

**Series: CHRISTMAS...UNWRAPPED. Dec. 24, 2005**

**BRINGING HOPE!  
Luke 2:1-12**

Tonight, hope is sky high for most kids. They've made their Christmas list and showed it to the appropriate person—whether they have a beard or wear lipstick—and their hope is that tomorrow is going to be a wonderful day! They'll wake up and there will be packages under the tree with their name on them. And their hopes are pretty realistic cause, see, **someone** loves them and gets a charge out of seeing their smile and excitement. And that **someone** will do almost anything to make that happen! Yep, those hopes have some substance to them!

But hope is only as good as what you put your hope **in**—right? When I was a teenager, about 20 years ago or so, I remember some of the girls I knew talking about having a wooden chest in their home, something like this, and they would occasionally buy things to put in it. Sometimes it was ordinary stuff—silverware, china, linens. Sometimes it was heirlooms handed down by parents and grand-parents. They did this because they were anticipating the day when they would get married. Anyone have a clue on what this was called? A **hope** chest.

People don't do **hope** chests anymore—partly, I think, because our culture has realized that there is something unwise about centering all your plans for your life on finding a man someday. It's *possible* that, as wonderful as men are—and I'm all for them—they **may** not be the fulfillment of every longing in a woman's heart.

Some of you achieved this brilliant insight through a personal experience with **Mr. or Ms. Wrong**. You've got a chest, but it's more like a **hope-NOT** chest. You look at this person and think, "Wow, I **hope not!**" But the truth about you and me is, we all have one of these down inside. It's a place where we store our deepest longings and all our unfulfilled desires. We humans are shameless, irremediable hoppers.

Hope is absolutely essential in life. Without hope, life gets **very** dark. A little over a week ago, I ended up with a kidney stone. I've been told it's the male equivalent of giving birth. I'm not sure I would say that, but it is pretty painful. The **hope** you have when you leave the ER with a strainer and a bottle of pain pills is, **this too shall pass!**

Hope is defined as a **desire** accompanied by **expectation** or **belief** in the fulfillment of that desire. In the scene you just watched from **The Shawshank Redemption**, the hero made it clear that he could handle

weeks in solitary confinement—only because of **hope**. You can make it through almost anything—*if* you have hope.

Hope causes people to lay everything they have on the line to start a business. Hope is why people with cancer endure expensive, risky, painful procedures. Hope is why people have children—and pay for their education. Hope is why people buy treadmills and weights and diet books in January. The **hope of a better future** is why some of you left warm climates with palm trees and beaches and moved to Toronto!

But lose hope—and watch out. When people lose hope, they give up on life. Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. In his own quest for survival, he decided to use his training in psychology to study his fellow inmates and figure out why some survived horrible atrocities—and others committed suicide or just gave up and died. The difference was **hope**. Those who hoped lived. Those who lost hope didn't. You can't survive without hope.

I have a message from God for you this Christmas Eve. It's a message of hope. **Extreme** hope. However dark things are in the world; whatever mess your personal life is in; however past Christmases have disappointed you and created awful memories for you to carry, this message of hope makes Christmas worth celebrating—not just for a day, but for a lifetime!

One day when earth seemed very dark and bleak—**HOPE** came to this planet--disguised as a tiny baby born to poor parents. The night Jesus was born, the message of hope flashed against the blackness of the midnight sky to shepherds. This was the message:

***The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger (Luke 2:10-12 NIV)."***

To get the context of this message, let me back up history about 1000 years to a man named David. It's emphasized by all the angels, that Jesus will be the **son** of David; reign on **David's** throne, be born in Bethlehem, the **town** of David.

Most of you are probably familiar with David in one way or other—certainly the most famous king Israel ever had. I don't want to talk about Goliath—or David's Psalms. I want to talk about David's **cave**. When you read his story, it's one of the best rags-to-riches accounts you've ever heard. He

goes from watching sheep in Bethlehem—probably in the same fields these shepherds were in—to the throne.

David has this meteoric ride to fame. In months, he went from local hero to commanding the armies of his country to becoming the fiancé of the king's daughter and living in the palace. Anyone remember the theme song for the TV show, *The Jefferson's*? "I'm a-movin' on up...to the east side...!"

But one day a jealous king named Saul threw a spear at him, and everything David had was stripped away: his job, his income, his place at the king's table, his wife, his mentor, his best friend—and even his country.

At his lowest point, David winds up in this cave. The lowest point in most people's lives is when, like David, they're expecting the palace and get the cave. No one explains why it's happening—or when it will end. For David it lasted 14 years.

Anyone here ever done **cave-time**? The cave is a dark place. It's where you end up when everything's been stripped away; all the props, crutches and scaffolding get pulled from your life. Life can be pretty good when everything's moving up and to the right on your chart. But what do you do when it doesn't? I've been to the cave several times.

I remember once, early in my ministry, when I hit the back of the cave. My boss wrote me a 9 page letter telling me that he thought I was lazy and ought to do something else besides leading churches with my life—and I had invested everything in that. Besides that, my best friend had betrayed me, my marriage was shaky, and it didn't look like Lori and I would be able to have children.

One day I was driving along—and I felt my car strangely drawn toward this bridge abutment. I thought, "The darkness could be over—and it would just look like another accident." I'm glad I didn't toy with that thought for long—because, see, when you're in the cave—you can't see all the good ahead of you.

You may be doing cave-time tonight. For lots of reasons. Unbearable financial pressure, having children is not turning out at **all** like you planned. Maybe it's a deadly struggle just to survive. But the cave is very dark.

If you've **never** been to the cave, just get a little more life under your belt. Most people cut a timecard there sooner or later. In the cave you

ask questions like, “Why? What’s the point of even trying? And where’s **God**?”

Hold that thought for a minute—and let’s move ahead about 1000 years to another cave. It’s quite interesting that the stable Jesus was born in has been identified as a cave.

That cave was apparently the only private place left in Bethlehem when Joseph and Mary arrived from Nazareth. In Mary’s life, the cave may represent more than just a place to stay. It may have been one of her darkest moments.

It would appear that from the angel, Gabriel’s, visit on, things just got harder for Mary:

- \*Pregnant out-of-wedlock in a culture where that could be life-threatening;
- \*A fiancé who didn’t believe her when she said, “God did this!”
- \*A 70 mile trip—probably on foot—to pay more taxes;
- \*And the amazing conclusion? Labor and childbirth in a filthy parking garage for animals—where the attending obstetrician is your clueless husband.

But Someone else was in that cave with Mary and Joseph. The Bible is very clear about the fact that the baby Mary gave birth to was a very real, helpless baby—but **also** the Son of God. One who was eternal. Who created everything—the stars that shower over him, the cave he was born in, and the straw he was laid on. But, as He so often is when we’re in the cave, God was disguised. He had set all of his power and splendor aside and humbled himself to be in that cave with her.

Don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t a **sad** thing. A whole bunch of angels lit up the countryside to tell this shepherds, “You’d better come and **see** this! This is an **amazing** Day that God deserves glory for! God has come—and the result will be **peace!** Apparently caves aren’t such bad places when God is there with you! And even though you may not see Him because of the darkness, you’d better believe He’s there. God does some of his best work in caves!

The interesting thing about Jesus is that his life ended in a cave as well. Jesus was this rising leader who absolutely amazed people. He healed, taught, walked on water, raised the dead, and multiplied food. Everyone thought he would be the new king who would end Roman oppression.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the palace. By the end of the week Jesus, like David, had lost everything. He was betrayed by a

follower, denied by his closest friend, and had the people who had chanted his praises, calling for his execution. It even appeared that His Heavenly Father had forsaken him, along with everyone else. When he was pried, dead, from the cross, he went back to the cave—a man-made one. A massive stone was rolled across the entrance. People thought, “That’s it. He’s in the cave—this time, for good!”

You need to understand that if Jesus had stayed there, the whole **world** would’ve ended there with him. And I don’t think we’d be celebrating anything tonight. But He **didn’t!** In April, 30 A.D., it became clear to the world that God does some of his best work in caves—places where it appears that all is lost. It was clear, just like the prophets said, this baby was **Almighty God! God with us.** Wherever we are. Even when we’re doing cave time.

But, I’m getting a little ahead of myself. This is the celebration of Jesus’ **birth.** There’s a title given to Jesus throughout this whole Christmas narrative—even imbedded in his name, Jesus that offers incredible hope to everyone. The title is **Savior.** It’s a little confusing to us, because we tend to think, “What needs to be saved? What, in my life, needs to be rescued? Redeemed? Changed?”

Anyone here beside me have things about your past you regret? Ever have times when you stare at the ceiling at night and think, “How could I have been so stupid and blind?”

If you’re a human being, and I think most of you are, there are things you wish you hadn’t done; habits you wish you’d never started; times when you wish you had been more courageous, less selfish, more truthful, more attentive to people you said you loved, hadn’t skewered someone you love with angry words. My past is stained. Tonight, I could **name** a list of people I’ve hurt and damaged along the way. Don’t get excited—I’m not going to.

Sometimes we pretend we’re cool, it’s okay, “Hey, it was fun! What the heck?!” But to be honest, we’re **not** okay. Guilt and regret and shame haunt us; they gnaw at our hearts and souls like rats. What’s in your **hope chest** for that? You know, your past?

Jesus came as a **Savior** for our past. His death paid for my past—and yours. It’s true. If we ask for forgiveness, the weight of guilt and regret can be lifted from our shoulders. **Your** past, **my** past—whatever it holds, however junked up it is, and be washed as white as the snow **used** to be when it fell last week.

Because of Jesus, I’ve been able to leave my past **in** the past. Tonight, the biggest need some of you have is to get rid of the

backpack of guilt and sadness you carry? It can be cut off your back tonight. **Ask!** There's hope for the past.

There's another place where I need hope. It's for my present. The **present** in our lives can get really screwed up. We watch the mess get bigger, not smaller; we watch the child we have such high hopes for get further away, not closer; we watch opportunities disintegrate.

In times like that, we begin to doubt the worth of our lives; that life will ever turn out like we **hoped** it would; that what we're going through will ever make sense. Our life is like a puzzle with so many pieces missing, we can't even tell what the big picture is.

Sometimes well-meaning friends, "Suck it up! Just hope for the best!" We think, "Suck **what** up?" It's not enough. We need a Savior. Someone bigger than us who sees where we're at and knows the way home. I sometimes wonder if it was when David was doing **cave time** that He wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Listen to the words.

***Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me (Psalm 23:4 NLT).***

You need to know that there is a **Savior**—born in a manger. He knows the cave—see, He's been there. And He's God so He has no problem at all with the messiest stuff we can ever face. And when we put our hope in Him—He is able to use our present redemptively. Know what that word means? It's the same thing Jesus did when He turned the cross He died on from a symbol of failure and shame into a symbol of hope. Forever. We need hope for our present. Hope gives us the strength we need to keep going when we feel overwhelmed.

And what about the future? The nightly news keeps us even more up to date with the mess in our world than we'd like to be. Anyone ever hear about terrorism, violence, natural disasters and the ever-mutating forms of disease currently available—and feel **fear**? And what about your future? My future.

Truth is, the death rate just continues to hover around that 100% mark—and the dash in between the dates on a tombstone can be pretty uncertain. So, what's your plan? What's in your hope chest? Most of us put our hope in something. The angel, Gabriel, who told Mary that, as a virgin, she would give birth to a baby said, right before he left, ***For NOTHING is impossible with God!***

That's an amazing statement. How many of you think the new government we elect is going to solve our problems? ***For NOTHING***

*is impossible...with a new government!* Sounds stupid, doesn't it. How about **NOTHING is impossible--with science.** Or **NOTHING is impossible...if you have enough money...if you have the right friends...if you have the right job.** Here's the deal; if you're going to stake your future on something, it had better be **hope-worthy.** A good question to ask is, "Is what I'm hoping in bigger than anything life can throw at me—including **death?**"

Tonight, I'll tell you where my hope is. **My** hope is in this baby, this **Savior** born 2000 years ago. He's never let me down. When he came, He fulfilled every prophecy that had ever been made about him. Guess what else He made clear? He has the future...**all of it...**in His hands. The end my surprise us—but it **won't** surprise him. Right now, as I speak, this Savior who was born, Jesus Christ, is orchestrating all of history to a final conclusion—and it will be spectacular!

But the best news I have for you tonight is what Christmas **really** means. Know what it means—if you unwrap it all, and pull off all the holiday songs, and parties, and Christmas trees and lights and Santa Claus? **GOD SHOWED UP!** He was way different than we expected—mainly because of his humility—coming as a helpless baby born to a couple of poor teenagers. As He taught, the amazing truth became clear—God was not mean and angry—He was absolutely loving, filled with compassion—willing to lay everything aside, including his rights and power of God. **God showed up! That's why there's hope. Always.**

In the course of three years, he changed the entire course of human history. And He changed the course of the world. Know how? By changing people's hearts. He said, "You've got to lift your eyes higher than governments and money and people—they'll break your heart. Look higher—to the God of all Hope who holds **everything** in our lives—in **His** huge hands. And the message of Christmas gets even better. Not only did God show up. **He's still here!** And He's at work in every single nuance of your life—even when you can't see Him or understand Him.

The question tonight, this Christmas Eve is not, "Is there hope?" The question is, where's **your Hope!** Has the best news to ever hit this old planet every made it to **your** Hope Chest?

When He's with you, no problem is unsolvable! No mountain is unmovable! No heart is beyond the hope of change. Tonight, there's **hope!** There's Hope. Because this Baby came, there's hope. **That's** why we celebrate Christmas! So...**so! Let's ring every bell! Let's drop our sadness, our cynicism and our petty grudges. Let's bring our worry and fear and dread into the**

***presence of God and see what happens to it! Let the hope and grace and joy and life of Christmas penetrate every crack of this planet!***