

Sermon Notes for 12/4/16 (Advent 2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Romans 15:4-6

Theme: THE IMPORTANCE OF STEADFASTNESS AND ENCOURAGEMENT

The Point: Scripture's written record builds into our hearts a living hope in the "God of steadfastness and encouragement", so that we live in harmony and praise.

Introduction: Written materials can seize the heart and enlighten the mind. Many written materials live in our traditions and our observances of Christmas. Just a few words can start your mind racing down certain tracks. How do you continue when you hear the simple words, "'Twas the night before . . ." How about "Rudolph, the red-nosed . . ." Of course, as God's people we have other more deeply-rooted memories of written materials: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" or "Silent Night" or "Joy to the World." It is not only poetry that has such power, but even certain prose can speak powerfully: "It came to pass in those days. . ." or "God bless us, every one." Written words can take on a life far beyond what the author had in mind.

The Jewish community called itself the "People of the Book," indicating just how fundamental was its connection to the writings of the law, the prophets, and the psalms. Islam uses the phrase "People of the Book" to refer to adherents of both Judaism and Christianity, since these are both seen as Abrahamic religions that predate Islam. The term "Bible" means "the Book"; a number of Christian denominations have claimed identity as "People of the Book." It is obvious that prophetic writings have a vital place in most modern religious faiths. But what is our Lutheran slant on this understanding? How does our view of the written Scripture serve as a witness to those around us?

St. Paul's words from today's Epistle lesson help us to get a grasp on this. God had plans for the written word, plans that go far beyond just being a record of the past. That written word was written not just to be memorized or to be quoted, though these exercises can be very important as we live out our Christian faith. 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." That is what God is aiming at in your life and mine – that "we might have hope." The instruction that the word of God provides is not just to fill up our brains – it is to strengthen our hearts! God wants us to live in HOPE!

Hope is at a premium, isn't it? And if we pay attention only to the writings that flood our email inboxes or our post office boxes or our law schools or our newspapers, we could conclude that there is no hope. People seem to be disappointed around every turn because those in whom they have placed their hopes have let them down. Parents let down children as those children figure out what really makes the parents tick. Voters are disappointed when the people that they elected don't work miracles their first week in office. Those who trust in the military or in their legislators or in their city councils are constantly being let down. Our plans for the future can leave us disenchanted when that future moves in a whole different direction than we had hoped. And there are always the Michigan Wolverines fans, who seem to know that the weekend we play Ohio State is almost always hopeless.

Of course, our self-made and self-directed hopes disappoint us. They come from within us and have no more lasting power than a snowball on an 80-degree day. And when we place our hope in other humans and their strategies, we are bound to be disappointed. The Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to where John was baptizing had placed their hopes in their lineage and their traditions. They were the chosen people, after all. They were God's favored ones. But John spoke some harsh words to them: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." They thought it was enough to be racially pure descendants of Abraham, not realizing that this heritage could never provide for their salvation. They needed

something solid in which to place their hope.

God is a God of steadfastness and encouragement, who wants us to live in hope every day of our lives. But He has more in mind than simply wishful thinking. This God of Abraham had raised up from the stones – namely the “dead” bodies of Sarah and Abraham – a child, Isaac, the child of promise, when it seemed impossible. And that act kept hope alive in Israel’s early days. Yahweh had prophesied through the voice of Isaiah that a shoot would one day spring forth from Jesse’s seemingly hopeless stump. He had brought hope through John the Baptizer to the Jewish people, whose hopes had grown dusty and shrouded over the 700 years after Isaiah’s prophecy. John declared, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” And at the end of the ages, God the Father sent forth One more powerful than John, One who baptizes in Spirit and fire. And He still specializes in raising up life and hope from the dust of our broken dreams, our erstwhile plans, and our foolish intentions.

Just as that written record of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms kept hope alive in at least a remnant of the people of Israel, so this very written Word keeps our hopes alive. Even when it seems that evil has triumphed and Satan is victorious, this Word reminds us that final judgment rests solely with the Root of Jesse, the Messiah known as Jesus. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This One who holds the power of final judgment and separation of the wheat from the chaff is the very One who bore in His body the penalty and punishment that belongs to us because of our sin. He is the Word of God writ large in our human history, God’s perfect revelation of Himself come into human form. That Word suffered so that we might be freed from judgment. God’s judgment is therefore not something that the children of God need to fear, for it has already been accomplished at Calvary when God judged your sin and mine in the body of His own beloved Son.

This message of God’s love and forgiveness embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah brings hope to hearts and lives that have almost given up hope entirely. During the Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century, German Lutheran pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God’s provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, by God’s grace, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord’s presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many. “Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed; God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears; God shall lift up thy head. Through waves and clouds and storms He gently clears the way. Wait thou His time, so shall the night soon end in joyous day.” It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles and even our desperation to show us that He wants to be (and that He is) our only source of strength. And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt, we receive new hope. Are you facing a great trial? Take heart. Put yourself in God’s hands. Put your hope in His promises. Wait for His timing. He will give you a “song in the night.” (*Our Daily Bread*, May 7, 1992)

It is not insignificant that the terms “steadfastness and encouragement” are applied both to the Scriptures and to God Himself. This Word is God’s Word in no uncertain terms. It is His Word because it embodies His person. This Word brings steadfastness and encouragement because the God whom it presents is the God of steadfastness and encouragement. And the Word that brings us Christ brings us life and hope.

This hope is not to be limited to a small group. No, indeed, if Christ died for all (as Scripture assures us that He did), then there are none whom we may write off as hopeless under God’s gracious hand. In

today's epistle lesson, Paul affirms this in a powerful way: "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, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy." Both Jew and Gentile receive the promises so that Jew and Gentile alike lift up their voice in praise to God for His mercy and His goodness. So God's people also become servants to the circumcised and to the uncircumcised, so that people the world over may learn to live in hope and peace. We are people of hope and as thus are signs of hope to all the people around us.

Let me use my own situation as an illustration of the significance of hope in our lives. Hope is not just wishful thinking, based on our desires for the future. So as I have gone through this particular surgery on my ankle, my hope is not my desire to be able to walk again pain-free and somewhat normally. Oh, yes, that would be a good result, at least according to my thinking. But my hope is in the Lord who in the eternal kingdom will make this body to be what it ought to be and to do what He desires it to do. In the meantime I am determined to live in such a way that my life affirms His Word. My hope is based on His promises, written solidly in Scripture, promises that assure me that everything my Lord does, He does for my good, that He is with me in every time of trial, and that He will turn every experience (even those that are painful and troublesome) into His divine plan for my eternal life. Jesus our Savior offered His life, had His hands and His feet pierced by cruel nails driven by crueler executioners, so that you and I can live, not pain-free, but guilt-free, which is ever so much more important in the long haul.

A student of Scripture (P.E. Kretzmann) writes: "He is the God of patience and comfort, inspiring steadfastness and encouragement in our hearts through the use of the Scriptures in which He reveals Himself. And if these gifts of God are found in us by the gift of God, then we and all Christians will be like-minded toward one another, then there will be God-pleasing harmony among us, then we shall consider one another as brothers and show a true brotherly spirit, free from all selfishness."

If we are living in the Word of God, that Word which brings steadfastness and encouragement, if we worship the God who is known as a God of steadfastness and encouragement, then we will surely display those virtues in our own lives. We will demonstrate steadfastness, perseverance, patience as we face the difficulties that life brings to us day by day. And we will live as encouragers of others, who are desperate for the hope that we have found in the knowledge and love of Jesus our Lord.

A story is told about Edward Steichen, who eventually became one of the world's most renowned photographers. He almost gave up on the day he shot his first pictures. At 16, young Steichen bought a camera and took 50 photos. Only one turned out – a portrait of his sister at the piano. Edward's father thought that was a poor showing. But his mother insisted that the photograph of his sister was so beautiful that it more than compensated for 49 failures. Her encouragement convinced the youngster to stick with his new hobby. He stayed with it for the rest of his life (he died at 94 years of age). What tipped the scales? Encouragement in the midst of a lot of failure. (*Bits & Pieces*, February 4, 1993, pp. 4-5)

Conclusion: Martin Luther wrote this about some of the heroes of faith in Scripture: "Samson, David, and many other celebrated men full of the Holy Spirit fell into grievous sins. Job and Jeremiah cursed the day of their birth; Elijah and Jonah were weary of life and desired death. No one has ever fallen so grievously that he may not rise again. Conversely, no one stands so firmly that he may not fall. If Peter (and Paul and Barnabas) fell, I too may fall. If they rose again, I too may rise again." Luther was speaking about the call to live in hope. Scripture's written record builds into our hearts a living hope in the "God of steadfastness and encouragement", so that we live in harmony and praise. Live in that Word. Trust the God who is presented in that Word. And join with all others who praise Him to display our unity and our love to a world that needs the hope that only Christ can give. In His saving name, AMEN!