.

4. The first person selects a gift from the pile and opens it.

It important to make sure that everyone can see the gift and it is kept on display. Don't hide it.

5. The people that follow can choose to either pick an unwrapped gift from the pile or steal a previous player's gift. Anyone who gets their gift stolen in this way can do the same – choose a new gift or steal from someone else.

Now this is where it starts to go downhill because the confusion comes when it uncertain how many times you can steal someone's gift. According to these official rules,

- A present can only be stolen once per turn.
- After three swaps, the gift now remains with that player.

6. After all the people have had a turn, the person who selected first gets another chance to swap the gift he or she is holding for any other opened gift.

This is why it is important to draw #1.

I know, it sounds all so confusing and so far from the true spirit of Christmas. Stealing the best gift! But if played in the right spirit, it can be a lot of fun. Don't say you never learn anything practical at church.

The Gift Exchange. I have been pondering gift exchanges lately. Some have speculated that the practice of giving presents at Christmas can be traced back two thousand years when the Magi from the east arrived in Bethlehem with gifts for the new born Christ child. Others contend that it was a certain fourth century Christian bishop, Saint Nicholas who started the tradition that has become an important part of Christmas festivities around the world.

As we approach Christmas, we are reminded of the greatest gift ever given to humanity, the birth of our Saviour Jesus. It was 16th Century German theologian, Martin Luther who is credited with the concept of “The Great Exchange”. This exchange is at the heart of our Christian faith. Since God fully participated in our human nature through the incarnation, the birth of His son Jesus, we have the privilege of participating in His Divine nature. That is, we are united with Him by receiving His Son as Lord of our lives. This sentiment is captured in the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

Now that, is the most wonderful gift exchange and we walk away with the best gift, would you agree? It is important to notice that this is not just some transactional relationship. Jesus’ life for our sin. His life for our wrongdoing so that one day if we can just endure our time on earth, we get Heaven when we die. Oh our eternal security is good but the exchange is much deeper than that. When we receive Jesus, the Holy Spirit lives in us and allows us to live the rich and abundant life that God always had in mind for us despite whatever is going on around us.

Jesus himself declared in **John 10:10**, that his purpose is to give us, his followers... *My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. Who doesn't want a rich and satisfying life?!* So, can I ask you this morning as you sit here four weeks out from Christmas, are you living a rich and satisfying life? If not, why not?

Perhaps with all that is going on in the world. We still have the lingering effects of COVID-19. Inflation rose this year. There are soaring food and

gas prices and a predicted Recession in 2023. There have been labour disputes that have threatened school closures. An underfunded health care system is closing emergency rooms and delaying surgeries.

I read in the London Free Press this week that there are increased acts of aggression and violence on the streets of Canada. That is disconcerting. Those things can weigh heavily on us not to mention what is happening internationally. We have the ongoing Russia/ Ukraine conflict, child poverty and environmental concerns. With all of those things swirling in our minds, have you found that it has impacted the quality of your life? Are these and maybe other more personal things robbing you of living the abundant life promised by Jesus?

These days, do you find yourself more apt to worry than to have peace? Are you less loving and more apathetic? Are you more discouraged than joyful? Has hope been replaced by despair? Today, at the beginning of this service, Trish lit the Advent Candle that represents Hope. If you know my story at all, you may know that it is HOPE that has brought me to the place of standing in front of you today.

Let me explain. Almost thirty years ago, March 13, 1993, was a Sunday just like any other Sunday. Carolyn and I attended church in the morning with our only child at the time, our beautiful almost two-year-old daughter Leah. I don't remember the topic of the sermon that morning or the songs we sang but, after church we drove back to our home just outside of Waterloo in the small town of Baden.

I collected the Toronto Star newspaper like I did every Sunday and after lunch, I settled into my green lazy boy in the basement and began to read. A story on the front page caught my attention immediately, “**Throwing a lifeline to a northern “hell”**”. This article drew me in. I was moved as I read the details of why the Indigenous Canadian teens in northern reserves, were dying by suicide at alarming rates. The comment that specifically caught my eye was by one of the chiefs of the community who said, our kids... *are overcome by feelings of hopelessness which, over time, leads them to try and end it.*

They are overcome by feelings of hopelessness. I don't know why but those words pierced my soul. These teens saw no other option, no better future to live for so many were taking their own lives. The

story gripped me in a powerful way. I remember leaping out of my chair going upstairs to find Carolyn and saying *we have to do something. We have to go to these teens and tell them there is hope.*

I shared this story with you ten years ago when I first came to North Park as the teaching pastor but it bears repeating because it wouldn't be overdramatic to say this newspaper article changed my life. Has that every happened to you? One defining moment changed your life? See, I was about to turn 30 around this time. What I read in the paper caused me to reflect upon my own youth, my high school days. Oh there were some interesting moments, some dabbling in this or that, but I never experienced life as hopeless. *Why*, I wondered? What made me different then these teens in the article? After some careful contemplation I realized that it was my Christian faith, I had been taught that life was more than just about me and my happiness and pursuit of the good life.

There was a grander story that I was just invited to play a part in. It was the story of God, the Bible and Jesus. It is a story of deeper meaning and significance. My faith in Christ and this greater story instilled in me hope from a young age and as I reflected upon that, I realized that this hope had sustained me through some highs and lows of my life up to that point. Over the next four years, after I read the article, God led me on a journey that culminated in 1997 when I left a 10-year career as a school teacher to become a youth pastor in a local church. One of the first things I did for the youth in my church was create a theme verse. It was,

Psalm 71:5

For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. (NIV)

Hope. It was all about Hope. I wanted to ensure that those in my youth group knew that despite whatever was going on in their lives, the source of true hope was Jesus. That story I read in the Toronto Star in 1993 moved me to the point of literally changing my life, career path, passion and focus. It changed everything and **HOPE** continues to drive what I do everyday in ministry, in my preaching, but also in pastoral care and counselling.

Why? Well I don't know if you noticed but we are living in a world that teeters on despair. It could be because of those things I mentioned earlier or

maybe, just maybe it is our increased dependency and addiction to technology that is partly to blame. More and more studies are being released finding a strong link between heavy social media use and the increased risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness and suicidal thoughts.

These days most of us have access to social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Snap Chat, Be Real) through our smart phones or tablets which makes things quite convenient but it also means that information is always available at the tip of our fingers. The round-the-clock hyper connectivity, constant alerts and notifications emanating from our devices affect our concentration and focus. We have FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Keeping our devices by our bedside disturbs our sleep and all of it has created psychological cravings making many of us addicts, slaves to our phone. According to a report in ONLINE BUSINESS CANADA, in 2022 a record 31.8 million Canadians spent an average of one hour and fifty-three minutes across six different social media sites each and every day and it is affecting our mental health. Studies find we now have *lower psychological well-being, less curiosity, lower self-control, more distractibility, more difficulty making friends, less emotional stability and shorter attention spans.*

Let's face it. Technology is not going away and has done much good for our world. But we also need to be aware of it's potential negative impact on our mental health by perpetuating despair and eroding hope. In his book, **Water into Wine**, Christian author and pastor Brian Zahnd writes, *ours is an age of noise. With our technological progress has come the din of modernity. With the advent of digital social media has come the white noise of everyone, "expressing themselves". Silence is now a precious commodity, a scarce resource hard to come by.*

But it is in the silence where we discover hope. On a quiet, still night 2000 years ago, hope was born. What does this word mean to you? When I say HOPE, what comes to your mind? Think of your past week. In what you did and the places that you put your time, energy and talent, what does it say about where you look for hope?

I meet with people, many of you every week. In my office, I sit with couples who wonder if they still really love one another and they grapple for hope in their marriages. I visit hospitals and meet with many

of you who have been given a difficult health diagnosis and you search for hope. This past week I visited in the ICU with a 50-year-old man recovering from brain surgery. Three weeks ago he was healthy and vibrant but he experienced a sudden brain aneurysm rupture and now the future is uncertain and his family is grasping for hope. In your homes, I have met with some of you who have lost a loved one and you struggle for hope in the midst of your grief.

This idea of hope appears to be a psychological necessity for human beings. It is almost a natural inclination and we tend to function differently when we see a situation as hopeful or hopeless. Have you noticed this? Think of the times when you said, this is hopeless. Chances are it was when you didn't see results, there seemed to be no favourable future.

There is a poignant line in the classic Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*, have you seen it? Do you remember the scene where the angel Clarence is beckoned to help a trouble human? "Is he sick?" Clarence asks. "No, it's worse than being sick", the head angel replies, "he's discouraged."

One of the worst depressions a person can suffer is that of feeling discouragement or hopelessness. When you feel your situation is never going to improve or that there is no escape, that you are trapped forever in your predicament. The possibility of slipping into a severe depression or worse, suicidal thoughts is heightened. And I know that there are some even here today where that is your reality. Christian author, CS Lewis gives some insight into the human condition when he says, "we try to be our own masters as if we had created ourselves. Then we hopelessly strive to invent some sort of happiness for ourselves outside of God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come human history, the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make us happy" It is a futile pursuit. Would you agree? Trying to find something/anything to fill a void that only God can fill in our lives is futile.

Here is the thing that is a little confusing for us as we consider the way that we think of this concept of hope. In our culture today, we tend to use the word hope when we are wishing for something to happen. It is almost an unsure optimism. I HOPE for a good mark on an exam. I HOPE for Canada to win the World Cup. I HOPE to win the lottery. Or I can

simply HOPE that tomorrow will be a better day, that things will improve,

This modern idea of hope is to "wish for", to expect but without certainty of the fulfillment. To desire very much but with no real assurance you are going to get what you want. We put our hope in ourselves, in our things or in circumstances and when they inevitably disappoint us we seemed surprised. Just think about that. Where do you put your hope? What are you hoping for today? On November 7, millions put their hope in financial freedom by purchasing tickets for a record US Powerball lottery jackpot of \$2.04 billion dollars despite facing 1 in 294 million odds. How does the way that you live each day, demonstrate where you put your hope?

In the Kingdom of God, Hope has a different nuance. It is not so much a "wish for" as it is an indication of certainty. Hope in the Bible means a strong and confident expectation. It isn't wishy-washy like it may be in our world. Look at two examples from Scripture. In the New Testament book of Hebrews, this idea of Hope is very much tied to faith.

Hebrews 11:1

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

Hebrews 6:18-19

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie.

Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.

In these two passages, the author of the book of Hebrews emphasises hope with certainty. Assurance in the future reality even if it can't be seen. According to the author of Hebrews, hope is life shaping and life anchoring. It's dependable and it means that we can live not to just hold on. Do you know that expression, *when you get to the end of your rope just tie a knot and hold on?* No! We are to live not just to persevere through the difficult moments of life but actually thrive because of the

certainty that Christ holds our future. That's hope, biblical hope.

It is the type of hope that gives our lives as followers of Jesus, meaning and purpose. In light of what God has done, specifically by sending his son Jesus to us and because of what God continues to do in our world and in our lives, each day brings new possibilities. Do you believe that? Jesus, the light of the world broke through the darkness and each day brings new possibilities. I love the way it is stated in the Old Testament even before Jesus was born.

Lamentations is an Old Testament book in the Bible said to be written in one of the most dismal and hopeless times in the history of the Israelite people. They were separated from God and wondered if He had forgotten them or even cared for them at all. In the midst of their lamenting and hopelessness, the author reminds them in,

Lamentations 3:19-23

*The thought of my suffering and
homelessness
is bitter beyond words.*

*I will never forget this awful time,
as I grieve over my loss.*

*Yet I still dare to hope
when I remember this:*

*The faithful love of the LORD never ends!
His mercies never cease.*

*Great is his faithfulness;
his mercies begin afresh each morning.*

Because of God's promises and His faithful love, there is hope! There is a future, there is a new day for you and for me. It doesn't mean that everything is always going to be rosy. It doesn't mean that you will never have feelings of doubt or despair but hope is seeing that because of Jesus, our lives have a purpose and meaning right here and right now. God is with us, Immanuel!

Do you see that in your life? One of the great inheritances that we have as children of God is hope. Hope, not in things or people or situations but in God and anchoring our lives to His promises.

Remember the examples I shared with you earlier about my meetings with many of you going through difficult circumstances in your relationships, with your health and your grief? God has used many of you to teach me about hope. Even in the midst of difficult circumstances I see many of you reaching to Jesus to get through trying times. I am humbled by the hope that many of you have demonstrated in dire circumstances. You have taught me a lot.

That is why this season of Advent which leads to Christmas is so important for us in our Christian tradition. We celebrate hope. We remember the longing of our ancestors for a Messiah who would come and save them. Who would come and free them from their sin that held them in bondage and God did the unimaginable, He came to earth Himself in the form of a baby. A baby born into a poor family, in an inconspicuous town off the beaten path in a dirty stable and this humble gesture set into motion the redemptive plan for all of humanity. The plan was Jesus. Listen to what it says in Romans 5.

Romans 5: 1-5

*Therefore, since we have been made right
in God's sight by faith, we have peace with
God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord
has done for us.*

*Because of our faith, Christ has brought us
into this place of undeserved privilege
where we now stand, and we confidently
and joyfully look forward to sharing God's
glory.*

*We can rejoice, too, when we run into
problems and trials, for we know that they
help us develop endurance. And endurance
develops strength of character, and
character strengthens our confident hope
of salvation. And this hope will not lead to
disappointment. For we know how dearly
God loves us, because he has given us the
Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

Biblical Hope is certain and sure because it is founded on faith in the factual content of the gospel. God loves us so much that He sent His son, Jesus to earth. A baby born in a manger. He grew to teach us to live and then take on our sins, and put them to death when He was buried in the ground. Then when Jesus was raised from the dead after three

days, it gave us the possibility of new life, hope! When we repent and believe and put our faith in Jesus. It is the “Great Exchange”. Jesus the greatest gift given to humanity and all we have to do is receive Him. Have you done that? Have you received Jesus.

Biblical hope becomes possible when there is belief in the living God who acts and intervenes in human life and can be trusted to keep his promises. Is that the hope that you have today? Again, it doesn't mean that you will have a perfect life with no problems, no worries or no doubts. God uses all of our circumstances to foster hope in us, when we turn to Him. Does that encourage you? Think of whatever is weighing you down today, whatever is causing you despair or anxiety. Can you surrender it to God right now and invite Him to turn it to hope?

Jesus is not an escape from our problems or from reality, nor does our faith leave us twiddling our thumbs waiting for the day when Jesus returns. It doesn't leave us sitting in the safety of a church building surrounded by people that all think and feel the same way as us. The hope of Christmas, Jesus calls us to action. He puts us into gear and beckons us to live, truly live on mission for Him. To go out into our world and love those that God puts in our path. In our schools, our workplace and our neighbourhood. Hope oozing out of our lives through words and actions. Is that hope alive in you today?

About a month ago, after a service here, I had a dear older couple come to the front and say hello to me. Although I have not seen them for a number of years, I recognized them instantly. They were Chris' parents. Let me tell you about Chris. I met Chris about twelve years ago when I was a pastor in Waterloo. The first time we got together, he shared his story with me. He was raised in a loving Christian home, but by the time he was 12, he stopped believing in God. He could find no logical reason for being a Christian. He still attended church with his family but in his own words, he did so deceptively. He left his hometown to attend university and by many accounts he was a genius, gifted in computer technology. Soon he was married with a wonderful wife, two children, lots of friends and a great job making good money.

At the age of 35 he was a self proclaimed atheist, convinced that God did not exist and he had no need

for Him in his life. He thought he had everything he needed and he was happy. In August 2010, when his life seemed to be going so well, Chris was diagnosed with a brain tumour. All that he had been putting his hope in, health, status, money, things came tumbling down and with much reflection (a diagnosis tends to do that to a person, causes them to reflect on their life and mortality) Chris began a journey back to God. He described it to me as only a computer genius could. He said, *it was like God rebooted my brain and gave me back the faith of an eight-year-old, child.* On February 27, 2011, I had the privilege of baptising Chris after he shared with our congregation his story of how he had exchanged the despair of a brain cancer diagnosis for the hope of Jesus. Chris believed that God was going to heal him and give him a long life to be an example of hope for others. Chris' health declined over the fall of that year however, and on November 15 he died at the age of 36.

A memorial celebration was held for him and the place was packed. Many people were impacted by Chris' life and his journey with brain cancer. He spent the last year of his life not lost in despair but instead, he told everyone he encountered about the hope that he had rediscovered in Jesus. I don't know why God didn't physically heal Chris? At the risk of giving a “pat” answer, if we think of our lives in the context of *this is all there is*, then 36 years, yeah, that is a rip off. But as followers of Jesus Christ, our hope extends beyond the *here and now*. God did save Chris and he has life eternal. He has no more pain, no more disease and God is continuing to use his life as an example of Hope even today, 11 years after he physically died because I just shared his story with you!

I don't know where this message of hope finds you today. Perhaps you are like me sometimes. You just soldier on despite the circumstances. You put your head down and plow through day after day, figuring that this is your lot in life if only you can endure it! Can I challenge that thinking? Because of Jesus, there is hope. We don't have to simply survive life. We can prosper and flourish because His spirit lives in us and we have a future. We have hope. His mercies are new every morning, great is the faithfulness of God.

In Isaiah 9 of the OT, it says this:

Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child is born to us,

a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His government and its peace

will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from

the throne of his ancestor David

for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the LORD of

Heaven's Armies

will make this happen!

This prophecy is of a child that was to be born centuries later. God incarnate. It was Jesus! And because Jesus, we have hope and a future. Whether you are lonely or fearful, hopeless or needy in our world today, you can have hope. Whether you are rich or poor, a sinner, an addict, you are persecuted or oppressed. You have hope because of Jesus. Jesus gives hope to you and to me and that hope lives in us to share with others.

Have you noticed? We are a world in desperate need of the hope. The hope of a Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is what we remember this advent season. That is what Christmas is all about. God broke through the heavens and came to earth. Light broke through the darkness and was born a baby in a manger. Born to save us all. Have you received the miracle of Christmas? Do you have the HOPE of Jesus in your life?

Points to Ponder

Advent - HOPE

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share some of the Christmas gift giving traditions you have established in your home. Why have these routines become so important to you and your family?
2. How does the idea of “The Great Exchange” go beyond just Jesus’ death for our sins? How does Jesus’ life, death and resurrection impact the way that we are to live our lives?
3. These days, what is robbing you from living the kind of abundant life that God always had in mind for you?
4. What is the significance of *hope* in your life? Think back over the last week. How does where you spent your time and money indicate where you look for *hope*?
5. What are some of the benefits that technology has brought to your life? In what ways have you experienced technology and social media negatively affecting your emotional and mental health? Explain.
6. Have you ever put your hope in someone/something and they/it, let you down? What did you learn through that experience?
7. Describe a time when your faith and hope in Jesus helped you overcome the despair of a difficult season of life. Where did you see God at work in that situation?
8. Explain the difference between biblical hope and worldly hope.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray that you would experience the hope of Jesus anew this Christmas season.