

## **Homily – The Hope of Christmas**

**Rob Keim**

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Many call Christmas Eve the most beautiful night of the year. The traditions, the music, the candle light all make it very special.

We are so glad that you are here tonight because another thing that makes this night so special is that we get to spend it together. Christmas is a time with family and friends. Whether present or not with us physically tonight, we remember the love and laughter, and even tears, of those whom we cherish. That love is very much part of our Christmas Eve.

We also remember that love of God that is always with us, that divine love that shines forth like a beacon on this most beautiful night. God's love is a love that we have not earned, and it is love that we can ignore but it will never stop embracing us. You and I are all loved eternally by God, and it is this love that gives Christians, and all of those on a spiritual journey, it is this love that is the foundation of our hope.

Hope is sorely needed in this world of ours. Whether it is here in the Arroyo Grande or in Gaza, the hope we have from Christmas is something that we need to take out into the world. Often, we look at the future with doubt and uncertainty. We wonder what has happened to truth and trust. We wonder if violence is going to overtake us. We fret about the future.

Well, I am standing up here tonight to assure you that our future is bright. It may not always be the one that we had envisioned, but it is a future that has been made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Two thousand years ago, the universe was changed forever. As Christians we often focus on the resurrection of Jesus. Yes, Easter did change us forever, but for many Christians the birth of Jesus was an even bigger event.

At the beginning of time, Christ came as the perfect union of spirit and matter, and this Christ permeates every and all parts of the universe. Then two thousand years ago, perhaps when the human mind was finally ready, the infinite and perfect union of matter and spirit came down into the finite union of God and human that we know of as the baby Jesus.

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;*

*and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

And the universe shouted out to the shepherds that night, *praising God and saying,  
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

The eternal love of God is made real to us through the birth of each and every baby, but it is especially made known to us by that birth of the perfect union of God and human that we know as Jesus.

The birth of Jesus two thousand years ago, is the foundation for our hope as Christians and it is the antidote for our weary and fretful world.

But, how, you may ask, how does this birth of Jesus give us hope for our future and how can I get more of it?

"To have hope we need to know what is truly life-giving and be able to distinguish it from those things that are incapable of giving life. Life-giving qualities such as love and peace are timeless and eternal; they existed before us and they will exist after us. We experience these timeless qualities in specific temporal ways. A friend may be a temporal manifestation of the timeless quality of love and acceptance. The friend is the vehicle by which we receive love.

Everything we value comes to us in a vehicle. For example, a candle provides light, but the candle itself isn't the light, it is a vehicle for the light. Problems arise when we confuse the value with the vehicle.

Here is another example of the error we sometimes make. That red Book of Common Prayer that is in the pew rack in front of you is a temporal thing that points to an eternal or timeless quality. Clinging to a book of words, regardless of how sacred it is, is like clinging to a sacred statue. The prayer book does not set you free. However, being in the presence of the life-giving God that both book and statue point to will set you free.

To have hope we need to hold and be held by this timeless quality rather than cling to its temporal manifestation. Idolatry occurs when we view this temporal vehicle as the source of the timeless quality. By definition, temporal things are temporary, and clinging to the temporal expression of a timeless quality will result in fear of loss and grief if we do lose it."

Jobs, health, and even loved ones are all a temporary expression of something timeless, but they are not the timeless thing. We may have a temporary hope in these things, but for those of us on a spiritual journey, we are called to hang our hat on those things that are truly eternal.

Wise people know to let go of the temporary, and on this Christmas Eve we are reminded about the beauty that comes from God made human. On this most beautiful of evenings we celebrate that which gives us a realistic hope.

Now if you are like me, then sometimes it can be hard to know when our beliefs and values are leading to a realistic hope or to an unhelpful hope.

On prior occasions I have shared the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is getting what we want and it often represents by the statement: "I will be happy when..." Conversely, joy is being grateful for what we already have.

Getting what we want versus being grateful for what we already have. To me, this is the difference that a wise person sees between happiness and joy.

An unhelpful hope has the same difference. It delays happiness until some date when we have achieved or obtained what we think will provide happiness. A hope based on wanting is no hope at all." Instead, we want a realistic hope.

And, here are four rules of thumb to consider as you examine and evaluate and strengthen your realistic hope for the future.

First, are you connected to something greater than yourself? This provides a deep sense that we are not alone.

Second, do you have a purpose and a mission and the opportunity to co-create the future with God? Being the hands and feet and voice of Jesus gives life a meaningful focus.

Third, humanity lives in the shadow of death. Have you embraced a spiritual answer to the mystery of life and death? Freed from the fear of death, we can live hopefully in the present moment.

Fourth, do you have a sense that life is essentially good? Despite that which we perceive as bad, do you believe that good will ultimately prevail? God can bring good out of that which appears bad." A baby can be born into a broken world, a baby which is the perfect union of God and human.

Now, “being part of a love-based community that shares a set of core beliefs and values can provide resources to live this life of hope.

Being part of a community with a purpose helps us to be part of a social system that is bigger than ourselves.

The community’s purpose can strengthen and support our individual purpose.

In community, we can find emotional and physical support to deal with the day-to-day issues that the death of a loved one can cause.

In community, we can find support to challenge and overcome injustice and the consequences of natural calamities.

And finally, in community, we can find acceptance when we fail.”

At our best, this is the type of community we have here at St. Barnabas. Together, as we walk the journey of life and death, together we find strength and love and joy and hope.

On this beautiful Christmas Eve, we remember the timeless beauty that came into this world as a baby boy. We rejoice in the eternal union of God and human that was born to Mary and celebrated by the shepherds on a dark winters night in the town of Bethlehem. And, we celebrate the hope that came into the world with Christmas.

*Parts of this homily are based on or taken from Rob Voyle in his book, “Restoring Hope.”*