

THE ADVENT OF HOPE

(11/27/11)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 42: Responsive Reading # 12 (page 480)
Romans 5:1-5

*“. . . we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us.”
(Romans 5:3-5)*

First, I would like to give credit to Scott McKeen for giving me the theme for our Advent reflections this year.

As you know, every week I give Bob L’Heureux the scripture lessons and the sermon title I plan to use the coming Sunday; he comes up with the hymns that he believes will fit what he suspects will be the theme of my sermon. Perhaps I am more transparent than I think about what I think, but he does an outstanding job of fitting the hymns to the sermon.

Not many of you know it, but Scott has the same problem – or challenge. Every week, not always *early* every week, and often only after several patient reminders, I e-mail Scott the theme of the service or sermon for the following Sunday. He then comes up with a brief, encapsulated articulation of this for the sign in front of our church. Scott is also handicapped by the fact that our options are limited by the number of letters we can fit in the available space on the sign.

Last Sunday, in response to Scott’s inquiry, I told him that this Sunday would be the first Sunday in Advent. I told him that the theme, as symbolized in the lighting of the first Advent candle, was the theme of hope. I said that we could put “The First Sunday of Advent” or “Hope” on the sign, but neither of us was thrilled with either option.

Then Scott suggested that “The Advent of Hope” would combine both of these themes. Perfect! So that is the phrase on our sign; it is the title of my sermon; and it has provided me for the theme for our Advent reflections. So thank you, Scott!

Today, the first Sunday in Advent, David and Barbara Crane lit the first of our advent candles -- the candle of hope. Christmas is a time of hope.

What is hope? The word is commonly used to describe a state of affairs we would like to see either in our lives or in the world. For example, I might say that I hope that our economy will rebound. I hope we can end our armed occupation of Afghanistan. I hope my BMW with 250,000 miles on it will last another ten years.

Some hopes are more realistic than others. I might hope my children will make a lot of money and, in loving gratitude for all that Darlene and I have done for them, will not only provide for us in our old age but also enable us to take an early retirement. Some of you are smiling. I can read lips. Several of you just muttered, “In your dreams!” To be honest, if I were to bet on which of these hopes is the most likely to be realized, I think I would put my money on my car.

I don’t want to imply that the hope list I just ran through and thousands of other hopes like them are trivial or unimportant. I do hope the economy rebounds. I don’t like to see people hurting financially. I do hope we can extricate ourselves from Afghanistan sooner rather than later and without leaving them in a state of chaos. I hope we did well in our recent pledge drive. I hope that we will all be happy and healthy in the New Year.

We use the word “hope” to cover a broad range of desires. In many of these cases, a more appropriate word would be “wish.” I *would* actually like to get five hundred thousand miles out of my car. But by using the word hope to describe that desire, I may be dulling my sensitivity to a deeper dimension of hope, the spiritual dimension of hope that is an integral part of the message of this Advent season.

What do you hope for? In these moments, I invite you to hold in your mind and in your heart one thing that you hope will happen or come to pass in the year to come. It may have to do with your own life situation. It may be a hope you cherish concerning a loved one. It may have to do with the resolution of some problem within your family. It may have to do with a state of affairs that you would like to see come to pass in our nation or the world. Pick something, your deepest hope, and hold it in your mind.

When we turn to the Bible, we encounter three different aspects, characteristics, or dimensions of hope. Let’s look at each of these to see how they might strengthen our understanding of that hope which we hold in our hearts.

First, the Bible tells us that hope is ultimately a hope in God. Whenever hope is used in other than a purely secular manner, as for example when Paul says he hopes to be able to see the Thessalonians in person before too long, it is inextricably connected to God. The Harper’s Bible Dictionary defines hope as “the expectation of a favorable future under God’s direction.” The key part of that definition is not the expectation of a favorable future. It is the phrase, “under God’s direction.”

Hope is an expression of trust in God, an affirmation of God’s role in our life. Our hope, if it is spiritually grounded, should line up with God’s hope, God’s will, and God’s direction. Think about the hope you just held

in your mind and possibly also in your heart. Do you think that your hope is God's will? Do you believe that God is already working within you, within other people, and within the world toward the realization of that hope? If it is, then your hope, which can sustain you, is a spiritual gift.

The 42nd Psalm invites us to place our hope in God. The psalm is a reminder that hope does not emerge from times of joy but from times of difficulty. The writer of this psalm is obviously depressed. His soul is "cast down", "disquieted within him". Perhaps this accurately describes your state of mind in relation to that for which you hope. Perhaps life is so difficult or painful for you that it is even difficult for you to hope. The psalmist declares his faith even in the midst of his difficulties when he says,

*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God. (Psalm 42:11)*

Hope leads us to praise God even when the life that God has given us is not the life we would have chosen. We praise God because we know that God is working for good in all matters, and that when we believe, when we have faith, we empower God's Spirit in our lives and in the world. The psalmist believed that this was not only true of the nation of Israel, but of the individual believer as well.

Hope should turn our faces toward God even, or especially, in times of darkness. In ancient Israel, God's loving-kindness, revealed in repeated examples of faithfulness, gave the people confidence that he would fulfill his promises in the future. Our belief in God, our experience of God's intervention in the world and in our lives, is the source and the basis of our hope.

False hope, i.e., hope in anyone or anything other than God, leads to chaos and disaster. The prophet Hosea tells us that we should not place our hope in weapons of war. Hosea, speaking for God, says,

*You have plowed wickedness,
you have reaped injustice,
you have eaten the fruit of lies.
Because you have trusted in your power
and in the multitude of your warriors,
therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people,
and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, . . . (Hosea 10:13-14)*

We should also not ground our hope for the future in our wealth, in economic security. In Luke 12, Jesus tells us,

“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15-21)

Second, hope is not meant to pave the way to an easy life. It should not be synonymous with a desire to avoid suffering. Hope is a spiritual gift that is forged from the way we carry our suffering. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul says,

. . . we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s

love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that was given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

Hope is a gift from God. It is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But it is not a free gift. It is forged out of our suffering and the way we carry our suffering. Hope is not only the beginning of the process but also the end, an end that leads to a new beginning. It is often because of our trials that we turn to God. It is often out of our helplessness that we open our hearts to Christ. Paul tells us that when we experience the spiritual gift of hope, our hearts will be open to the love of God that will be poured into us, that indeed has *already* been poured into us through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Third, hope enables us to look to the future in an attitude of trust. The Old Testament word that we translate as “hope” comes from the Hebrew verbs “to wait, to expect” (kawah) and “to be full of confidence, to trust” (hatah). Hope can help us to be patient. It can help us to wait expectantly. This is where it fits with our Advent theme.

Hope is empowering. It does not look forward to the future from an attitude of helplessness. It is not passive. It leads us forth into action.

The First Letter of Peter speaks to the active dimension of hope. Peter tells the early Christians (1 Peter 1:13),

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.

Peter tells us that in relation to that for which we hope, we should prepare ourselves mentally for action. Hope does not relieve us of our responsibility to do whatever we can to bring about that for which we hope. Peter also tells us that we should discipline ourselves. It may mean to

discipline our expectations. It may mean to discipline our tongue that we may carry our burdens with grace and with graciousness.

I'm not sure it is legitimate to hope that our troubles will disappear. Hope is meant to help us carry our burdens, to carry them in the right way. We have hope in the midst of our troubles. We have hope as we face an uncertain future. We have hope because we know that the Christ who can come into our hearts this Christmas is the Christ who is already with us, always moving from the past into the present, into our world today with the gift of his comforting presence.

Go back now to that for which you hoped. Hold it again in your mind. This time see it in the context of the spiritual dimension of hope. Place it in God's hands. Enable your hope to shape you. Realize that you will probably need to work to bring about that for which you hoped. Be patient in your waiting. Maintain an attitude of expectancy, an attitude of openness. You never know when and how God will bring about that for which you hope.

Paul says, "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." This was not a passive wish for a better tomorrow. It was based on God's promise fulfilled in the present Christ who came and who comes again.

May the blessing of this deeply spiritual hope be yours throughout this Advent and Christmas season and also in the year to come.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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