

**Psalm 80:1-7, 16-19 O.T. 511 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth <sup>2</sup>before Ephraim  
and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

<sup>3</sup>Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. <sup>4</sup>O  
LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's  
prayers? <sup>5</sup>You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them  
tears to drink in full measure. <sup>6</sup>You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.

<sup>7</sup>Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be  
saved.

...

<sup>16</sup>They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they  
perish at the rebuke of your countenance. <sup>17</sup>But let your hand be upon  
the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
<sup>18</sup>Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call  
on your name.

<sup>19</sup>Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may  
be saved.

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 O.T. Page 511**  
**“Restoring Hope”**

**Opening Prayer:** Please bow with me in prayer. O God, on this first Sunday in Advent, come among us, speak to us, and show us your light, for you are our hope and our salvation. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

**Introduction:** Today is this first Sunday in Advent and we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath which long standing tradition calls **the candle of “hope.”** Hope is that sense that allows us to keep on keeping on even when our circumstances seem bleak. **Hope is that proverbial light** at the end of the tunnel; not matter how distance; no matter how faint, no matter how weak. **Hope is that belief** that the tomorrow will be better than today. **Without hope**, everything becomes meaningless. Without hope, living gives way to despair. Without hope, evil snuffs out the light, and a world of darkness prevails.

**You wouldn’t normally think** of the imagineers of Disney Studios as being a source of a song that gives a glimpse into a world where darkness prevails, but they almost were. **There’s a song** that’s part of a deleted scene from Disney’s 2000 animate film “The Emperor’s New Groove” that’s sung by the villainess **Yzma**, as she laments the ravages of age, called, “*Snuff Out the Light.*” Let’s listen to that diabolical song’s climatic finale:

**{Play Video: “Snuff Out the Light Finale HD.mp4” [0:35]}**

Evil threatens to snuff out the light. “*Apparitions of eternal darkness spiraling in circles through the night. Creatures of beguiling blackness no more squinting in the light.*” Talk about a world of darkness, no wonder Disney deleted that scene. **Yes, the first candle of Advent is lit.** A light’s yet shining in the darkness, and the darkness has not, and will not, overcome it. **And that light** is our source of “Hope.”

**PAUSE**

**Move I.**

**Many people are leading lives devoid of hope.** Most days they just go through the motions. And when the weekend comes, all they want is to escape the misery, even if it's just for a moment. **Just a drink** to take the edge off, or two or three, or four or five or six. Just a little weed, or a few pills, or something else that provides a satisfying high. But you know what most people long for? **They long for a real relationship** with someone who understands them; someone who actually cares about them, someone who loves them just the way they are. And when that's missing from their life, **they feel hopeless.**

What you need to understand is this isn't just a matter of degrees. **Someone who's hopeless** isn't just someone who has a little less hope than someone who is hopeful. Hopeless and hopeful **aren't just opposite directions** on a scale of hope, they're polar opposites as different as north and south. **Hopeful and hopeless** are antonyms. To be hopeful is to be full of hope, but to be hopeless isn't just to have less hope, **it's to have no hope at all.** To be hopeless is to be totally devoid of hope.

**In their book**, "*Hope in the Age of Anxiety*" psychologist Anthony Scioli and Henry Biller describe three pure forms of hopelessness: **(1) alienation, (2) powerlessness, and (3) doom.** Let's look at each form in turn.

- **First "Alienation"**– **A person feels** isolated and cut off. They feel that no one deems them worthy of love, care, or support. Their response is to close themselves off to protect themselves from further pain and rejection.
- **Next "Powerlessness"**– **A person feels** they can't write the story of their own life and therefore they're no longer capable of navigating their own way toward desired goals. They are incapable of doing anything to better their own situation.

- **And finally, “Doom”– A person feels** that their life is over, and that death is imminent. They feel their situation is irreversible, incurable, and unescapable. They’re trapped in the downward spiral of decline.

**So, to be hopeless** is to be alienated, powerless, and doomed. Hopelessness is a truly desperate state. But true hopeless isn’t just a psychological condition, **it’s a spiritual condition**. To borrow the words of the Apostle Paul, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** (Romans 7:24, NRSV). That’s the primal cry of hopelessness.

**Hopelessness describes** the situation among the people of Israel in our Bible lesson today. Israel feels cut off. **They feel alienated** from God. **Israel feels powerless**, nothing they can do will make anything better. **And Israel feels doomed**, their enemies are getting the best of them? Who will rescue them?

**Three stories** have dominated the news this year. **The global pandemic** that has sickbed and killed millions and disrupted everyone’s lives. **The death of George Floyd** that sparked protest and outright riots across the country and even right here in Erie. **And finally, the most divisive and mean-spirited presidential election cycle** in any of our memories. This has led to a widespread feeling of hopelessness. **People are feeling alienated** from each other. Maskers from anti-maskers. Black from white. Democrat from Republican. **People are feeling powerless**, to make our situation better. We can’t stop the virus. We can’t stop racism. We can’t find any uniting common ground. **And People are feeling doomed**. Doomed to watch COVID claim more livelihoods and lives. Doomed to suffer from racism. Doomed to endure unending partisan spin. **Who will rescue us** from our pending death? The apocalypse feels so very near. **Yes, many people are leading lives devoid of hope.**

**End I.**

**Move II.**

**So, Christ comes to restore hope.** Advent is that four-week period leading up to Christmas where we remind ourselves why Christmas is so important. Without Christ's coming, **hopelessness** would abound and **Yzma's desire** would rule the day. **The light would be snuffed out** and people would be dancing as they watch the dying sunlight fade as hopelessness takes center stage.

**In the ancient story of Job** from the Old Testament, one of Job's so-called friends named Bildad speaks of what it would be like if Yzma's desires were to come true. **In Job 18:5 (NRSV)** Bildad says, **“Surely the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of their fire does not shine.”** Can't you hear the Yzma and the Egyptian mummies belting out the refrain, ***“Snuff out the light, claim your right to a world of darkness!”*** Later in his same discourse Bildad goes on to say, **“The wicked are thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world”** (Job 18:18, NRSV). But Advent is a time that says now hold on there, not so fast. **The light might be faint**, it might look pretty dim, but it hasn't gone out. The smoldering ember can yet be fanned **back into a raging fire**. That's what messianic hope is all about. Evil people may long to snuff out the light and claim their supposed right to a world of darkness, but God isn't going to let them have their way. **The Messiah**, which of course is just the Hebrew word for the Christ, has come and is coming again to chase away the darkness. **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”** (John 1:5, NIV). Yes, some have tried to snuff out the light, and some are still trying today. **“Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”** (John 3:19, NIV).

Have you noticed that a lot of evil tends to happen under cover of darkness? **This past summer most of the rioting and looting** happened under cover of darkness. People love darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil.

**Like many people**, while I abhor police brutality, I don't understand how violent protests and rioting helps make anything better. Obviously, different people see this differently. **I could see this** in the sharp contrast between my progressive and my conservative friends' posts of Facebook. How do you sort through all of rhetoric, posturing, and hidden agendas to get at the truth? I for one don't feel smart enough, or informed enough, to make it all make sense.

**A half-dozen years ago, back after the riots after the grand jury decision was handed in Ferguson, Missouri**, I remember a Facebook post by a very unlikely source that rang truer than anything else I've read since. **The post was by Benjamin Watson**; a now retired professional football player who at that time was a tight end for the New Orleans' Saints. **I've included Watson's whole post** as an insert in your bulletin so you can read it in its entirety. **Watson starts by saying**, *"At some point while I was playing or preparing to play Monday Night Football, the news broke about the Ferguson Decision. After trying to figure out how I felt, I decided to write it down. Here are my thoughts."* Watson goes on to lay out the entire range of emotions that that event seemed to bring out in everyone.

Most people think of football players as dumb jocks, but Watson shatters that stereotype too. After running through his whole range of emotions from feeling angry, embarrassed, frustrated, and confused; **Watson runs through** being both **hopeless** and hopeful and ends by saying he's encouraged. *"I'm encouraged, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it's a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we're racist, prejudiced, and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot, and burn. But I'm encouraged because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus. I'm encouraged because the Gospel gives mankind hope."* **So yes, Christ does come to restore hope.**

**End II.**

**Move III.**

**And our hope transcends our circumstances.** In fact, that's the sure sign that your hope is based on something worthwhile. If changing circumstances end up dashing your hopes, then you've placed your hope in the wrong things. You need a hope that's not subject to shifting prospects. **And as Christians** the ultimate source of all of our hope is Christ. As the Apostle Paul says, **"We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"** (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV). Worldly hopes based on wealth, or status, or fame, are all so fleeting. One moment you're riding high, and the next moment you're brought low. But a hope placed in God is solid as a rock. **God's unchangeable, God's unshakable, God's unstoppable;** that's what God is. **And a faith based on God** can withstand whatever opposition life throws in its way.

**Gilbert Keith Chesterton** was an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century English writer and armchair theologian. Just by looking at his picture you can tell he was a real character. In his day he was best known as being the **"Prince of Paradox."** Chesterton could hold two opposing ideas together, especially if he knew that together they were far truer than they could ever be apart.

**In a book called *Heretics*** published in 1905, Chesterton wrote, **"Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate."** That's the kind of hope **the Apostle Paul** is talking about when he says he **"has learned to be content whatever the circumstances"** (Philippians 4:11, NIV). You can only do that with a paradoxical kind of hope. A hope placed beyond all worldly circumstances. **Its thinking like this** that made Chesterton an armchair theologian.

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As I was reading about G. K. Chesterton, I ran across another quote that seems very fitting to our circumstances here in America today. **This is a quote** from an article Chesterton wrote about British politics that the *Illustrated London News* published in 1924. ***“The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected.”*** Personally, I abhor political labels. I find that they do nothing to bring about the **unity we are to all be seeking in Christ**. Our hope isn't found in ourselves and our individual ideals. Our hope is found in God, and in Jesus the Christ, God's means of salvation.

**The key verse** at the heart of our Bible lesson today is **Psalm 100:3 (NRSV)**, **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine on us, that we may be saved.”** Jesus Christ is the light of God come into the world (John 12:46). **To come face-to-face** with Christ is to come face-to-face with God. **Advent reminds us** that the Christ has come and he's coming again.

On this first week of Advent we remember that Christ comes **“Restoring Hope.”** Not a fleeting hope like the hopes of this world, but the paradoxical hope that can only come from God. Turmoil and strife consume much of the world. Trying circumstances have become the norm. **And yet our hope truly transcends our circumstances.**

**End III.**



**Conclusion:** Yzma wants you to “*Snuff out the light and claim your right to a world of darkness.*” **Yes, many people are leading lives devoid of hope.** Many are feeling alienated, powerless, and doomed. They’re lost in an unending state of hopelessness. **So, Christ comes to restore hope.** The light might be faint; it might look pretty dim, but it hasn’t gone out. The smoldering ember can yet be fanned back into a raging fire. That’s our messianic hope. **And our hope truly transcends our circumstances.** We can be cheerful in circumstances we know are desperate. That’s the paradox of our hope. We can face whatever life throws in our way, because we know Christ is “*Restoring Hope.*” “*Our hope is in you Lord, it’s in you.*”

{**Play Audio: “*Restoration Clip.mp3*” [0:12]}**}

**Closing Prayer:** Let’s pray. O God in a world full of turmoil and strife, you bring restoration to our souls. On this first Sunday in Advent, we thank you for “*Restoring our Hope.*” **Amen!**

**10:30 Closing Hymn: “*My Hope is Built*” Red Hymnal No. 368**

All Four Verses

**Sending Forth:** Are you feeling alienated, powerless, and doomed? Is a sense of hopelessness flooding your soul? The let Jesus bring restoration to your soul. Go forth filled with hope because Jesus has come and he’s coming again. **And all of God’s people said. Amen!**