

Sermon for Advent 2A

The Text: Romans 15:4-7, 12-13

Radiant with Hope

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Linus and Lucy are sitting in front of TV when Lucy says to her brother Linus: “Go get me a glass of water.” “Why should I do anything for you?” Linus replies. Lucy promises, “On your 75th birthday, I’ll bake you a cake.” Linus gets up and, going to the kitchen, says, “Life is more pleasant when you have something to look forward to!”

Thank God that at the end of each year, we have the birth of our Saviour to look forward to. Each year our world is more and more in need of the hope Christ’s coming to our world brings. Life is tough without an indestructible hope. We most of all need hope when the prospects for something better look bleakest.

There’s a shortage of hope in our world today. Our media doesn’t help with its focus on bad news. Our TV, radio and newspapers make it easier for people to be pessimistic about the future. For us Christians, pessimism is a luxury we cannot afford.

But Christians, of all people, have every reason to be radiant with hope, because we’ve been given a hope that is radiant and resilient, and that nothing can destroy. A common saying is: “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” The greatest book of hope, the Bible, suggests that the reverse is true: “Where there’s hope, there’s life.”

The word “hope” was rarely used in the pagan world in the time of Christ’s coming. Hope was seen as little more than a wish, like, “I hope it will rain tomorrow”. Many people around us no longer hope for the best. Instead, they just hope they can avoid the worst. For the followers of Jesus, His life, death and resurrection changed that. Jesus enabled His followers to be radiant with a hope that only grew stronger in the face of hardships and persecution. The joyful certainty Christians attached to their hope of the resurrection and eternal life, made their hope something other people began to desire.

Today’s text reminds us that no matter how bleak and gloomy the world around us seems, our Bibles are filled with lots of words of encouragement and joyful messages of hope. In His word, Jesus encourages you to “rejoice in your hope (Romans 12:12).” Why? You can overflow with joy because you have access to the greatest hope in the universe. God’s word can fill you with a hope that survives everything – misfortune, pain or loss, and gives a hope that thrives in the face of gloomy forecasts about the future by our media experts.

The better you get to know your Bible, the better you will see how God has so often intervened unexpectedly to give His people hope and help just when all the odds seemed stacked against them. Throughout the Bible, we see how God's faithful people continued to glow with hope when there seemed to be no reason for hope. The prophet Habakkuk gives us a good example of this. With words that have helped countless Christians ever since, Habakkuk says "Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive falls and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation."

It is hope that people of all ages need from the Bible more than anything else. From the beginning to the end, the Scriptures are coloured with an expectation of better things ahead, an expectation that grows stronger the more God's people suffer. The hope the Bible gives has withstood the test of time and is as powerful today as ever. This hope tells us that the best is still to come, for which the present is but a preparation. Jesus came to fill the present with meaning and purpose by enabling us to live in the light of eternity. St. Paul offers us these words of encouragement: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal(2 Corinthians 4:17-18)." We need all the encouragement we can get. Mark Twain, commenting of the rarity of words of encouragement given and received, said, "I can live for two months on one compliment."

A Christian school principal reflected on how to deal with a student who was constantly causing trouble in a classroom. The boy's background was difficult, and he had no motivation to study. He was called into the principal's office. When he came in, the principal looked at his hands and said, "*You have good, thin hands – the hands of a surgeon.*" Nothing more was said. The boy was dismissed, but his behaviour began to change and he did become a skilled surgeon. He was given a vision of hope for what he could become.

Barnabas was an outstanding example of an encouraging Christian in the New Testament. He encouraged St. Paul and spoke highly of him to other people. He always had positive comments to make about others as he saw God's grace work wonderfully in the lives of his fellow Christians. He saw the potential in St. Mark when Paul rejected Mark and worked wonders with Mark. God blessed the work of both Paul and Barnabas when they went their separate ways. A climate of encouragement can raise the morale in a congregation or church community and contribute in a splendid way to its growth. We must avoid being pessimistic about others. Instead, let's say to as many fellow church members as we can: "*I thank God for all the good work you're doing for Him behind the scenes.*"

Words of encouragement achieve what all the complaints and criticisms in the world never can. Give words of encouragement either over the phone, by email or face to face. Words of encouragement have the power to bring out the best in others. See the people God has placed in your life as His gifts to you for your growth in faith, hope and love. As you thank God for them, God opens your eyes to see more of their good qualities. Now, how good is that?

In today's text, the God of hope, who gives us hope like no one else can, wants to fill you with a joy that keeps bouncing back and seeks to cheer those around you. Jesus says: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete (John 15:11)." This pre-Christmas season you can rejoice in God because God rejoices over you. As God's word declares, "As a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you (Isaiah 62:5)."

This Advent season, let us all be co-creators of each other's joy. Then we will, as our text wants us to, "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (v7)." To welcome means to invite others into your life, to share what God has given you with each other. This time of year is a superb time to practice hospitality with those you haven't done so with before. In the practice of hospitality, our guests so often bring us a greater blessing than we give to them. Jesus says, "If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that (Matthew 5:47)." A new Church year gives us all a chance to treat people we rarely speak with in the same warm, welcoming way our Lord Jesus treats us.

In the light of eternity, anything that keeps us apart from one another needs to be got rid of as soon as possible. Forgiveness is God's barrier-breaking, future opening gift to you, so that you can leave the past behind and make a new start with God and neighbour in this new season of grace. Embrace these words from your Lord, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11)." This hope is so sure and certain, and already making its home inside us, that St. Paul can speak of it in the past tense: "For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:24)."

Faith and hope feed on and strengthen one another. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1)." Hope fills us with confidence; while faith keeps our expectations for the future God has waiting for us growing stronger and stronger. There can be no better way to conclude than with the exhilarating blessing at the end of today's second reading: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in your faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope (Romans 15:13)."