

Romans 15:4-13

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name”;

10 and again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”;

11 and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him”;

12 and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

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

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

The ghost of Christmas past resides in my attic. Each year I carefully climb the rickety ladder and bring down red and green plastic boxes filled with the holiday cheer of yesteryear.

I bet some of you do the same thing. It's an American tradition.

I must admit that I get a bit frustrated lugging those stuffed boxes and filling up my garage with the paraphernalia of the season.

But, there's something good about it too.

Those boxes are like a collection of blessings from the past. We still have the baby's first Christmas ornaments, the gifts given by members of former congregations I have served, and the nativity set that has been in our family for years.

No wonder Christmas evokes such strong feelings. The hopes and fears of all my years are stored in the attic. Each year I bring them down, dust them off and hang them on the tree.

In a way that describes how we prepare during the season of Advent. We dust off the old stories of faith and tell them again.

In a season filled with lights we talk about that one great light that shone in the darkness long ago. We bring the hopes and fears of all our years to the manger.

O COME O COME EMMANUEL

We live in a world that is in dire need of hope. If it weren't for bad news we'd have no news at all.

The economy is in the tank. The job market is lean. More people than ever are hungry and homeless. There are wars and rumors of war. Terror continues to rear its ugly head.

And I know that many of you struggle quietly with sorrow and a profound sense of loss.

The darkness of winter is literal and figurative. Like ancient Israel we too cry in our own way, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" and ransom us. Deliver us from this darkness.

Today's Scripture talks about the hope of God, the hope that does indeed deliver us from the heart of darkness.

Paul had this word for the small, struggling band of Christians in Rome,

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

Isn't that a wonderful Christmas wish? God fill you with hope. God give you joy and peace.

Many of our greeting cards convey a similar wish. We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

But, we need to remember that the hope of this glorious season is based upon more than just wishful thinking. It is based upon the promises and character of God.

THE SOURCE OF HOPE

Paul's benediction of hope is more than just a lovely greeting card based upon sentiment. It is statement of trust based upon God's word.

Look at verse 4. Paul writes, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

If you are short on hope dust off the old stories of faith found in the Bible and read them again. Paul tells us that the old, old story wasn't just for those people long ago and far away. The story of Scripture is for us today. It is a source of instruction and encouragement.

Sometimes I think we come to Scripture with the wrong attitude. Some of us come to Scripture and ask, "How can I use this word to prove my point? What verses can I quote to prove my enemies wrong?" Scripture is used as a club to win the battle of ideas.

Others come to Scripture with an air of superiority. I like that story about how Thomas Jefferson took a Bible and cut out all those stories that he didn't like or agree with. He truly had a holy Bible! And that's how many of us approach Scripture.

But, Paul tells us that Scripture is not something that we judge. Nor is Scripture something that we use to judge others.

Scripture is a source of encouragement and hope.

We should go to Scripture looking for light in our darkness. We should go to Scripture looking for hope.

We should go to Scripture asking, "What is the good news in this passage? What message of hope is God bringing me through this story of faith?"

We come to Scripture expecting to be blessed by the power of God's Spirit. And this passage tells us that those expectations will not be disappointed.

Advent is a season of great expectations.

We look forward to family reunions and tasty meals. We look forward to parties that are fun. We want to please the ones we love with thoughtful gifts. We look forward to inspiring music and meaningful worship services.

But, at the heart of all those expectations is an old, old story that still has the power to change the hearts of people today.

A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

A friend reminded me of this. She said that she did not become a believer until she was an adult. And it was as an adult that she ran across that Charlie Brown Christmas Special.

I'm sure most of you have seen it.

After picking a poor Christmas tree and being roundly criticized by Lucy and the gang Charlie shouted out in frustration, "What is Christmas all about anyway?"

Linus comes to the center of the stage, a spotlight is focused on him and he recites the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke. And then Linus says, "That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown."

The Peanuts characters are listening as Linus tells the story and they are changed by the story.

No longer do they criticize Charlie Brown for his poor choice of trees. They decorate the little tree together, give Charlie Brown a big "Merry Christmas" and sing a Christmas carol, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

This special was controversial when it first aired. The "suits" at CBS thought that no one would want to hear the Christmas story, especially from King James Version of the Bible.

But, they were wrong.

Schultz insisted on telling the true story of Christmas, and the special was honored with an Emmy and a Peabody award. One critic hailed Linus' telling of the Christmas story as the "dramatic highlight of the season."

My friend said that the retelling of the Christmas story was part of what changed her as well.

At that point in her life she needed encouragement and instruction. She, like the Wise Men of old was seeking something greater than her own life.

And the old, old story still had the power to make a difference ... even when a cartoon character was delivering the message!

THE GOD WHO ENCOURAGES

According to our passage for today the Scriptures offer encouragement and hope. The reason is that the God revealed in those Scriptures is a hopeful and encouraging God.

Notice that Scripture and God are described in exactly the same way in our lesson for today.

In verse 4 we read that “by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures” we have hope. And then in verse 5 God is described as “the God of steadfastness and encouragement.”

In a world that is constantly changing one thing remains the same, the promises of God’s love as revealed in Jesus Christ. We can approach life with a basic sense of trust because we believe that God is trustworthy. God is steadfast.

In Jesus Christ we see that God is not out to get us. In Jesus Christ we see that God is out to save us!

That view of God as revealed in Scripture not only changes our mind; it also changes how we live. If we believe in the God who brings us encouragement and hope we become encouraging and hopeful in our attitude toward others.

Paul makes this point in several different ways.

In verse 5 he tells us that this view of God enables us to “live in harmony” and glorify God with “one voice.” What if our attitudes and actions toward others were not based upon how those other people treat us but upon how God has treated us?

That’s what Christmas is all about.

The angels’ promise of peace on earth and good will toward men and women is not based upon an unrealistic view of who we are and what we can do. That would truly be wishful thinking, not hope.

Instead peace and good will are the result of what God promises to do. In the Christmas story God “invades” the earth with his divine presence. God becomes one of us and in so doing changes everything in a very down to earth, human way.

And the power of that story is a present reality. The retelling of the Christmas story changes things today.

If God is with us here and now, does that change what you believe and how you act? It should.

According to this passage we should be more peaceful, more joyful and more encouraging. We act this way because in the Scriptures we have met the one true God who has revealed Himself to be peaceful, joyful and encouraging.

We have a sense of peace in our lives because we believe that God is faithful, and the Holy Spirit has convinced us that this is true.

WELCOME FOR ALL PEOPLE

The holidays and especially Christmas are marked by a sense of hospitality. There is a general expectation among people of faith and people who have no faith that this is a time that we should welcome people into our lives. The holidays are a time when we should be grateful and gracious.

This fits very nicely with the final emphasis of today's passage.

Paul wrote that just as God has welcomed us into the family of faith so God wants us to welcome others into the family in his name. Verses 7-12 talk about the hospitality of God in terms of the Gentiles.

Literally the word Gentiles means "the nations."

The Jews are God's chosen people, but they were chosen to be a light to the world, to bring God's message to the nations. And one of the prophetic signs that the kingdom had come would be the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Paul quotes several Old Testament passages to prove his point. The salvation of the nations, the Gentiles would be a sign of divine hope.

Those strangers from the east, the Wise Men represent this hope in the story. The star of Bethlehem can be seen throughout the whole wide world. God is doing something greater with the birth of Jesus. This was about more than just the salvation of one nation.

What Israel forgot and what we often forget as well is that God has not chosen us for special privilege. God has chosen us for special service. Christians are in the hospitality business.

Somebody told me this past week that we Christians shouldn't come church with a napkin on our lap, wanting to be fed. Christians should come to church wearing an apron, wanting to serve.

And that service should not be limited to people who are just like us. Throughout the Bible you see that God's plan was expansive, welcoming more and more people into the kingdom as a sign of God's grace and glory.

The Bible tells us that God loved the world so much that he sent his Son into the world. The incarnation is the flesh and blood revelation of that precious message. It is (as the Christmas story puts it) "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

It is good news for ALL PEOPLE.

We do not limit the Christmas party to just family and friends. We find a way to welcome more and more people.

We want all people to hear this message. We want all people to see the glory of God. We want all people to experience the grace and forgiveness of God as revealed in Jesus. We want all people to know the power of hope.

We want this because this is what God wants. The good news is for all people. When it comes to God's hope there's enough for the whole wide world.

A CHRISTMAS LETTER

This past week Gradye Parsons, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly sent his Christmas letter to the church. In it he quoted an Advent hymn, People Look East.

A line from that hymn goes,
"Angels, announce with shouts of mirth Christ who brings new life to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.
People, look east and sing today: Love the Lord is on the way."

Gradye wrote,

"Eleanor Farjeon, a British children's author who penned the Advent hymn, "People, Look East," as well as 'Morning Has Broken,' had to have been a morning person. I imagined her skipping her way down a garden path on a sunlit morning – until I read more about her life.

Farjeon was a shy, home-schooled child in poor health with poor eyesight who spent the majority of her days in an attic stacked with books.

Apparently, her infirmities did not dampen what had to be a resilient spirit, even in the midst of the cold, harsh reality of winter:

'Birds, though you long have ceased to build, guard the nest that must be filled. Even the hour when wings are frozen God for fledging time has chosen.'

Perhaps we, too, retreat up to the attic. There, we rummage around and find treasures, among them the carefully packed nativity set that has been passed down for generations – generations that have seen ups and downs, comings and goings, springs and winters.

Once more, we will position that resilient crèche in a prominent place. Once more, it will remind us of a miraculous story: An angel of the Lord tells Joseph, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'" (Matt. 1:23).

People, look east: Once more, Love the Lord is on the way!"

A FINAL WORD OF HOPE

Gradye is right. The hope of Christmas is too powerful to be confined to the attic. The hope of Christmas is too powerful to be confined to a celebration that comes but once a year.

The hope of Christmas is all around us every day of the year. The love of God as revealed in Jesus has become flesh, and every day there are flesh and blood opportunities to celebrate that hope.

But, during this precious season of Advent, the darkest time of the year the hope seems to shine more brightly. And we have this opportunity to once again see the light that shines in our darkness.

This past week at Bible study we talked about how certain Scripture passages had been a source of encouragement and hope in our dark times.

We mentioned the 23rd Psalm and other classic expressions of God's grace such as:

"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son ..."

"Thou doest keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee."

I'm sure you have your own favorites.

But, this morning I want to challenge you to add one more verse to your memory list. It's the last verse in our lesson for today, and it's a blessing. Paul wrote,

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

Make that phrase not only a part of mind but also a part of your heart this Christmas season.

Learn in a new way this Advent season the power of hope.

Amen.