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“A Season of Hope” Advent Sermon Series, Week 1

“The Reasonableness of Hope”

Intro/Tie-in to Intermountain:

They sat to the edge of the parent training session looking tired—tired emotionally, spiritually, and certainly physically. The frustration, despair, and anger at their struggle had frayed their last nerve and any sense of pretense. This was not a PTO or school fundraiser where parents huddle to brag on their kids and swap harmless parenting war-stories. Each parent here knew that despite their differences, they all shared something in common. All other options and attempted remedies—hopes to repair the brokenness in their hearts and homes and the trouble they had connecting to their children—had failed. So, with an honesty that bore out the longing and hurt of a parent that cares deeply for their child, these parents voiced what many of us know is every parent’s hope...

“I just want to know that my son is going to be okay. It can’t stay like this.”

Intermountain’s residential services proudly professes to be in the business of “restoring hope to children.” In that quest to help as many hurting children as they can, they are also able to restore hope to many parents that their children will, in fact, be okay.

This hope can be elusive. Hope can tease us, open us up to greater hurt and vulnerability. Hope, as the character Red in Stephen King’s “Shawshank Redemption” said, “can be a dangerous thing.” Hope is fraught with danger when it feels that time and time again your hopes have been dashed. Your dreams are unmet. Some deep need is unfulfilled. In these circumstances, hope may seem a dangerous thing.

Transition:

Consider the situation of the nation of Israel under the Roman occupation. The hope of a messiah had grown so dim, there seemed a better opportunity for hope in the occasional outbursts of insurrection and defiance. Many messiahs had come and gone, zealous for God, for freedom, perhaps for self-aggrandizement. Each time, the Romans had come down hard and with little mercy. In this unlikely setting, a glimmer of hope comes in promise of a child.

Our situation, personally or collectively, may seem hopeless. So, as we start a season of hope, it may be best to consider the reasonableness of hope. Why should we bother with hope? What makes hope worth it? If there is the possibility of being disappointed or let down, is it not more reasonable to keep a pessimistic attitude, cynical of the future and any prospects of things being better than they are now?





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We will look at four arguments for the reasonableness of hope this morning, but ultimately, hope is an expression of faith. Hope is not possible without faith... faith that things can get better.

1. Human experience calls for hope.

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

“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. ² 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.

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁵ 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.” (Romans 5:1-5, NLT)

Certainly, this life gives us our share of disappointment. But if you think about disappointment, it comes from an expectation. Expectation of something better. A hope that things would be right, just, fair, or favorable. Every disappointment is a testament to the need for hope. Hope is reasonable or unreasonable depending on what it rests upon.

2. Historical and universal expressions of hope are arguments for it

a. Even the idea that other religious systems have of a cessation of existence (nirvana) is an expression of hope.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the suffering of this life and the disappointment of unmet hopes and dreams is explained as part of the cycle of life trapped by the illusion of reality. Once we become enlightened to the true nature of the universe, we are released from the illusion that what we think is real is going to bring us happiness or fulfillment. Nirvana, which means “to snuff out” or “to extinguish,” brings with it a meaning of a flame which burns and is put out. This flame symbolizes our existence, and when it is put out we cease to be individualized, and become connected to everything. Our consciousness is absorbed into a greater reality. This is the hope of the great Eastern religions. While stated imperfectly, as any quick summary of a spiritual system, this is a good start to understanding what is at the core of Hinduism and Buddhism.

We have all been at a point where we, in the words of the Southwest Airlines commercial, “just wanna get away.” We’d like to escape our present situation, that might seem hopeless, and just be done with it. Now, we





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might not go to the extreme of thinking all of our pain and suffering is connected to our unwillingness to see that everything is an illusion. But, we can understand the appeal, perhaps, of those religious teachings.

- b. Pre-history burial mounds, tombs of the Pharaohs, the Terra Cotta warriors of Xian... all of these are expressions of hope beyond this current life and purpose in this life.

Building large pyramids or monuments seem a thing of a bygone era, but how different are the large foundations and charitable trusts that the wealthy and influential set up nowadays?

The concept is the same... we want to secure our legacy, that we will be remembered after our deaths.

Illustration: Cryonics

Some have even gone as far as documenting their DNA or cryogenically saving their bodies in case science and medicine get to the point of being able to extend our lives past this present life. There are numerous services available from freezing your head to your whole body. For \$10,000 to \$200,000. there is an option for just about anyone.¹ It is the modern version of Egypt's mummies. Both are evidence of a hope in either science or the supernatural, a hope that life extends beyond this existence.

3. The unfinished nature of life suggests the necessity of hope

Not just the finality of death, but the "is this all there is?" feeling while living the everyday life. This sense of a need for meaning or purposefulness to life has spawned any number of worldly remedies. Self-help books and seminars that promise "a better you" cash in on this craving.

Illustration #1:

Ozymandias² by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I MET a Traveler from an antique land,
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,

¹ <http://cryonics.org/comparisons.html>

² Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Roger Ingpen & Walter E. Peck eds. New York: Gordian Press, 1965.





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Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is OZYMANDIAS, King of Kings."
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Shelley's poem first appeared in the London Examiner in 1818. Not much has changed since then. We see the ruins of the past, those monuments constructed to great people and great nations. Emblazoned with boasts and claims to immortality, those they were built for fade from our consciousness. We can make similar efforts to impress a memory of our presence upon the world, but it is ultimately meaningless unless our lives are invested in those things that have eternal value: God, God's Word, and the souls of men and women. Each of these treasures are accessed through relationship.

4. Meaningfulness in life is dependent on hope

The self-help books, seminars, and personal quests for self-actualization or achievement fall short of the meaningfulness we seek as creatures made in God's image. We are made for whatever we can achieve and accomplish in our short lifespans.

"God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end." Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NLT)

Our perspective, limited as it is by our own lifespan, cannot always make sense of the pain, hurt, and seemingly hopeless nature of our world. From the depths of our being, we long for something more. We long for a relationship with something lasting—something eternal. We long for assurance—not in something, but in some One. One who is worthy of our trust and is true to their promise that things will get better.

We hope, ultimately, because we believe in this someone. We believe in God through this faith. Not in someone or something we can prove, and often in spite of the evidence that stares us in the face. We hope and trust, not only because it is a better option than





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despair or meaninglessness, but because we have experienced the miraculous through the small hopes met through the relationships we have built.

Conclusion/Intermountain tie-in:

It's why Intermountain can boldly proclaim a promise of restoring hope to children. Intermountain has been part of the small miracles of turning despair into hopefulness for families and children for over a hundred years. It's through the hard work of relationships and investing love and grace over and over into a situation where these things seemed to have failed. God works through the brokenness and wisdom of those who seeking to bring healing to children and families and restores hope through a compassionate understanding of the struggle to hold on to hope.

Conclusion:

As we enter a season of hope, we remember the reasonableness of hope that comes through Jesus Christ. Born in humility, Jesus reaches out to us offering hope. Hope of a relationship with God that is renewed and whole, making possible whole and healthy relationships with one another. Through this relationship we have the reasonable expectation that things will be even better than okay. We can entrust our hearts, our lives, our hopes and our dreams to a God who loved us enough to send his Son to us at Christmas time. This truly is a season of hope.

[prayer]





A Season of Hope Advent Series, Week 2

“Hope and Christ’s Coming”

(Note: the imagery of a play may help your listeners to tie the various aspects of God’s plan for sending Jesus and the eventual return of Jesus together. I have suggested hints at how you can weave that through the sermon. If you feel it is too cumbersome, or you think of a better analogy... well, you certainly won’t hurt my feelings! –Chris.)

- A. Setting The Stage: God is active within Israel’s history and religious practice
- a. Always defined by relationship (“I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” Exodus 3:1-6 ; John 8:48-59; Acts 3:13-20)

The relational nature of God is seen before there even is a Creation to relate to! God the Father-Son-Spirit were in perfect relationship with one another prior to Genesis 1. The Trinity is based in loving, reciprocal relationships. This background serves at the “setting/stage” on which the “play” is performed

- b. Jesus’ birth was first for Israel and then the whole world (Isaiah 49; Romans 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:19)

The story starts small and builds... there is considerable foreshadowing (interesting way to think of Biblical prophesy!) about the universal implications of this seemingly insignificant birth in little Bethlehem.

- c. Jesus’ incarnation (God becoming flesh) fulfilled and surpassed all of Israel’s hope
 - i. Salvation from situational stress (Ps 118:8-14)

This is primarily how you will see “salvation” demonstrated in the Old Testament. The people of God back themselves into a corner (sometimes literally... think about Pharaoh’s army bearing down on the nation at the edge of the Red Sea!) and God shows up in power to rescue them. While salvation for an outward threat is helpful, it is never permanent. There is always the inner taint of sin that spoils any sense of “resting” in the promised land.

- ii. Salvation from sin (Romans 1:16; Hebrews 9:27-28)

It is clear from the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees and Leaders of the Law that Jesus’ claims to forgive sin were particularly offensive, and wholly unexpected from their view of what the messiah would be (Matthew 9:1-8). Jesus, on the other hand, viewed this as the primary reason he had





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come and the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; Matthew 18:11).

B. Act One: God stepped into and became a participant in world history

Before the incarnation, God DID make his presence known, but it took the shape of storms of earthquakes, fire from heaven, pillars of fire by night and cloud by day... etc. In Jesus' birth, God became flesh... Jesus is our "God with skin on"

a. The Word of God incarnate (John 1:14)

A "word" spoken is many things... often powerful. A word can convey a myriad of emotions. As amazing as a word may be, it is only when it takes shape through letters on a page, through the actions the word suggests, or someone or expresses the word in art... only when the Word "takes flesh" that it can be fully known and experienced.

b. Image of the Invisible God (Col. 1:15) through whom God is fully known (Col. 1:19)

Jesus is more than just a reflection of God or a piece of God... in Jesus we get the "full picture."

c. Jesus is an "exact representation" of God and God's nature (Heb. 1:3)

In Jesus we see the full reflection of God's divine attributes. As we read the pages of Scripture we can see Jesus reflected throughout God's Word.

C. Act Two: We understand Jesus' second coming in light of his first coming

a. The "unfulfilled" elements of the reign of God will only be known after Christ's second coming (Acts 1:6-11; Hebrews 9:28)

The images of a conquering messiah in the Old Testament weren't wrong... they just weren't fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus. We have pictures, even in the New Testament, of a much different "side" of the messiah that will come to once and for all judge sin and death.

b. Between "advents" of Jesus, we live an "already, not yet" realization of salvation (Romans 8:18-25)

Just like there is an apparent "disconnect" between some of the images of the messiah in the Old Testament and what has been realized in "Act One," there are aspects of our salvation that will not be complete until Jesus comes again ("Act Two"). In this "in between" time, we rely on the grace of God because we still live as imperfect people in an imperfect and fallen world!

Intermountain tie-in: God is a God of grace... we never live up to God's perfect standard, so we depend on grace. Likewise, Intermountain coaches parents to adopt the "good enough" parent mentality and see themselves as capable parents that can meet the needs of their children (like "foster parent" ad campaign)





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A Season of Hope Advent Series, Week 3

“Hope and the Kingdom of God”

What the Kingdom of God is not...

- A. Another earthly kingdom
 - a. Jesus “passed” on Satan’s temptation to rule the world now. The first advent was not about ushering in an earthly kingdom (Matthew 4; Luke 4)
 - b. Jesus had even his own cousin, John the Baptist, confused! (Matthew 11:2-6)
 - c. Judas’ betray may have been motivated by confusing Jesus’ purpose, and certainly Pilate could not make sense of Jesus’ statement, “My kingdom is not of this world...”
- B. A Kingdom that the people of God build for God
 - a. Constantine and the “Holy Roman Empire” and our nation’s aversion to blending the roles of church and state, especially in leadership and governance
 - b. Even Protestants had a go at forming the “Christian Community” with mixed results—Calvin in 16th Century Geneva, for example
 - c. What of the experiments of the American colonies and discussion of “The Kingdom of God in America” championed by The Christian Century (which faded after WWII)
- C. Something God creates for us based on our wishes and dreams
 - a. It is NOT about us... a Kingdom is about the King
 - b. “of God”—the thing that makes the Kingdom unique is God’s presence, God’s heart/will

Intermountain tie-in #1: What they need, not what they wish for

Children who come to Intermountain need to let go of what was once necessary for survival (a child’s reasonable responses to abnormal situations) in order to make true connection with others. Asking a child to set aside what has become habitual and necessary is a difficult process. This is like asking a person who feels they were shoved out of a plane at 15,000 feet that they need to let go of the umbrella they hope will help their descent so that we can hand them a parachute! Somehow, they might believe that you are trying to help. By some miracle they could believe that the parachute is really a better way to go than the umbrella. But ***everything else within them***—that which is at the core of the impulse-response/brain chemistry and the relational patterns built through dysfunction—tells them to cling as tightly to the umbrella as they can and to fight anyone that would ask them to let go. What the staff at Intermountain does is lovingly bring the children through that time of struggle until they learn the trust they need to have in new skills and new ways of being that will allow them to have healthy, happy relationships in the future.





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What the Kingdom of God is...

- A. More about the person in charge than what the person possesses (Reign VS Realm)
 - a. It's RELATIONAL. Jeremiah 30:22—"So you will be my people, and I will be your God"
 - b. In this Kingdom, the subjects accept the sovereignty of God, rather than having that rule enforced or lorded over him.
 - c. The members of God's Kingdom transfer their loyalty from sin/death to right-living/life
- B. A present reality to be lived in the "now"
 - a. We are given authority over spiritual darkness because of our connection to Jesus (Luke 11:20; Acts 19:13-20)
 - b. Jesus spoke of the "seed" form of the Kingdom present now and growing every day (Mark 4:26-32; Matthew 13:3-9; Matthew 13:24-30)
- C. Not yet completely known or experienced
 - a. "Thy Kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10)
 - b. The promise of this Kingdom rests on God's initiation and faithfulness to bring it about (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Intermountain tie-in #2: Katie's on the way to "becoming a real girl"

Katie was a young lady that came from a sexually abusive background. She had been used by those from whom she should have received love. Katie's sense of intimacy had been warped by her experience and as staff grew attached to her, she had ways of eliciting very strong emotions, not all of which were positive. Through persistent work and careful boundaries, cottage staff were able to bring Katie to a place where Dr. Liz Kohlstadt, Intermountain's chief clinical officer, remarked: "Good work, team! Katie is on the way to becoming a real girl!" What did Dr. Liz mean by that? Well, for the first time since Katie's abuse, she was able to laugh honestly, play openly, and relate to others passionately but purely—without the sexual overtones. Has she arrived at complete healing from her deep woundedness? Of course not! But, Katie is on her way.





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A Season of Hope Advent Series, Week 4

“Hope in Jesus is a ‘forever’-hope”

- A. Hope in Jesus is “forever”-hope because of who Jesus is
 - a. Jesus is God, the Word made flesh (John 1:14)
 - b. Jesus is the perfect representation of God in human form (Colossians 1:15)
- B. Hope in Jesus is “forever”-hope because of the salvation he brings
 - a. Jesus brings new birth through the Spirit (John 3:3)
 - b. We become new creations through him who spoke creation into existence (2 Cor. 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Colossians 1:16; John 1:3)
 - c. Our hope is secure because our salvation is dependent on Jesus, not on our works (Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Peter 1:9)
- C. Hope in Jesus is “forever”-hope because God’s desire for us is good.
 - a. Creation was good (Genesis 1:2)
 - b. The new heavens and earth will restore God’s original purpose (Rev. 21:1-6)
 - c. Hope is our proof (Hebrews 11:1) that we are on the way to the fullness of our redemption (Romans 8:18-25)

Intermountain-based illustration: Little victories

Hope is a big word around Intermountain. Their tag line is: “Restoring hope for children.” Along the way to the more hopeful future is a great deal of the “groaning” Paul speaks of in Romans, Chapter Eight. On the road to redeeming hearts, minds, and souls from the hurt of the past and the dysfunction of the present there are enough little victories to keep hope in sight. Derek was a young man who came to Intermountain depressed, sullen, and aloof. It was like pulling teeth to get any sort of response from him. One day, however, the chaplain brought by some Legos for the cottage he was in. From the corner of the room where he sat, Derek peeked out from his black hoodie to see what was going on. The younger children remarked at how well Derek built Lego creations, and with a little encouragement, Derek was able to lead the younger children of his cottage in building the Lego sets. In that moment Derek emerged from the darkness of his depression into the light of potential leadership based on a positive sense of self-worth. He had something to give others. He saw a ray of hope that broke through his present circumstance and promised a brighter future.





A Season of Hope Advent Series, Christmas Eve Message

“Child of Hope, Child of Promise”

- A. God’s nature as a promise-keeper (covenanting) is a strong basis for hope
 - a. Litany of biblical examples starting in the Garden (promise of a Redeemer that would strike the serpent’s head), protection for Noah and his family through the flood to the promise-sealing rainbow, of continuing blessing through the offspring of Abram/Abraham, and so on
 - b. Personal stories of God’s promise-keeping
 - i. [insert story of your own experience, or that of a congregant]
 - ii. Intermountain example: Elena’s story [<http://vimeo.com/69974348>]
 - c. Coming of Jesus to “save his people from their sins” [Matthew 1:21]
 - d. Jesus HAS come, has ascended, but is promised to come again... and the fulfillment of that promise comes with great hope in the future and assurance in the present [John 14:3— “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”]
- B. The Child of Hope helps us see past our hurt, present circumstance
 - a. The reality of Jesus’ presence in our lives “is more than just fulfillment of a promise, vindication... it is affirmation that hope is the basic character of human existence” (Morris Ashcraft, “The Christian’s Hope” in *The Layman’s Library of Christian Doctrine*. Broadman Press: Nashville, TN. 1988. p. 145)
 - b. Hope allows us to see past our hurt, and with perseverance to our redemption [Romans 5:1-5]
- C. The Child of Hope promises rest
 - a. The Sabbath Rest intended for all Creation, but especially needful for humankind [Genesis 2:2-3]
 - b. Only in Jesus can the mind/body/soul find true ceasing from labors and the laboriousness of life in general [Hebrews 3:11,18; Hebrews 4:1,3,8-10]
- D. The Child of Hope Promises Victory
 - a. Through Jesus we have victory over this world [1 Corinthians 15:57]
 - b. Because we know the Child of Hope, we have a testimony that overcomes our present struggles [Revelation 12:11; see also Jesus’ message to the disciples in John 16:33... right after delivering some very difficult news, he tells them that this is “so you will have peace.” Therefore, peace is not the absence of the storm, but the ability to make it through the storm in a peaceful condition!]





Christmas morning, December 25, 2013

“To Us a Child of Hope is Born”

This short message is based on the lyrics to Rev. John Morrison’s Christmas carol by the same name. The music is printed below, for your use if you so choose.

To Us a Child of Hope Is Born

*Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Isa. 9:6*

1. To us a Child of hope is born, To us a Son is giv'n, Him shall the tribes of earth o-bey,
2. His name shall be the Prince of Peace, For - ev - er-more a - dored, The Won-der - ful, the Coun-sel - or,
3. His pow'r, in-creas-ing, still shall spread, His reign no end shall know; Jus - tice shall guard His throne a-bove,

Him all the hosts of Heav'n; Him shall the tribes of earth o-bey, Him all the hosts of Heav'n.
The great and might - y Lord; The Won-der - ful, the Coun-sel - or, The great and might - y Lord.
And peace a - bound be - low; Jus - tice shall guard His throne a-bove, And peace a - bound be - low.

WORDS: John Morrison, 1781. MUSIC: "Zerah"; Lowell Mason, 1837. Public Domain.

Introduction: welcome to Christmas morning service, quick summary of messages from our Advent series, “A Season of Hope.”

From week 1: We spoke of the reasonableness of Hope, and how ultimately hope

doesn't come to us through a book or technique or message. Hope most often comes to us through a relationship.





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From week 2: We turned our hearts and minds toward the work of God throughout history among those known as the people of God. We saw how the relationship between God and man gave the world Hope, and how this hope crescendos towards the promise of a Savior, the Messiah.

From week 3: We saw the connection between the coming Child of Hope and the Kingdom of God. We also saw how we need to be constantly reminded of how God's Kingdom differs from the kingdoms of this world.

From week 4: Our series "Seasons of Hope" continued as we looked at how Hope in Jesus is a "forever-kind-of-hope" that brings new life out from the darkness of shattered dreams and hopes that rested upon those things other than God.

And, just the other night, on Christmas Eve: We saw the hope that we have in Jesus resting in the character of God as a promise-keeping, loving God. In this hope we find our rest and we look to the promised victory as we trust in the One who both created this world, and has overcome the world and the grave.

Transition: (sing the Hymn, *To Us a Child of Hope is Born*, as a congregation)

Point 1/Verse 1: The Child of Hope is born, and all the tribes of earth will obey the Son of God.

- A. "Every knee will bow, and every tongue confess..." (Phil 2:10)
- B. Proper response: willing obedience (from the popular Hillsong chorus: *Come, Now is the Time to Worship*—"One day every tongue will confess, one day every knee will bow. Still, the greatest treasure remains for those who choose you now.")

Point 2/Verse 2: The Child of Hope is born, a Prince of Peace, Wonderful, Counselor

- A. "He shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God" (from Isaiah 9:6)
- B. Proper response: to rest from our frantic labors, to listen. Many voices assail us, but only One is worth listening to!





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Point 3/Verse 3: The Child of Hope is born, and with His reign comes justice and peace

- A. "The government shall be upon his shoulder... The prince of Peace" (from Isaiah 9:6)
- B. Proper response: Recognize the connection between God's rule, God's justice, and peace. Commit to be the "peace-makers" Jesus said were blessed to be known as "children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Prayer:

"Holy God, the Almighty who humbled himself to be known to us as the tiny baby of Bethlehem. You are here among us, Immanuel. May we have hearts to obey you, minds stilled in the knowledge of your care for us, and hands ready for your service as peace makers in the great kingdom of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen."

