

Counterfeit: Escape

Nehemiah 8:5-6, 8-12

Prayer...

Certainly this year is going to be very different.

COVID19 has left many people wondering

what Christmas is going to be like this year.

Some are already depressed

because they know it's not going to be same.

Our Christmas Eve service won't be the same;

our family gatherings won't be the same;

the general atmosphere in society

won't be the same,

and that can cause great despair.

Others are embracing the season earlier

(putting up decorations in early November;

blasting Christmas music to drown out any talk of COVID19;

overindulging in eggnog lattes

to give you that extra boost of cheer)

with the hope that it will be just the escape

they needed to forget about COVID19

and feel a sense of "normal" again.

But we need to be careful that we pursue in this season is the actual
hope, peace, joy and love that is found in Jesus' arrival
and not fall for counterfeits.

Only Jesus is able to transform our lives.

But it's easy for us to fall for counterfeits.

Counterfeits help us escape from life

and feed us false promises that life will be better
on the other side.

They seem legitimate,

but leave us feeling empty in the end.

The deep hope, peace, joy and love that Jesus offers us
isn't found in escaping life and its setbacks.

Rather, they're discovered in the midst of life.

Jesus walks alongside us

through all of life's storms, chaos and havoc

and draws our attention to His

hope, peace, joy and love.

In this Advent series

we're going to draw out some of the counterfeits
we might be tempted to follow this year,
and seek Jesus' true advent in the midst of life.

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So it may not come as a surprise to us
but every human being has a longing within them:
longing for companionship,
longing for something more,
a desire to find that special thing that will
make us feel complete, whole, satisfied.

This very longing is evidence
that a fracturing in the human experience has happened.

Why (if we're so evolved and advanced as a species) **do we**
have this gnawing sense
that we're missing something?

The Bible teaches us that
this missing element is our connection with the Creator.
The ability to fully depend on and trust God

to look out for us and have our best interest in mind;
a God who wants our best and for us to thrive.

And that relationship (between us and God) is what has fractured.

Every longing we have is rooted in a longing for God.

Now it's this longing that marketers rely on for their job.

It is their job to pull at that longing
and draw us toward whatever product
they've been hired to advertise.

Forbes estimates that the average American

is exposed to anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements a day!¹
(that's as many as 3,650,000 a year!!!)

No wonder people are confused about how to fill this longing.

We're constantly fed items, ideas, escapes
that will leave us feeling empty.

So the first advent theme is Hope.

What's the counterfeit?

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/?sh=6b1bc329626e>

I suggest the counterfeit of hope is **escapism**:

**What is that next thing/place/person that will help me
escape life as it is now long enough
to get some sense of relief?**

If the opposite of Hope is Despair,

then when we feel despair what is it we try to use to escape
and avoid that feeling?

We escape through consumerism;

through materials; through vacations;

through a false sense of control.

As disciples of Jesus

we are called to be people of HOPE;

so when we're tempted to despair, we don't turn to escape it.

We feel that despair, we lift it up to Jesus

and rest in the fact that **our hope is not dependant on what we do**

(for ourselves or for God)

but wholly in what God does *for us* in Jesus.

When we feel despair we either think:

“Oh well I deserve that because I'm so horrible,

or I didn't do that well enough,

or I could've done better"

and we get so down that all we want to do

is run away and escape that emotion.

OR,

we feel despair and feel attacked:

"Hey, that isn't right. I'm actually a good person

and I don't need to feel this way.

I deserve to treat myself

for that lapse in confidence,"

and so we escape that emotion with entitlement.

But our hope is rooted in what Jesus has done for us.

Which means we don't need to feel horrible,

because Jesus showed us how much He loves us;

and we can't feel entitled

because Jesus has given us *EVERYTHING!*

We face life with the hope

that God has undone the fracture that sin caused

through His Son Jesus,

and is restoring the world (us included)
by His Holy Spirit.

All we can do in response

is remember, rejoice and revere His holy Name,

and that's exactly what we see in our passage.

NEHEMIAH 8

Now a bit of background.

We know that God's People were carried into exile
and displaced to Babylon.

Like any world power,

you can only hold your position until another force in the world
shows up and overpowers you.

Persia did this to Babylon

and under King Artaxerxes, God's People were
given permission to return to their homeland.

And so we encounter both Ezra and Nehemiah

who led the way for rebuilding Jerusalem

and rediscovering the Jewish traditions,
because while the exiled Jews were in Babylon
their Jewish identity had fallen to the wayside.

So God's People get to work.

They start rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem,
and when they finished all the people were excited.

They were in a place of awe and wonder before God.

They cried out to Ezra and asked
that He read the Book of the Law of Moses to them.

The People were ready to worship God
because finally, they were home again!

Ezra cried out, "Blessed be the LORD, the great God!"

and all the people responded, "**Amen, amen!**"

They fell down in worship and revered God.

Then Ezra began to read God's Word to them.

We're told he read **clearly** (v. 8)

and 3 times we're told the people

(men, women, anyone who could understand)

listened and were given every opportunity
to understand every word.

The Levites were there,
leading small groups as Ezra read,
helping to translate the spoken Hebrew
into everyday Aramaic.

The point being,
everyone was thoroughly equipped
to understand everything being said.

IMPACT (v. 9)

The impact of hearing God's Word
we would think would fill the people with hope.
But the reality was: **all the people wept**
as they heard the words of the Law.

You see, the Law (God's Word) functions as a mirror.

It revealed their sin and the depth of how short they had fallen
from God's purpose for His People.

If we read the Bible and feel like we can't measure up

to what is written on the page, then be encouraged:

you can't resemble it perfectly,

because the whole point of the Bible

is to tell of the One person who *does*

resemble it perfectly and what that

One person does with such perfection.

This mirroring is what happened to God's People

as they heard Ezra reading out the Law.

They looked into that mirror

and didn't like what they saw.

They were overwhelmed by how far they were as a community

(let alone as individuals)

from the image the Law reflected.

You can hear Isaiah's words ringing out:

**There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself
to take hold of you...²**

² Isaiah 64:7

All of a sudden that passionate worship environment

turned mournful, ashamed and guilt ridden

(emotions that God wants to save His People from).

ENCOURAGEMENT (v. 10)

The weeping was so evident

that Ezra had to stop reading

and both Ezra and Nehemiah declared

“We’re going to have a party.

Because this is not the time for weeping!”

And they told the people:

¹⁰ “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Now in the past, Christians have read this verse

and treated “...for this day is holy to our Lord...”

to mean: don’t shop, don’t play games, don’t go to the movies

because this day (Sunday) is holy to God.

The assumption with that is

that Sundays become a day where all you do

is Bible study, pray and think about God.

Now all of these practices are good and valuable for disciples of Jesus

and we can learn a lot from these practices/disciplines

when we engage in them willingly

and with the desire to know God more.

But If we enter into them out of duty or obligation,

apart from deepening our relationship with God

we'll likely experience what Israel experienced in our passage.

Without a relationship with God

we tend to read the Bible

as if it were a life manual:

how do I live so that I can be a good person?;

How do I live so that I can make God happy?;

What does God want me to do in order to

honour Him, please (or appease) Him,

to be worthy of His love?

But if we have a relationship with God,
if every time we approach the Bible
we're seeking to learn more about *who God is*
then we'll find the Bible isn't concerned with giving us
answers to those previous questions.

Rather, it's concerned with reveal to us
the nature of the God we're longing to know more.
And that God is the kind of God
who **acts for us**; on our behalf.

And so Ezra and Nehemiah declare,

"...do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

In other words, the **joy** of God
(God's joy which flows out of
His own gracious activity)
becomes our strength.

God's Joy is our strength

because it's all about what God has done
and not dependant on what we've done.

God is JOYFUL because of what He did through Jesus;

Jesus is JOYFUL because of God's Rescue Plan;

The Spirit is JOYFUL because all of it is happening now!

God's Joy is our strength

because we realize nothing else could be better

than what God did in and through Jesus.

TODAY

This is hopeful for us today

because **the Advent (arrival) of Jesus**

means when we're faced with despair

(like a pandemic, like losing a job,

like the loss of a loved one)

we don't need to ESCAPE IT.

Instead, we remember WHO GOD IS

and WHAT GOD HAS DONE!

As people of hope,

we rest in God's activity *for us*

and not our own abilities.

We are able to live with **hope**

and find **strength in God's joy**

because God undid the fracturing that sin caused
and is restoring the world to Himself.

Think about that:

GOD gains pleasure from making things new in Jesus.

GOD finds joy in putting things back together by His Spirit.

God alone does this and He does it

because He alone could do it! And it's *brilliant!*

So as we approach Christmas this year

let us not mourn that things will feel or look different;

let us not grieve the fact that we're still in this difficult time,

because God has shown us what **hope** looks like:

it looks like a baby in a manger;

a carpenter who not only teaches God's Word but lives it;

a Leader who serves;

a Pastor who guides;

a Saviour who dies for those He loves;

a Friend who relates with our experience;

a King who is in control.

Let us Pray...