

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick - the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways - stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California.



Florence M Chadwick (1918 - 1995)

The weather was foggy and chilly; she could hardly see the boats accompanying her.

Still, she swam for fifteen hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her she was close and that she could make it.

Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out, only later

that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away.

At a news conference the next day she said, "**All I could see was the fog** ... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."¹

Can you relate to those words?

Since March 2020 many live unsettled lives in a fog of dread, desperation and despair,

witness racism and injustice,

soak in a toxic swamp of cynicism and contempt,

and bombarded by misinformation and misunderstanding found in social media and internet.

This spirit of melancholy has produced a deep sense of ambiguity - the trending word that describes the dominant feeling in 2021 is "languishing."²

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence_Chadwick; Randy Alcorn, [Florence Chadwick and the Fog - Resources - Eternal Perspective Ministries \(epm.org\)](https://www.epm.org)

² Adam Grant, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

Today we begin a new sermon series, “Advent: The Light Has Come.”

ADVENT means “coming” or “arrival”; it points to both first coming of Jesus at Christmas as well as the promise of his second coming to set the whole world right once and for all. Jesus, the light of the world came into the world and will come again!

Today’s theme “Hope Has Come” is most timely and fitting because “hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls” (Heb. 6:19 NLT).

The opposite of languishing is flourishing and hope is fundamental to human flourishing.³

The birth of Jesus occurred during *Pax Romana*⁴ – Roman Peace - when the Romans secured a fairly long period of relative peace and stability among previously war-torn territories through a well-established infrastructure in which ...

communication was efficient,

³ Cf. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Editors), *The Future of Hope*.

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pax-Romana> It is “a state of comparative tranquillity throughout the Mediterranean world from the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 CE). Augustus laid the foundation for this period of concord, which also extended to North Africa and Persia. The empire protected and governed individual provinces, permitting each to make and administer its own laws while accepting Roman taxation and military control.”

commerce was booming,
and cities were thriving.

Phillips Brooks wrote the popular carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* – we often romanticize the Christmas story.

It would not be of any surprise that the nativity scene immediately pops into our heads: the star, the shepherds, the animals in the stable, the three wise men, Joseph, Mary, & baby Jesus wrapped in a manger, etc.

One of the lines in this song is “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

In the little town of Bethlehem, God met the hopes of all humanity by the birth of His Son, Jesus.⁵

But truth be told, Jesus was born ...

in an obscure town of a poor Judean region filled with cynicism, resentment, and danger due social unrest, oppression, financial

⁵ Wally Odum, [The Hope of Christmas | CBN.com](https://www.cbn.com)

hardship, subversive and resistant movements,

in a pleasure-driven, self-indulgent, anything-goes culture but spiritually poor and hungry.

Welcome to a world where hope is in short supply, then and now! As John Maxwell says,

***Where there is no hope in the future,
there is no power in the present.***

The bible teaches that “when we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time ... God sent his Son, born of a woman” (cf. Rom. 5:6; Gal. 4:4). Hope is one of the best Christmas gifts because we celebrate afresh the promise and power of God in the coming of the Christ-child!

Let me provide a biblical definition of hope:

Hope is embracing the certainty of God’s promised future that shapes how we live in the present.

In Matt. 2:1-18 we read about the search of the wise men from the east for a new king and the subsequent massacre of 2 years and younger boys ordered by King Herod.

This story reflects the universal, human yearning for a better future and teaches us about **how we can live a hope-filled life in a hope-deprived world.**

Jürgen Moltmann, hailed as the theologian of hope of the 20th century, says:

As long as hope does not embrace and transform the thought and action of men, it remains topsy-turvy and ineffective.⁶

Based on this story I want to share with you **THREE hope-infused practices** that would anchor our souls in turbulent times.

⁶ Cf. *The Theology of hope for the 21st Century.*

(https://books.google.ca/books?id=m2xNEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT40&lpg=PT40&dq=As+long+as+hope+does+not+embrace+and+transform+the+thought+and+action+of+men,+it+remains+topsy-turvy+and+ineffective.&source=bl&ots=qjLjklfYx7&sig=ACfU3U2MI7So6A4Iz5K8eIbLAqOc4Q1wkQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj9_dH1grf0AhUll2oFHUeDC2wQ6AF6BAgCEAM#v=onepage&q=As%20long%20as%20hope%20does%20not%20embrace%20and%20transform%20the%20thought%20and%20action%20of%20men%2C%20it%20remains%20topsy-turvy%20and%20ineffective.&f=false)

1. Be Curious: Follow the Leads and Ask Questions

Matt. 2:1 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men ***from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem,*** asking, ² ***“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose ...”***

⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” [the leading priests and teachers of religious laws] said, “for this is ***what the prophet wrote:*** ⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”

When we read this story we must keep in mind that people in ancient times considered **reality is made up of the natural and supernatural, the visible and invisible worlds; there’s no separation or compartmentalization.**

As respected pagan astrologers of the time, the wise men are “seekers”/“religious knowledge leaders”

who make concrete, predictive interpretations about human destiny and spiritual path

by studying the movement of planets and stars.⁷

When these wise men “**saw**” the shining star “**as it rose**”:

they took immediate notice and reckoned that its appearance was a sort of “revelation” of some importance and impact from heavens – a portent of the future;

they observed, paid attention to it, because they were interpreters and “prophets” of the mysterious future.

These wise men travelled from modern day Iraq to Jerusalem, approx. 800+ km, a journey that probably took 3-4 months for the caravan.

With just a sighting of an extraordinary star ...

⁷ Cf. Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 48-49; <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/astrology-and-astronomy-ancient-world>

they didn't wait around but followed the leads;

they planned for the trips and assembled a team, without any knowledge how long and where the star would lead them at the beginning;

they sought other's assistance along the way until they reached Bethlehem under God's sovereign and progressive guidance.

Today we have the availability, access, and advantage of the whole bible, the great cloud of witnesses of God's people, and a long history of faith traditions passed down through the ages, to tell us the story of God's love and His world restoring plan.

What would we do? We owe to ourselves to be curious, to find out what our future holds or who holds our future – follow the leads!

If you want to learn more about the hope we have in Jesus, check out the resource page on our website,

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/discipleshippathway/seekers-and-new-christians/>

2. Be Careful: Examine Our Motives and Methods

Matt. 2:3 King Herod was ***deeply disturbed*** [***troubled and agitated***] when he heard this ... ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" ... ⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child ...

¹⁶ Herod was ***furious*** [enraged/"fuming"] when he realized that the wise men had ***outwitted [mocked and ridiculed] him***. He sent soldiers to ***kill [murder] all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under*** ...

King Herod "was distrustful, jealous, and brutal, ruthlessly crushing any potential opposition ... He constantly feared conspiracy. He executed his wife when he suspected she was plotting against him.

Three of his sons, another wife, and his mother-in-law met the same fate when they too were suspected of conspiracy.”⁸

Roman rulers were afraid of astrological signs because they were considered to be bad omens. Also, King Herod, like most kings, would react with hostility to potential rivals or usurpers as well as to any prediction of their demise.⁹

Herod is the ultimate antithesis of the wise men:

Herod was “**wickedly curious**” and used all resources available to him to find out everything about this star because his future was at stake;

he acted out of **selfish motives, deceit, insecurity, and fear of losing his position, power, and prosperity.**

He projected **self serving glory** into the future instead of being shaped by God-intended future.

Instead of longing for a future that God will make all things right, Herod’s future is making all things right for himself.

The lessons we learn from this negative example of King Herod:

Make sure the decisions we make are **not driven by selfish ambitions, fear or insecurity.**

Our preferred future must be **aligned with God’s restoring purposes.**

The ways and means we pursue our goals must be **God-honouring and enriching others,** because hope is always relational and community oriented.

If you want to learn how to put Jesus’ commands into practice, check out the resource here:

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/embody-the-jesus-way-of-life/>

⁸ <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/12/who-was-herod/>

⁹ Keener, p. 49.

3. Be Committed: Stand on God's Promises and Stick with His Guidance

Matt. 2:5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," [the leading priests and teachers of religious laws] said, "for this is **what the prophet wrote**:⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem ... **a ruler will come from you** who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'" ...⁹ And the star they had seen in the east **guided** them to Bethlehem ... and stopped over the place where the child was ...¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they **bowed down and worshiped him**. Then they opened their treasure chests and **gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh**.

The yearning for a new and better king would not be of any surprise in a world where the Romans ruled ruthlessly, a world where greatness was seen as power, brute force, and domination.

If we were the wise men who were looking for a new king, we would have done the same thing, i.e., to go first to "the power that be," King Herod's

residence, for inquiry and affirmation – wouldn't that be a reasonable expectation?

And even when they were re-directed to Bethlehem - an obscure, little town - they would still expect that the location would be a somewhat grand and worthy for a royalty.

Julius Caesar and every Roman emperor aspired, or people believed, to ascend to the heavens, but this Prince of Shalom descended on earth, in a poor obscure part of Judea and into a small hut to start a rescue mission!

Did God the Father send God the Son to the wrong address?

This fundamentally paints an alternative picture of what is assumed or expected!

But when the star stopped over the humble home of Joseph and Mary instead of the centre of power, prestige, wealth, and control, the wise men bowed and worshipped the child and offered their valuable gifts.

Having had experienced the progressive guidance of God and witnessed firsthand the fulfillment of prophetic words ...

they **reframed** the present circumstances from the **eternal perspective**,

they were **emboldened** to live the future in the here-and-now,

and they deepened their trust in God's continuous faithfulness, [thus following His instruction not to report to Herod, cf. 2:12]

According to Benjamin Hardy, an organizational psychologist and bestselling author, **low hope people will either disengage or distract themselves when facing obstacles.**

But **high hope people are committed to find the best pathway, get other's input and feedback, use experiences and lessons to adjust and improve their pathway to reach their goals.**¹⁰

¹⁰ Benjamin Hardy, The 3 Key Aspects of Hope, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_TeZatkHHk

We should all be high hope people who are curious, careful, and committed, even when our present circumstances may not be what we've wanted or expected.

If you want to learn how you can reframe your present situation, I recommend *Rewriting Your Broken Story: The Power of an Eternal Perspective* https://www.amazon.ca/Rewriting-Your-Broken-Story-Perspective-ebook/dp/B01D8W4IKY/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=Rewriting+your+broken+story&qid=1637971342&s=digital-text&sr=1-1

We continue to lean on God's promises and His faithfulness, knowing full well that Jesus' first coming deepens our trust in his second coming to set the whole world right once and for all.

Let me close by repeating the definition of hope:

Hope is embracing the certainty of God's promised future that shapes how we live in the present.

May this hope shape our present and direct how we live in the here-and-now. Amen.