

Advent 1 – Hope

Romans 8 (selected verses) December 3, 2017

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Over the Sundays of Advent, we explore four core promises of the Christian faith, and today we see what the Bible says about hope.

The understanding of hope often gets confused with salvation or optimism.

Christian hope is not just the promise that a better life awaits you in heaven, and hope is more than the optimism that your problems will disappear.

Biblical hope is that God loves you, cares about you, and is present *for* you here and now.

Even while the Apostle Paul was facing great danger and hardship, he could hardly contain himself as he wrote of this hope in his letter to the Romans.

Reading Romans 8 reminds me of the 4th of July – a celebration of freedom, in this case, freedom from self-idolatry, sin, fear of death, and from the many ways the world seeks to diminish our value.

Romans 8:1-2 *With the arrival of Jesus ... those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us now ...* – note that is not distant, not just in the future, not passive.

With the arrival of Jesus ... those who enter into Christ's being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, ...

Where The Message translation says *like a strong wind*, the original Greek is *pneuma* which means Spirit ... as in the third person of the Trinity and is the same meaning as the Hebrew *ruach* which is the the breath of God or the wind that hovered over the waters of chaos at the time of creation.

A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime of brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death.

For Paul, death is more than physically dying.

Death is also being bound by the ways of the world that separate us from God and that deaden our souls.

The Apostle Paul is declaring the Good News of Kingdom to come, as well as the Kingdom that is now.

But for this we have to be awake to the presence of Spirit., because most of the time we live under a cloud of self-absorption and busyness.

A couple of days ago, I was waiting at a traffic light behind a blue BMW on Balboa Blvd. when the light turned green, but the BMW didn't move.

I tapped my horn and we drove on some more – until we got to the next light.

Again, we stopped.

Again, the light turned green.

Again, he didn't move.

I honked again, shouting through my windshield, "Come on, fella. This is the only shade of green we offer."

Not surprisingly, when I passed to get around him I saw that he was half driving and half texting.

How often do you go through your day half awake and half self-absorbed?

We get distracted from what really matters at our own risk.

Sometimes, we miss God's here-and-now presence because we've gotten distracted by worry, shame, replaying our worn-out stories, self-doubt, stewing over others' judgements of us.

To experience real hope, we must wake-up up to what God is already doing in us right now.

It's the only life we have ... but we can miss it.

Sister Helen Wilson taught a junior high math class at a small Catholic school.

One day the kids became agitated because they were having trouble grasping a particular math concept.

Does anyone else here feel stupid when you don't understand some math problem?

Before long it was clear that they were increasingly distracted and unable to concentrate on the lesson, so Sister Helen decided to set the lesson plan aside.

Instead, she talked to them about how we all go through times or when we feel like failures, but even during those times we are loved and valued.

She said God loves us no matter what.

Of course, just saying that wouldn't mean much to a bunch of 12-year-olds, so she asked everyone to take out a blank sheet of paper and anonymously write down the names of their classmates and one thing they especially like or admire about them.

She collected the papers, and that evening she sorted the comments by name, added a few thoughts of her own, and then on Monday passed them to the students so they could read what others had written about them.

Eight or ten years later, the parents of one them, a young man named Mark, called to say that he had been killed in the Vietnam War, and they asked Sister Helen to attend the funeral.

After the ceremony, Mark's dad walked over and handed her a folded and frayed piece of paper: the list of good qualities classmates and Sister Helen had written years before.

Mark's dad said that it had been found in his wallet ... apparently, he had carried it all these years.

When she overheard this, a young woman opened her purse and pulled out her copy, worn and taped together.

Another young man said that he still had his in his dresser drawer.

Another had saved hers in her wedding album.

In the midst of a world that piles on shame and pulls us down, we are starved to hear the Good News that we are loved.

The world may say, you're not making it because you drive an old clunker.

You're told that you'll never be loved because you're too old, too fat, too dark skinned ... you fill in the blank of what it is for you, because we all carry some iteration of that monkey on our back.

Jesus reveals that lie.

Romans 8:11 When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life.

We are born into the new life of Christ after we die to our old life.

Baptisms in the early church essentially were funerals. Those who were about to enter the church would take off their old clothes as a means of shedding the old, anxiety-ridden life and walk down into the water.

The waiting priest would place them under the water saying, "Buried with him in baptism."

As they rose from the water the priest would then announce, "Risen to new life in Christ."

Then they would put on new clothes, symbols of putting on Christ.

The rationale for this burial form of baptism was to make the members of the church go through "dying" and get it over with.

This was the period of persecution of the church, but once members were no longer anxious about Caesar's persecutions, they were free to boldly live and proclaim the gospel.

You can't scare dead people.

Once we die to the expectation that we'll ever be unconditionally accepted by the world, then we are freed to receive the unconditional love of Christ.

Ironically and tragically Church has added to countless people's shame by ostracizing women, divorced people, gays, and those sexually abused by clergy, and sometimes by its over-emphasis of the Doctrine of Original Sin.

The Doctrine of Original Sin was developed in the early 5th Century, and though never embraced by the Eastern Orthodox Church, became a cornerstone of Western Christianity.

It attempts to explain why we default toward selfish behaviors.

But left unbalanced, the Doctrine of Original Sin can overshadow the totality of Jesus' message and morph into teaching that you are so flawed that God had to send his Son to be tortured and executed to clean-up the mess *that is you*.

Now, I'm not denying the meaning of atonement and Jesus' sacrifice, but Jesus is about more than being born of a virgin at Christmas and then going to the cross as a sinless sacrifice at Easter.

Jesus was not a "C & E Christian".

There was a whole Jesus ministry in between those events, and there is the living Spirit he promised that is with us today.

If all we do is wait for heaven so we can leave this world of sin, then we miss this life.

Jesus brought a message of hope, love, justice, and reconciliation in addition to facing the cross ... and that is also part of the Good News.

Awaken to His presence right now and you'll experience his love for you, right now.

From 1968, Francois Clemmons played Officer Clemmons on Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

He was the first African American to receive a recurring role on American television.

But Clemmons said that because of the brutality and racism of police in the ghetto where he was raised, he was very uncomfortable playing the role of a police officer – even in Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.

I imagine you know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and that he viewed his long run on children’s TV as a ministry of showing God’s love to children who were otherwise left with nothing much beyond violent cartoons.

He closed each episode by saying something like, “You always make it special for me by just your being you. I like you just the way you are. You know that, don’t you? See you tomorrow.”

After one of the programs, Clemmons came up to Fred Rogers and said, “You know, you were looking right at me when you said your closing lines today. I felt like you speaking directly to me.”

Rogers replied, “Francoise, I’ve been speaking that to you for fifteen years. It’s just that you heard me today.”

Real hope begins when we wake up to hear Jesus’ voice speaking love, forgiveness and acceptance to you now ... just for being you.

And by the way: Jesus didn’t promise to take away all the struggles in life, but to be with us through those struggles.

Romans 8:10-11 Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won’t know what we’re talking about. But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God’s terms.

There are very popular ministries that have confused the ideas of hope and optimism.

The gospel of optimism says, have faith and your problems will soon disappear; have faith you’ll become wealthy and healthy.

But the hope the Bible talks about comes from knowing deep in our bones that even when we are going through tough times, God is with us, and He’ll somehow use those hard times to bless us and others.

Hope is knowing that God will walk through the dark valleys with us, not pretending that there will not be dark valleys.

Hope frees us to live fully – to take risks for what matters – to grow and not contract in fear.

Romans 8:15 *This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?"*

I want to share this little clip from a TV commercial by Allstate.

It touches me deeply – maybe it will you, too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kI1bKm22Up0>

Romans 8:28 *That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.*

It's like you can see the celebratory fireworks launch from the pages of Romans 8, freedom of life in Christ.

It come to a dramatic climax this way:

Romans 35:35-39 *Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.*

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.