

INVITATION TO *Hope*

You better watch out
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town
He's making a list
He's checking it twice;
He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice
Santa Claus is coming to town
He sees you when you're sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness sake!
You better watch out!
You better not cry
Better not pout
I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is coming to town

How many of you are familiar with this "Christmas Song"? Wow, growing up listening to these words used to make me nervous. Every year at Christmas I would think over the past year and evaluate my behavior. Was I good enough? Had I been good enough to get presents from Santa this year? I would hope that I had been good enough for goodness sake!

The most amazing thing about singing this song all those years as a child was that somehow I had taken the words of the song and attributed them to how not only Santa saw me, but it was how God saw me.

God was watching over me, God saw me whether I was sleeping or awake. God knew if I had been bad or good. And if I wasn't good, then.....well I would never get to heaven when I died. You see, I understood eternal life as something that I earned through my behavior, well, my good behavior. And when I really thought about my behavior I felt at times hopeful, because I had been "good" but then there were those times when I felt hopeless, because I had been "bad". That is one tough way to live!

Jesus came into the world to share with us that eternal life happens, not only if we are bad or good, and not only when

we die, but it is present right now! Our hope for eternal life isn't dependent on our behavior good or bad. It isn't even only what happens to us when we die. It is now! Eternal life is for living right now!!! Listen to these words from 1 Peter 1:3-5 as written in "The Message" bible.

"What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you'll have it all—life healed and whole."

This is the hope that Jesus shares with us. That God is present with us right now, God isn't some far off being that waits to see how we behave so we can get to that place called heaven. But that's kind of God that I grew up believing. Maybe you did too. Many Christians, like you and me, believed that eternal life, life abundant, life with God was all about where you will spend eternity after you die – kind of like purchasing a life-insurance plan for the hereafter. And if we manage to be good enough here on earth then when we die we get to go to heaven and be like the good people who will live for eternity, forever. We will live in big mansions with Jesus and wear awesome jewels and walk streets of gold. Eternal life was basically about getting to live with the "Good Christians". You know the type, they never get mad, they are always loving, generous, kind, and they keep perfectly clean homes, so if you ever went to their house it was spotless.

So even now when I hear the phrase "eternal life" it's hard to not just think of it as life after death. Don't get me wrong, it is true that to have eternal life means that death is not the final word...that beyond the death of these human bodies is a life with God everlasting, That's beautiful, and yes, it is good news. But it's not the whole picture.

Because eternal life is more than just what happens after we die. It is also about life before death. Eternal life can't just be about time that never ends – and here's why. We need hope not only for our future, but we need hope for right now. Many of us have and continue to experience fear and anxiety in all kinds situations in our past, in future and even right now. We have concerns about jobs, finances, friendships, neighbors, family members. We can become hopeless. We can't change the past and we can't control

the future. We can become hopeless. Lost in the things that have happened in the past or the fears of the future. We often we spend our time, our time right now, and squander it either regretting what we've done or what's been done to us in the past, or fearing what will or won't happen to us in the future. We can become hopeless in the present and when we do, we miss out on the abundant life Jesus has for us right now.

So if the promise of eternal life that Jesus speaks of in our reading for today is only something that happens after we die, then it just doesn't feel like good enough news. But Jesus offer us more than just a hope for eternal life in the future. He offers us eternal life, a new beginning, a new start, a new hope right now. It is in his constant and ever loving presence. Life can bring us many losses or deaths. Death of relationship, job, finances.

God brings new life and hope from the most difficult situations.

It is the truth of Who God is in Jesus. And God is the giver of all life, and as children of God we receive the gift of eternal life right now and it is not dependent on being good enough, or having enough faith or having the correct belief. You see, no matter what our circumstances may be. Eternal life right now has something to say about letting go of our resentment about the past and our anxiety about the future. Because when it comes down to it, all our regrets and fears that rob us of the present moment. And God is always in the present moment.

So if fear and regret are the things that rob us of the present moment then when Jesus speaks of eternal life, it isn't just about what happens when we die. Eternal life is life that is available now and it's life that comes from knowing that death has finally been put in it's place. Everlasting life is available now. This isn't about just when we die... because this God is present to you most especially – not in the past or future – but in the present moment. Christ is not something that we remember from ancient history –it is always a present reality.

Life everlasting is always about the present. It's about a promise in Christ made in the past, which continues in the future but is most especially for right now in the present.

Maybe you live in a place of resentment or regret for what has happened in the past. Or maybe you live in anxiety or fear of the future, and if so, please know that the truth of Christ is present with you. Right here. Right now. Your hope is in Jesus.

God is here. The eternal truth is found in the way God is present to us in each moment. This present moment is a gift to you from God. Because here's the thing: God has already redeemed your past and is already present in the future that you keep worrying about. And the life that God brings us is abundant, now, life eternal. It is happening right now and it is more real and more powerful and more eternal than anything you have to fear or resent or regret. So welcome to the hope of life eternal. Amen.