

Open Table Community Church
Advent Devotional

2018

Week 1: Hope



Introduction

Each week of Advent has a theme. Week one is HOPE. Week two is PEACE. Week three is JOY. Week four is LOVE. In this Devotional, we will be tracking the life of Francis of Assisi, or if you were raised Catholic as I was, Saint Francis. Francis lived in the Middle of the Middle Ages (1181-1226) and not only lived a unique life but set the tone for Monastic living to this day.

Above all else, Francis was so fully committed to God that it drove him to live an amazingly counter cultural life. Through this Advent season I will be challenging us to live as though we are different from the world. I'm not asking anyone to be Saint Francis but I do believe that the season of Advent is the perfect time to see how "Francis" you can get. How much can you go against the grain in this chaotic holiday season. How countercultural can you get?

Scripture Reading

Philippians chapter 1

Psalms 5:1-3

Devotional Reading

Born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis was a typical rich kid. He received a good education, he loved high quality food and drink, and mostly, he loved to be admired. He was charismatic and easily found himself at the center of the upper echelon of Assisi youth. He was the classic ring leader of the popular kids.

Having money and privilege, Francesco (this was his father's nickname for him, meaning "little French man" but since Giovanni's mom was French, it was probably meant "momma's boy") was trained in the finer arts of war such as archery and horsemanship. He dreamed of being a knight as the Medieval Knight was at the peak of its popularity. Francesco was undoubtedly tempted by the prestige of such a position in society but those close to him also remembered how young Francesco was enamored with the concept of chivalry. He wished to defend the less fortunate and to rescue Ladies in need. With the hope of entering such a world, in 1202, he joined the army as Assisi went to war against Perugia.

Francesco's company was badly defeated in their very first battle. All but a handful of the wealthiest soldiers were killed instantly. Francesco was one of those spared for ransom. It took almost a year to arrange payment with Francesco's father, a period that Francesco spent alone in an underground cellar awaiting release. This time changed Francesco dramatically. It is unclear if he resented his father's money because it was the cause of his year-long captivity or if he had survivor's guilt and resented his wealth because it was the only reason he had been spared when so many others hadn't. The one thing that is clear is that when Francis, for this is the name he would be known by from this point forward, was returned to his family, he was already secretly committed to a life of poverty.

Once he recovered his health, for his captivity had left him very ill, Francis spent his days walking through the woods and wilderlands around Assisi, drawn to the solitude of nature and to the old abandoned Chapels that he would stumble upon in the woods. Francis would pray to God for guidance, knowing that he was called to a life other than that of a rich merchant but having no clear understanding of what that life might look like. On one of these hikes, Francis met a

leper. Francis had always despised lepers for he desperately feared them, but on this occasion, Francis claimed that he could see Jesus in disguise as a leper. Francis hugged and even kissed this broken soul and felt freedom flow into him as he watched the effect that his affection had on the leper. Francis was changed forever.

Francis began to spend more and more time in the woods and continued to meet and befriend beggars. He found he enjoyed their company. One day, while praying in a dilapidated chapel, Francis heard God say to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins." Though he suspected a deeper meaning, Francis chose to obey the literal interpretation of the voice and began to rebuild the chapel that was in such disrepair. After collecting as many stones as he could find, Francis realized that he would need to purchase materials. He proceeded in taking a large shipment of cloth from his father's company to market and once he had sold the material, he took the money to the priest for the restoration of the chapel. Francis was honest about how he had acquired the money and the priest refused the gift on the basis that it was stolen. Francis threw the money at the priest's feet and fled realizing the priest would notify his father about the stolen cloth.

Francis managed to stay hidden for a month but was caught, beaten and locked up in his father's house. Freed by his mother, Francis escaped but was eventually captured and brought before the council where in dramatic fashion, Francis stripped off all his clothes, down to his bare skin, and threw the garments at his father's feet, publicly renouncing not only his father's wealth, but also any legal right he might ever have to inherit from his family. Francis had officially and formally chosen a life of poverty. A priest covered Francis in a burlap cloak which Francis wore until it was utterly threadbare. This became the iconic Monastic garb.

Before Francis, poverty and monasticism were not linked. In fact, the church was the center of wealth during Francis's life. His voluntary vow of poverty made Francis completely counter cultural and though his decision was radical, it was motivated by a simple comparison of HOPE. While imprisoned, Francis awaited release knowing his only hope was in his father's wealth. The potential for a positive outcome was very thin. If his father pays, he is free. If his father does not pay, he is lost. Money was his only hope. On the day that Francis embraced the leper, he felt what it meant to hope in God. In facing one of his greatest fears, Francis realized that when he threw himself on God, the possibilities for good were endless. The leper could be healed. Francis could walk away uninfected. Francis could be infected and then healed. He could be infected but meet his best friend in the process. Francis could be infected and die and in so doing, convince someone that love is worth dying for. The possibilities were endless. Francis decided that there is more hope available in throwing himself into God's hands than his family's wealth ever afforded him.

This begs the question, “where do you put your hope?” What outcome is absolutely essential for us to consider our situation “good”? Maybe a better way to ask the question is what makes you feel hopeless? Obviously, with God, nothing, absolutely nothing is hopeless. Jesus was killed and buried, and that situation was not hopeless. Excruciating? Yes. Dark? For sure.

Terrifying? You bet. But hopeless? The resurrection says no. So, if something makes us feel hopeless, could it be that our hope is in the wrong thing?

Advent is a season of HOPE. Maybe this year we don’t try to muster up an emotional hope that is as fragile as the lacework of a snowflake but instead we reorient our hope toward God, recognizing that God can make more with our lives as beggars than we can with all the resources the world has to offer.

Discussion Questions

What is the best thing you ever received for Christmas?

Did you ever get your hopes up for a gift and then not get it? (explain)

Did you ever get your hopes up for a gift, received it, then find it didn’t deliver the satisfaction you had hoped? (explain)

Did you ever pray for something from God and not get it? (explain)

Did you ever pray for something from God, receive it, then find it didn’t deliver the satisfaction you had hoped? (explain)

Challenges

Identify one thing that you once thought you absolutely had to have that you now never use. Give it away.

Francis lived out the rest of his life as a beggar. Even when the Franciscan Order was well established and growing exponentially, the brothers begged for their provisions. I challenge you, sometime over Advent, ask someone to take you out for coffee, or ice cream, or a glass of wine. Let them pay. Don’t beg but allow someone to give to you. It’s harder than you think. Be sensitive to people’s budget and let them bless you according to their means, however that looks. Also, be sensitive to the fact that the same person might get asked by multiple people and may need to say no. Imagine this being what you had to do just to live.

