

HOPE

Week #1 of a 4-Week Series, "The Four Gifts of Christmas"

Dec. 1, 2021

Rev. Richard Rogers

Rev. Richard Rogers: What are some of the big promises that you've made in your life? Maybe to your spouse. Maybe to your kids. I want you to think about the big promises that you've made in your life. And the times when, maybe, it's tough to live into those promises: to fulfill those promises. And how have you, in your own life, done that? Have you ...? You know, where's the times when maybe you've missed it, and you didn't really live into that promise as much as you wanted to? Or maybe the times when you just: you nailed it. You just, you lived it. You fulfilled it. It was done! Right?

Because tonight I want to talk about the promises that God has made to your soul. And the context for this is: when we celebrate Advent ... Oh, I forgot to light the candle! Well, I'll go over there and light it in a minute. **[Whispers]:** You've got to help me! **[Congregation laughs]** It's a group project; you've got to help me! **[Congregation laughs]** Right?

There are these four Advent qualities. And, for the life of me, I've always wondered: why these four? Like, why? What is it about these four spiritual qualities that, every time when it comes to the Christmas season, we go back to these four qualities?

Like, you know, I've been a minister for a long time. I mean, I can't tell you how many talks I've done about these four qualities of Advent. Right? And, over the last couple of years, it's been, like: why? You know, and I realized that Advent started ... I mean, it is old! I mean, it's ... It's 1800 years old! I mean, Advent has been around for a long time! The early church celebrated Advent.

But why these four qualities? And I took it into prayer. Right? And, as I took it into prayer, what I got -- the message that Spirit had for me -- is that these four qualities are the promises of living your spiritual life. These four qualities are what we achieve through living our spiritual life. And it made all the difference in the world to me!

Because I want to know -- as I live my spiritual life year after year in greater and greater ways; as I do my spiritual work; as I practice spiritual principles ... I want to know -- kind of from a selfish point of view -- what's in it for me? Like, what do I get? Like, what's the reward? Some people talk about enlightenment; some people take about the hereafter. But what's the reward?

And I really felt Spirit saying to me: "*You get hope. You get peace. You get love. And you get joy.*" And I realized that these four spiritual qualities are the promise that God makes to all of us.

And so tonight we light the first candle for the spiritual quality of HOPE. **[Lights the Advent candle that symbolizes Hope]** And as I light this outer candle, I want you to think about the times and the places in your life where you've given up on hope. Maybe the places in your life where you felt knocked down or beat up. Like, you've given up: you've given up on life. You've given up on the possibilities. You've given up on the idea that it could ever be better than that.

And tonight, we light this candle for HOPE for all of us, who -- in some place, some aspect of our life -- have given up. Where we've been knocked down and, in some way, we stayed down. Because what hope does is: as we light this candle for hope, it gets us back up. It gets us back -- on our darkest, hardest day -- back up to the game. To the possibility.

And what God has promised all of us is that we can live with hope. In fact, that it's a requirement! That we can't live a bigger life without hope. Because the moment hope dies, our life starts getting smaller. It gets scarier. It gets darker. It gets uglier. But when we light the candle for hope, possibilities begin to reveal themselves again. Things that just a moment ago didn't seem possible now become possible.

So I want you to close your eyes for a minute. And I want you to see yourself lighting your own inner candle for hope in the place where you need hope the most in your life. And I want you to light the candle, and to see that -- within your soul -- that hope lives. That that part of us that gets jaded and small and ugly just thinks, "*Don't bother. There's no hope here. There's no possibility here.*" And yet, tonight, we light the candle for hope to affirm for ourselves and for the world that, with God, there is always room for hope. Hope for a bigger possibility. Hope for a bigger life. Hope for a greater day. Hope for more love and joy and peace and abundance. And hope is the promise. God is telling your soul right now that it's okay to hope. That every desire -- every promise -- will be fulfilled. Maybe not in the way you think it will be, but it will be fulfilled. Tonight I stand for hope. And so it is. Amen.

See, what happens with hope is that: the companion quality to hope is desire. And usually when we think and talk about desire, we actually kind of feel like it's our desire for life, for ... You know, sometimes, maybe sometimes -- out of our ego or out of our neediness or out of our wanting -- that we have these desires.

But one of the things that I love about the key word "desire" is: desire from its root word means "of the Father." That every true desire -- every great desire that we have -- is God's desire for us. And then these desires that God places in our heart and our soul ... You know, we actually have to have the ability, through hope, to hold them.

Because God could want to give you everything. But the moment you believe that there's no hope for that desire, that desire is dismissed from your life. Because to entertain any of the desires of God, we have to open a space for hope that there's a way that God could actually bring that. That we could actually create that in our life. That hope and desire need to walk hand in hand.

Now, for some of us, hope seems so wimpy. Right? Right? **[Speaks weakly]:** "*I hope.*" **[Congregation laughs]** You know? **[Laughs]** You know, most of my life, I have been a hard "type A" personality. Right? So, if you're a hard "type A" personality, you don't spend a lot of time sitting around hoping. That's just not what you do! Right? You spend a lot of time making stuff happen. Right? Because that's what "type A" personalities do! We feel better when we're in control. We feel safer when we're making stuff happen. And we are ... The more control we have, the bigger the smile on our face. Right?

So the idea that you're just going to sit around and hope for something, it's like, "*Please! Get out of my way! I've got things to do!*" Right? But that's not what hope is at all! Hope is saying, "Yes!" to the desires of God.

In fact, let me read this statement on faith from Hebrews 11: "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.*"

[Phone rings somewhere in the congregation] See? God is calling us! Right on that note! **[Congregation laughs]** Right?

So faith is the assurance of things hoped for! But faith doesn't work if you don't have a hope in your heart for a greater day. Hope is the act of believing when you don't know how it's going to work.

Now let me tell you a story about myself. I think everybody in the world knows that we now have two dogs and two cats. And our dogs are **[laughs]** Knucklehead #1 and Knucklehead #2. **[Congregation laughs]** They are now 15 months. And we decided to give the Christmas tree experience another opportunity this year. **[Congregation laughs]**

Last year we put up a tree after much debate, but we refused anything on it, because it was ... We just did not have hope. Right? This year we decided to put two-thirds of our tree up: like, the top two sections. Right? And that we were ... They're now obedient enough that they kind of understand the

family rules. And we're optimistic, even if the cats get in the tree that we can talk the dogs out of the tree. We're just optimistic that we can do two-thirds of a tree.

The problem with the whole idea of two-thirds of a tree is: the middle part doesn't really fit into the base. Right? So the middle part is about two-thirds too small for the base. So on Saturday -- yeah it was Saturday. Saturday -- with millions of Americans decorating their houses and their outside, inside and outside of the house -- the Rogers were putting up a Christmas tree. **[Sighs heavily]** And we were trying to solve this engineering problem of what to do with the tree that doesn't fit in your base.

And so my lovely wife came up with many ideas [laughs]. Like, she had this idea of stuffing -- you know, stuff popcorn: the peanut stuff -- stuffing that in there and then jamming the base in there. And I said, "Baby, it's not going to work." **[Laughs]** And then she came up with another. And she's like pitching these ideas, one idea after another. She was just full of ideas! And my response is: "It's not going to work. It's not going to work. It's not going to work! IT'S JUST NOT GOING TO WORK!"

And finally she said to me: "What are you talking about this week?" **[Congregation laughs]** And I said, "I'm talking about hope." She goes, "Well, Negative Ned, why don't you get on board that we're going to find a solution to this problem." Right? **[Congregation laughs]**

Because the moment you say, "It's not going to work," is that true for you? Because you've already decided it! You've already decided it's not going to work. And sometimes the Negative Ned in us -- or the Negative Nancy in us -- really interferes with all the good that God wants to bless us with!

There's this fabulous quote from Noam Chomsky that says this: "If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, then there is a possibility that you can contribute to making the world a better place."

See, what I want you to begin to see with me is that this quality that looks so wimpy -- that looks so like, "Let's just get to faith; we don't need hope, because we're going to make it happen." But what I want you to see is that, without hope ... Hope is like the switch that opens the infinite goodness of God. And if you don't have hope about any of the gifts -- about any of the promises that God has made to us -- then you never really access all the good that God has for us.

And tonight, I want us to be willing to look at ourselves and our world in the places where we have given up hope. And I don't believe that we can afford it! I don't believe that we can afford -- in our individual lives, in our collective world -- to live in a world where we've given up hope. Because every time we give up hope, we actually deny all the goodness that God wants to bless us with!

Like, you actually don't know how good your life could be. You don't know how much the Spirit of God wants to bless you with even a greater experience of life. And when we don't have hope, we dismiss everything that's not in our little picture. Everything in the way that we just see our little world and our little life. That hope is a requirement! And when we learn that it's okay to hope again -- when it's okay to actually believe in possibilities that are bigger than we've known before -- everything in our life begins to change.

Doc Pomus grew up in Brooklyn, New York. And he loved music, especially the blues. As a child, he contracted polio, and he walked with the aid of crutches. As a young man, he loved singing in blues clubs. And he recorded dozens of songs. And finally he thought he had a hit. The record company signed him, but later would not release the song, because they found out he was Jewish and disabled.

[Congregation murmurs]

So he decided, "I'm going to become a songwriter." And he wrote some of ... he wrote songs for, in the 60s, some of the most popular acts of the 60s. He wrote **[sings]** "Viva Las Vegas." Remember that?

[Congregation laughs] It's hard not to sing that one. **[Congregation laughs]** He wrote "This Magic Moment." He wrote "Teenager in Love." I mean, he wrote one number hit after another.

At his wedding in 1959, he watched as his wife whirled around the dance floor in the arms of relatives and friends. And she and Doc never danced. Some three years after his marriage, he came across one of the old wedding invitations. And he was thinking about that night, and watching his wife dance with everyone else. And he began to describe the lyrics on the back of this unused wedding invitation. And he remembered how it felt to watch his bride dance with everyone. And he wrote the line, *"But don't forget who's taking you home. In who's arms you're gonna be. For, darling ..."* You remember the line? **[With congregation]:** *"Save the last dance for me."*

Isn't that sweet? That is such a sweet story, right? Because The Drifters went on to record that song; it became a number one hit in 1960. It was later number one a chart hit for Dolly Parton, and Emmylou Harris recorded it. And his life -- even though, when people told him, *"No"*; when people judged him -- he had hope! And that hope opened doors that were greater than you could imagine.

Adam Ruiz is a chaplain. And he was a chaplain throughout this whole pandemic experience. And he said one of the experiences that touched him the most was watching a colleague -- a pharmacist, Debbie, who was nine months pregnant -- literally running down the aisle from the Covid unit to the ICU and back again. He asked her, *"Why'd you do it?"* And she said to him, *"If you're not willing to run for someone who is dying, when would you ever be willing to run? We have husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, dying of Covid in this hospital. And if I run fast enough, maybe we can save at least one of them."*

That's a woman who lives in hope.

Lori Kenned and her husband, Russ, after the first in California last year, lost everything. She tells the story of going back after the firemen said she could go back and look at her house. And she remembers driving down her street and just seeing one chimney fireplace after another was all that was left. When she got to her house, she found a couple of metal plates that her son had brought them from Europe, and a clothes rack -- an umbrella stand-like thing -- that was brass that survived the fires. But pretty much everything was gone. They had a vast inspirational library that they kept.

And finally, the wind kicked up, and it was kicking all the ash up. And Russ said, *"It's time. We've got to go. We just can't stay; all this ash kicks up; we've got to get out of here."* And as she's walking to the car she says, *"Lord, how do we survive this?"* And she just prayed: *"Lord, how do we survive this? How do we go on?"* It felt as if her life had been wiped out in that fire. And she said, *"You know, I really wanted to call it quits. I just didn't think I could get up. I didn't think I could do this."*

When she got to her car, she got inside. There was a little piece of scrap paper that was smudged and covered in soot. And she picked it up. And on the edge of the paper that was literally smudged -- I mean, just covered in soot all the way around with burn marks -- she read this. After she prayed, she read this quote. And the quote is this: *"If life seems difficult, I pause and reflect on the blessings sometimes hidden within every circumstance. With renewed faith and courage, I will begin again."*

I will begin again! I mean, how is that possible? She prays, *"God, how do I get along?"* She walks from there to her car and, by the time she gets in her car, she looks down at her boot. She sees this little burnt piece of paper. She pulls it out, and it says, *"I will begin again."* How is that possible?

With all the books -- with all the Scriptures ... I mean, my boot ... If I looked down at my boot, I think my boot would give me the Sears repair manual for my washer or dryer, you know? **[Congregation laughs]** But here she gets a message that was just for her soul at this moment!

We live in a time right now where we need hope. We can't get along without it! And the promise is: every Christmas -- as we awaken to the Christ within; as we awaken to the birth of Christ in us -- that

one of the qualities that we will be given, that will be revealed to us, that will be expressed through us, is hope.

So this week ... Are you ready for your homework? This week your homework is to light the inner candle of hope in the places in your life that are the most difficult for you right now. The places in your life that have gotten too small, too scary, too mean, too sad, too disappointed. And to be willing to literally, in your mind's eye: I want you to see yourself lighting a candle of hope right there. That it's okay for you to believe again. That it's okay for you to get up off the ground. And it's okay for you to believe that God has greater good for you than you've ever known before. That hope is the thing that allows all the promises of God to be fulfilled. And that, as we truly call forth that we are people of hope, our life is just better in every way.

Will you pray with me?

And I want you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to the power of hope in your life. And it seems like such a silly spiritual quality. It seems kind of wimpy sometimes. But without hope, nothing happens. Without hope, no business gets started. No relationship would ever stop. No one would ever get off the floor. No one would ever go to college. No one would ever create a work of art or write a song or get out of bed.

Without hope, life doesn't make sense. So tonight we light the candle for hope. And we allow the hope of God to ignite our soul: to inspire us to live, and to live more fully. To be more about the work of God in our life, and to fulfill every promise that God has made to us. Tonight we give thanks for hope. And so it is. Amen.

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