

Second Sunday of Advent – 2007

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
December 9, 2007*

Romans 15:4-13

Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, so that, through patient endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we would have hope.

May the God of patient endurance and encouragement give you a fitting unity in Christ Jesus, so that, in full accord, with one voice, you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so welcome one another, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. Because I tell you, Christ became a servant of the circumcision for the sake of God's truth, so that the promises to the patriarchs would be confirmed and the nations would glorify God for his mercy.

Just as it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the nations, and I will sing to your name." And again it says, "Rejoice, nations, with his people." And again, "All nations, praise the Lord, and let all peoples give him praise." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will also be the one who rises to rule the nations; in him the nations will hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you live in faith, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sermon

This is third year in which our Advent services have had a three-part structure. I'm not sure if it works. Have you noticed the structure? It's there in the bulletin, in the three section headings: "Remembering the Long Night of Waiting," "Celebrating the Incarnation," and "Renewing the Wait." It's here in the candles. We light them at three separate times during the service. And it's in the Scripture readings. First we read from the Old Testament, then from one of the Gospels, and last from one of the epistles. (Last week's "Gospel" reading was from one of the epistles. But it was the exception that proves the rule!) Have you noticed the structure? You must have noticed the structure.

That structure is an attempt to reflect the structure of the biblical story. At the center of that story is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who comes in human flesh, and who, by his body and blood, by his death and resurrection, secures the redemption of all creation. That's the center. But the story begins with ancient promises and hopes. The story of Jesus is an Israel story. Without Israel, there is no Jesus! And the story remains open. It's not over yet. We're waiting for the story to end. By faith we trust that it will be a good ending, a very good ending. Meanwhile we have promises, and we have hope. Because of Jesus Christ, it's possible to have lots of hope.

Hope comes naturally to most people, I think. Hope imagines how things can be in the face of how things are. Parents raising an autistic child hope for new research and for effective treatment. A college student in her final semester hopes for a leg-up onto the career ladder. A confused twelve-year-old hopes to survive his parents' ugly divorce. A single mother in the grip of a payday lender hopes for a way out of debt. Rising and falling nations hope to assert themselves effectively in coming international power struggles. Hope imagines how things can be in the face of how things are.

Not every hope will be realized — which is a very good thing — not every hope will be realized, but Scripture certainly validates some hopes: that children won't suffer from diseases or from the folly of so-called "grown-ups," that justice will liberate people trapped in poverty, that peace and harmony will flourish among the nations. Scripture validates some hopes. In fact, Scripture was written, in part, to encourage our hope. It does so by counseling a patient, long view of things. Scripture is honest about

hope. “We hope,” Scripture says, “for what we don’t see yet. Because if we do see it, then there’s no need for hope.”

Scripture also encourages our hope by indicating mile markers along the way. Paul’s letter to the Romans is, more than anything, about Gentiles being gathered together with Jews as one people of God in Jesus Christ. Paul writes over and over that Gentiles have been gathered and are being gathered. “You have been grafted in!” he writes. The vision, the hope, is being accomplished. There’s still that problem of a Jewish rejection of Jesus. But “give it time,” Paul writes. And be encouraged by Christ’s gathering of the nations – because the promises and their fulfilment go together.

Not every hope will be realized, but Jesus makes lots of hope possible because of what he’s done. I probably made it sound like a small thing: “the Gentiles, the nations, are being gathered.” But this is no small thing. A great wall — more substantial than any West Bank security barrier — separated Jew from Gentile. A wall of tradition and animosity. A wall of ignorance and suspicion. A wall of theological expectation. A wall of covenant requirement.

Jesus was born a child of Abraham under the Mosaic covenant. He was circumcised. He kept kosher. He observed the Sabbath and the great festivals. Jesus was a Jew, sent to the Jewish people. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he said (Matthew 15:24). “He came to his own,” John writes in his Gospel (John 1:11a).

Yet the great wall began to crack and to crumble. Jesus blessed a Syro-Phoenician woman and a Roman centurion. He sent his disciples toward the ends of the earth, to all nations. And he poured out his Holy Spirit on Gentiles as well as on Jews. All of this giving life to ancient promises: that Abraham would be a source of blessing to all peoples, that God’s servant would give light to the nations, that God’s praise would be sung far and wide and in every tongue.

With all of this underway in Christ — and we are among the nations who have been gathered, we, the church of Jesus Christ, give praise to God throughout this wide, good earth . . . How can we not have hope, when God is unfolding such ancient promises? How can we not have hope?

How can we not have hope? Because nothing seems to change. Because nothing’s getting better. Because the good news is old news. And kids still get sick or get caught in the crossfire. Armies and insurrectionist bands are still on the march. The poor hear more good news than they experience. And this whole “Jew and Gentile, one in Christ” thing? That’s a dream. It seems less likely than ever. The only way we get together as Jew and Gentile is when Christians forget about Jesus. So how can we have hope?

How can we have hope? Romans 15 sees hope coming from several directions.

Hope comes “through patient endurance.” Now, is it my imagination, or does hope sometimes come easier to people who shouldn’t have any? Perhaps hope is a byproduct of suffering or of despair. Perhaps we who despise hope have little reason to hope because life is good. And if life is good, who needs hope?

Hope comes “through the encouragement of the Scriptures.” Again and again, Scripture encourages us to hope and to never give up. Perhaps if I let biblical promises supplant my skepticism, perhaps if I accept what the Bible indicates — that the story and purposes of God are so much bigger, so much wider than the view from where I stand — perhaps then hope will win me over.

Hope comes as God fills us with “joy and peace.” Did you ever feel guilty for being content, for being calm, for being happy even, when the world is in so much pain? Did you ever feel guilty? And did you ever notice how your guilt did nothing to alleviate the world’s pain? But to receive joy and peace from God in the midst of this world — that kindles our hope for a better world to come, if we let it.

Hope comes from “living in faith.” It takes no faith to say, “Who can have hope in such a sorry world?” It takes no faith to say that. But put your faith into action to be an agent of hope: to reform the payday lending industry, to provide respite for a family with an autistic child, to mentor a college student on the cusp of a new career — put your faith into action to be an agent of hope, spread hope, and you just

might catch hope! And if you can make someone's day better, imagine what God can do, imagine what God will do, until Christ comes again to put all things right!

Finally, Romans 15 sees hope coming from the "power of the Holy Spirit." A certain amount of energy is required for even one candle flame to bring light into a dark room. So also we need power from the Holy Spirit to maintain hope in a hopeless world. We need power from the Holy Spirit to energize a living faith that seeks to give life the shape of things to come. We need power from the Holy Spirit to fill us with joy and peace from God, especially when the going is difficult. We need power from the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and hearts and minds to Scripture, to hear what was written there, not in general, but written for us, written for our encouragement. We need power from the Holy Spirit to enable us to hang in there when despair, or worse, boredom, would derail us. Hope comes from the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to the church.

So we can have hope. It's a gift from God, who knows we need it.

Hope imagines how things can be in the face of how things are. In Christ, though, hope is something more than that. Hope knows how things were. Hope sees what God has done and is doing through Jesus Christ. And hope imagines not just any old thing, but a world remade, a world reborn. Hope imagines a world with no need of hope because every good thing we have hoped for will be there. Hope imagines all that God has promised in Jesus Christ, and hope prays: "Come, Lord Jesus."