

Romans 15:4, 12-13

Second Sunday in Advent (Series A)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

God's Gift of Hope

December 4, 2022

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” . . . Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

The first time I preached on this text, back in 1989, the world was far different that it is today. It was a time of change in communist Europe. The Berlin Wall fell; political reforms were taking place in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev met with the pope, opening a time of religious change in Russia. After years of the cold war and living in fear of nuclear holocaust, people were breathing easier. There was a sense of relief and optimism that the world was changing for the better.

But the world didn't change for the better, did it? While the focus may not have been on the cold war, there were still many other wars to occupy our attention. Go back and read the newspapers, and you will see stories about all manner of human suffering. People are still dying in a senseless war between Russia and Ukraine. We have seen far too many mass shootings or killing sprees over the years, including one in Nova Scotia a few years back and one in Saskatchewan this summer. Add to that the many in shootings in the US, and we see some real problems. Recent earthquakes here in Alberta and volcanic activity in Hawaii have given apocalyptic environmentalists a new opportunity to tell us that we are driving ourselves into extinction. All these things, not to mention a host of other, more personal difficulties, can produce pessimism, cynicism, and feelings of futility—all of which can lead to a greater feeling of hopelessness among people.

Thankfully, God has a wonderful gift for people living in this troubled and uncertain world. It is the gift of hope in Christ—a real, certain and sure hope. Paul quotes Isaiah, saying: *“The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.”* The expectant hope of Advent is in the Lord who came to save us and who is coming soon to bring us to our final rest. But even now, God wants us to have hope, to overflow with hope, as we trust in His love for us in the Saviour born for us, the Saviour who is our living hope.

One of the Christmas traditions at our house is to watch the movie, *White Christmas*. Ever since Bing Crosby sang the words, “I'm dreaming of a white Christmas”, that song has become a classic. Record companies say that it is the number one Christmas song ever recorded. As I was preparing this sermon, I wondered if the song *White Christmas* is so popular because that is what many people think hope is—a dream of things we want to have happen in our lives, whether that hope is for a white Christmas, or if it is for something far more important. For many people, hope is nothing more than wishful thinking. The dictionary even defines hope as ‘wishing for something’. When we say we hope that we have good weather, or that we have snow for Christmas, we really mean that we wish that the weather will be what we want. Even though things don't always go the way we want, at least we can dream that they might be—some day.

God wants us to have hope—and His gift of hope is much more than just a wishful thinking kind of hope. It is a hope that is sure and certain because it is anchored securely to God's Word of promise and is grounded in His gracious power at work for our salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In our text today, Paul calls God the *God of hope*, because God gives hope to His people. He gives us the sure hope of a final victory over all the pain and suffering of this world. He gives us the sure hope of forgiveness for our sin, the sin that results not only in hopelessness for this life, but which would trap us in the hopelessness of hell for all eternity. He gives us the sure and certain hope that Christ is coming again to take His faithful people home, and that when He comes, we will live with Him in perfect joy and peace forever.

We need that hope for our lives! We need hope because there are so many things that happen each and every day that can make us feel hopeless. We need hope, because this world, so stained and marred by sin, including the sins that we commit in our lives each and every day, can be a very dismal, hopeless place. We need hope when the doctor tells us that we have cancer or that we need an operation. We need hope when we are confronted with either our own death or the death of someone we love. We need hope when we aren't sure how we are going to make ends meet, or when we find out we have been laid off at work. We need hope because there are countless problems that seem insurmountable in our lives—problems in our family, at work, at school or in our society. We need hope because we are sinful people, and our sin accuses us before God and calls for His punishment, the punishment of eternal death in the hopelessness of hell. We need hope because without it life isn't worth living.

It has been said that a person can live 40 days without food, 4 days without water, 4 minutes without air, and 4 seconds without hope. From the very foundation of the world, God knew how much we need hope for our hopeless lives. And He has provided us with that hope. In our text Paul said: ***“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*** God sets His gift of hope before us throughout His Word of promise. Every word of Scripture which tells us of the Saviour Jesus Christ; every word that assures us of our forgiveness in Christ; every word that reminds us that in Christ God Himself has come to save us, brings hope to our troubled lives. Hope shines through the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem and to a special, newborn child. Hope comes through the voices of the angels who filled the skies over Bethlehem as they proclaim their message of peace, goodwill toward mankind. Hope radiates from the cross on which Jesus died for our sins, and from the tomb that is left empty when He rises to life again. Isaiah speaks of that hope in our Old Testament lesson when he tells us that ***“They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.”*** (Isaiah 11:9–10, ESV) John assures us of our hope when he proclaimed: ***“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*** (Matthew 3:11–12, ESV)

My dear people, loved by God, your God, your Father in heaven, the eternal Son, your Saviour and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, your Comforter wants you to have hope. Paul prays that ***by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*** That is why Jesus Christ came into the world, that through Him we may have that sure and certain hope. Redeemed, restored and forgiven in Christ, we have a hope that is greater than the illness which can confine us to a hospital bed. We have hope that enables us to be content both in times of abundance and in times of want. His hope holds us together when everything seems to be falling apart. When we have Christ, we have all joy and peace and hope, even though we may not always feel it as much as we would like.

Even a great man of faith, like Martin Luther had his moments. Luther was once caught in a dark and gloomy mood. Katie, his beloved wife, tried to cheer him, but her efforts were in vain. At last she put on a funeral garment and went around the house in deepest mourning. When Luther observed this, he asked, “Who is dead?” “God,” replied Katie. “Don’t talk so foolish!”, retorted the great Reformer, “God is not dead!”. “Well, my dear Doctor,” answered his wife, “you are so downhearted that I concluded God must be dead, and so I put on my mourning apparel.” Luther understood the lesson his good wife wished to teach him, embraced her, and forgot his cares. He put His hope in the living Lord, whose gift of hope is ours for every need of our lives. Luther understood this when he wrote in the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress: Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none - He's judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell him. The Word they still shall let remain nor any thanks have for it. He's by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and spirit. And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife, though these all be gone, our victory has been won; the kingdom ours remaineth.* (LSB 656, st. 3-4)

The devil knows that his greatest weapon against us is despair and hopelessness. But his arsenal is powerless next to the hope that God gives us through Jesus Christ. When the cares and worries of the world intrude into our lives, we still have the hope that comes through the dying and rising Saviour. Paul reminds us that God’s Word was written to

give us hope—to show us again and again how God has been the help and strength of His people. His Spirit is poured out upon us so that we may overflow with hope—a hope that knows by faith all that Christ has done for us. Should our hope waver, we can go to His Word, and that Word strengthens our failing hope. We can come, as we do today, to His altar, where Christ comes to us in His special gift of forgiveness to strengthen our hope. In these advent days we are assured that the root of Jesse has sprung up. Christ has come! In Him God's gift of hope has been opened for us. And He will come again to turn His living hope into living fulfilment in heaven's glory. Amen.