

## Our Hope Is Coming

Romans 15: 13-17

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I first noticed it while walking into CVS drugstore a few months ago to buy toothpaste. Now while it wasn't advertised or showcased anyway, it was visibly present out in the open for others to see. And while I knew I couldn't or shouldn't feel judgmental, in reality, I did. And by frankly, I was a little mad.

"Why do they have Christmas decorations in the stores already?" "I asked myself. "Every year it comes earlier and earlier. It's still August and we got like three holidays to go!"

No matter where you are in the country, the truth is that it seems Christmas seems to come earlier and earlier every year in the retail and commercial world. From seeing stores advertising Christmas merchandise in the fall to radio stations playing Christmas music even before Thanksgiving, I think the rate we are seeing—in a few years the Christmas season will most likely extend into June.

Now, I don't want to give you the impression that Ebenezer Scrooge has come to preach for you this morning. On the contrary, Christmas is one of my favorite holidays. But like many others, I need take my holidays one at a time. After all, while it would be great to have all the excitement of all the holidays into one, I am not sure I can tell people to have a "Merry HallThanksChristmas" without laughing.

Our scripture this morning is all about anticipation. And not the anticipation of hearing Christmas music in July. But like Christmas, it's the anticipation of something which is to come that will not only bring much hope to others but in fact is the hope itself.

The book of Romans was written to the church in Rome at an important time in history. At the time, the army was in control of all the countries around the Mediterranean Sea and the leaders were wealthy and powerful. In fact, many people were enslaved in this corrupt society.

But as Paul was writing this epistle to the Roman church which not only outlines his travels plan to the region, Paul use his words to cup lift those in this culture who are experiencing difficulty, but outlines three central themes in our selected text which in a way summarizes the central theme of Christianity.

First, Paul talks about the central theme of acceptance:

As we see in verse seven, Paul is repeating his command to give a welcome to other Christians and show love for each other. Paul writes:

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God," Paul says. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of

God's truth so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed."

What is Paul saying here, don't argue and divide yourself, but embrace and love each other as fellow Christians?

The second theme of Paul wrote about in this text is in terms of praise:

In this Paul repeats Psalm 18:49: and outlines the need for Christians to praise God. "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." A verse later, Paul repeats Psalm 117:1, " Praise The Lord All You Gentiles, let all the people extol him!"

The final theme Paul focuses upon in our scripture this morning is the theme of hope: 'The root of Jesse (the Messiah) will spring up. One who will arise to rule over the nations, in him Gentiles will come. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While Romans 15:7-13 in a sense summarizes The Gospel, it also highlights the central need people needed not only in the Roman church but the central need people needed in the Old Testament a the central need all of us need today: the need for hope.

From the Israelites who lived under the oppression of The Egyptians and sought the hope to be released from the shackles of oppression, starvation, and brutality. To the hope, the Jews during Jesus time sought to be released from the oppression of the Roman empire. To even today, thousands of years later, all of us seek to be released from injustices and inequalities in our own world through racism, sexism, inequality, poverty, and government and corporate corruption--we are too are in a need of hope. And not just hope for social justice for all of the humanity, but hope in our own personal lives.

This past May, I graduated from San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian Church USA seminary on the West Coast. While I have a seminary degree, I am still working on completing my requirements to be ready to begin to look for my first ordained call. One of those requirements is getting training in a hospital setting as a chaplain. It's this training which brought me to this Portsmouth to work at Maryview Hospital where I serve as a resident chaplain which is like a "chaplain in training."

While I really enjoy living in this area and being more close to all my family living in Pennsylvania, working in a hospital setting has been difficult because you see suffering in many different forms every day. From seeing patients who are suffering from cancer to patients fighting battles against kidney disease, struggling with the diagnosis of diabetes, whatever someone may be suffering from, everyone has a story of pain. And not just stories of pain over medical issues, but personal issues too. While medical issues are what brings patients into the hospital, everyone like all of us has personal issues which often cannot be treated with medicines or surgeries.

From the man who was dealing with the heartache of a recent divorce. To the woman who felt confused over as to why her adult children were not talking to her. To seeing patients feel frustration over financial struggles and deal with insurance companies declining coverage. To those who grieve over ones they lost. You see, all of us no matter who we are, what our health status may be, cannot escape the realistic truths that all of us have

experienced and are experiencing suffering in our lives now. Suffering that despite how strong our faith may lead us to ask questions such as "Why am I going through this God?" "What have I done wrong?" "Where are you in all of this?"

One of my favorite writers is Fredrick Buechner. Buechner, who is a renowned writer and Presbyterian minister, wrote a book called "Telling Secrets" which serves as a memoir about the two most traumatic experiences in his life. The first experience happened when Buechner was only ten years old and his alcoholic father committed suicide. The second is set around around the helplessness Buechner felt in not being able to handle his daughter's battle with anorexia. In the book, Buechner not only documents his long road of finding healing not only through the God's presence in others but through God's promise of hope in itself.

In the book where Buechner is writing about being in an Alcohol Anonymous meeting and witnesses the pain of others through the group story process, he writes:

"They could hardly be a more ill-sorted lot. Some are educated, and some never finished grade school. Some are on welfare, and some of them have hit the jackpot. Some are straight, and some are gay.

There are senior citizens among them and also twenty-year-olds. Some groups are composed of alcoholics and some, like the ones I found my way to, of people who have no alcoholic problem themselves but come from families who did. The one thing they have in common can be easily stated. It is just that they all believe that they cannot live fully human lives without each other and without what they call their Higher Power. They avoid using the word God because some of them do not believe in God. What they all do believe in, or are searching for, is a power higher than his own which will make them well. Some of them will simply say that it is the power of the group itself.

A few weeks ago while visiting one of my patients who had been struggling for the past few years with cancer, she told me about how she fights to also keep her hope alive despite the many different rounds of chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and even her loss of herself from the disease.

"For a long time I felt a sense of guilt," she said to me. "I felt a sense of guilt because I was asking the questions Christians shouldn't ask. Questions such as why did this happen to me or what can't I be angry at God for allowing this to happen to me. But despite my anger at God and feeling frustrated of hearing friends say to me, 'only God can give you what he thinks you can handle,' I have come to believe that even in the anger, even in the questions I had, I believe now that God was with me then just as he is with me now. A God that doesn't abandon us when we are in the waiting, but suffers with us reminding us there will be an end to the painful wait.

My friends, today is Christ The King Sunday which marks the first Sunday before the First Sunday of Season of Advent. A season which is known not only for the preparation for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, but a season of one which is supposed to be about joy, the new beginning, and hope.

But let's be honest with ourselves, despite knowing what the season stands for and the need to praise Christ our King, it's hard at times to have hope when we find ourselves

facing a health crisis, dealing with an addiction issue, struggling in a personal relationship with a loved one, dealing with financial crisis, or sometimes wrestling with things we cannot even put into words.

But despite what we may be facing within our lives, our scripture today reminds us not only to have hope that the storms we endure now will not last forever. But our scripture today is a promise that through Jesus Christ, the storms will end in our lives.

Anne Lamott, the Christian writer, defined the promise of God's hope this way: Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

And so here we are at this time on a journey which is often filled with joy and love, but on a journey often filled with pains, hurts, and struggles. And while, we should not feel ashamed to ask those questions or express those anger feelings we have when we are going through the thick of things,, we should also remember that despite that painful diagnosis, despite that relationship problem or financial setback, God is with us on this journey and through each other will not only walk with us through the deep valleys, but is reminding us there will come a time when Weeping may endure for a night But joy comes in the morning.

For it's through God's Son, Jesus Christ, a man who not only saw the pain we experience but like us felt fear, anger, grief, betrayal, and death but experienced it himself, that we are promised that soon, very soon, we will find deliverance from it. It's this promise a promise of hope that defines what our Christian faith is about and why we praise and celebrate Christ as being our deliverer.

The dawn will come soon, my friends. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.

#### Bibliography

*Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary.* By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

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