

WE NEED HOPE, NOW MORE THAN EVER

Romans 5:1-11

December 1, 2019

First Sunday in Advent

Rev. Gregory D. Cox

Let us pray:

As we begin this advent season of preparation, we listen intently for that voice crying out in the wilderness and seek nothing more than to prepare for your coming. In these moments of worship, help us to bring down the mountains in our lives that prevent us from traveling on our road, and to smooth out those rough places that seem to be impassable. We pray for those moments that we might listen, hear, and ultimately cling to that hope in the Lord that will renew and strengthen us. We want to soar, we want to run - we want to live in you. Open our hearts to your Word to us that in you, we might receive that hope. In the name of the one who is promised, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Some of you will know this as true when I say it, but having two young adult college aged children has changed our lives. There's a voice that is playing in the back of my mind and it is my father's voice and it goes something like this - "it's a little late to realize that now - you should have known that the minute you decided to have children."

An oft asked question to Tracy and me is, "what's it like having only one of your daughter's at home?" My collective answer has been, "it's actually become a little more hectic. The drivers that we used to have around the house have gone, and all the activities that the youngest needs to attend is now back in our chauffeuring responsibility again."

But I shouldn't complain. We are quite blessed. Bekah worked her tail off for many years and bought her own car a year ago, and so she has been going back and forth to college on her own since we took her up for the first time in August.

Ohio Northern University is a solid three and a half hours from our home. Not a straight shot and with a bit of construction along the way, it's not as simple as going to Allegheny College north on Interstate 79.

But we've made the journey a few times in the last year and on a recent trip, I was able to just stick my nose in the air and use my internal navigation system and simply drive.

The day before our departure, Bekah asked when we were hoping to leave. I said that I really wanted to get on the road no later than 8:30 a.m. I hoped to be there about noon. That would get us to the campus in enough time to settle a little bit before we made our way to the football game. I would be sure to call when we were on the road.

And so it was that on that Saturday morning, we were dressed and in the car beginning our journey at 8:30 a.m. After we made our way on to the PA Turnpike, I gave Bekah a call and said that I hoped to arrive shortly after noon.

I hoped to arrive shortly after noon. I knew what to expect and barring any stupid mistakes on my part or some unfortunate accident causing traffic along our route, I had a firm understanding that it would take a certain amount of time. We would see our daughter shortly after noon.

I looked back at those conversations and I realized I used the word Hope quite a few times. Dad, when do you hope to leave? Dad, when do you hope to arrive? Tracy, I hope to leave at 8:30. Bekah - I hope to see you shortly after noon. It was not some fanciful wish, some guess, some lackluster desire, or fait accompli. It was a firm belief and anticipation of an anticipated outcome. We would be there shortly after noon.

We throw that word “hope” around a lot, I think. I hope it doesn’t rain during the marathon. I hope a deer walks right up to me tomorrow morning. I hope this car engine lasts me another year, I can’t afford a new one. We don’t expect it to be true, it’s more of a pipe dream, wishful thinking.

I found myself saying that recently when my beloved baseball team started moving in a new direction after a miserable season and began to hire a new management team. I sure hope the Pirates move in a new direction. One of your responses to me on social media was, “well . . . we’ll see.” Tracy and I understand the complexity of that wish, but wow it would be really exciting to see another World Series in Pittsburgh before we die.

We have entered into a season of expectation and waiting in the church in the season of advent. And as we explore theme of that anticipation, we understand that there are things of this world that we need now more than ever. There are many things that we need and the world is craving for, and hope is really one of them.

In our lives, when there are so many things working against us and the world and its politics and broken relationships and complex social norms are crashing in on us, we find ourselves again wondering what about this year. Will this year be any different?

We really do need Hope, now more than ever.

Scripture is full of hope. And even though we throw that word around a lot in our lives, the hope of God’s Word is not that fanciful wish but it is the complete opposite. The scriptures are full of that confident expectation that what God has promised will come. There is strength in the faithfulness of the Lord and we anticipate God’s completion of a new reality in our lives.

In this season of Advent, we hope - and we really do need hope. We are looking for that light to shine in the darkness and shatter through those inaccessible places in life to bring about a new reality. God in his infinite wisdom and power puts flesh to his promise and hope of the future in the person and work of his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

That hope, that confidence is holding on to the rich promise of life that God offers to us. There is more to come, there is longing and joy and a quenching that only God can offer.

More and more in our lives today, we put our trust and hope in the things of this world, not knowing that it will change us for the better, but complicate and drive wedges into our system. We rely on technology, trust in flawed and unscrupulous individuals to bring us what we long for and it drives us further and further into states of despair and anguish.

US News and World reports in September of this year published an article stating that increased use of social media is increasing anxiety in teens, and furthering internal and external socialization challenges.

More and more - it seems that we are longing for something, hoping for something.

The psalmist speaks of that longing.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.”

And then the writer continues with words that move from that despair to a desire and an expectation of God’s movement and grace in our lives.

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Regardless of where you are currently, God can move you to a place of trust. When we direct our attention and our spiritual longings to the nature and the work of Christ that is promised, not only in this world and in our lives, God’s richest promise to us is that he will reach down from incomprehensible heights to touch us, heal us, and strengthen us.

The apostle Paul talks about that rich promise in the scripture that we shared this morning from the letter to the Romans. Our new relationship with Christ brings us to a new level of being. Jesus has the power to remove the barriers and give us access to a loving and generous God who also wants to be in a deeper renewed relationship with us. Enemies can become friends, the sick can experience healing, the downtrodden can be filled with a renewed sense of hope, and the scared can be brought to a level of optimism that the world currently does not offer to us. We have been given a hope and a confidence that our purpose in life will be realized.

Paul realizes in very plain ways that there is suffering in our lives and the world around us is not perfect, but in Christ and through Jesus we can glory in the hope that does not put us to shame. We don’t glory and celebrate that we are suffering, but that statement moves us to a more triumphant view that our lives are not meaningless.

I love verse 6 from Paul’s letter, because after talking about suffering that produces perseverance and perseverance character, and character hope - he reminds us that God’s love has been poured out into our lives and our hearts.

And then he says this in verse six - “you see, just at the right time, while we were still powerless - Christ died for the ungodly.”

Just at the right time. Christ came, he healed the sick, fed the hungry, gave recovery of sight to the blind, ate with sinners - and then died for you and me.

I want to go back to something that I said earlier - God reached down from incomprehensible heights to bring healing and restoration. Just when we needed it the most, just at the right time. Jesus came and Jesus died.

And he did that all for you. He did it for me. He did it for all of us. And I think we need to hear that hope now more than ever.

As Christians today, we stand in a particularly interesting place. You see, Advent - a season of anticipation is this expectation of Jesus coming into our lives for the first time in the baby born to humble parents in a stable. We stand here expecting and opportunity to be freed from what we have become. We look back at the past and know what the past has wrought longing for that savior.

But we also find ourselves worshipping and experiencing a savior who has already come, longing and hoping to be brought into that hope filled future that in the end God will do what he has promised to do.

At the end of October, I had an opportunity to travel on a volunteers in Missions trip to Guatemala. The primary purpose for my participation in the trip was to teach Stewardship and Generosity to a group of pastors who would be gathering for training as part of the Methodist church. When asked what they wanted most in teaching, the leaders of the church asked for training in stewardship and so I was approached because of my previous experience in that area.

IN spite of having a primary purpose for my travel to that country, God had other things in mind for me and to experience a new level of his work and ministry in a region of his creation that I had yet to experience for myself.

On Thursday of our trip, our team participated in a wheelchair distribution and fitting. Persons who had previously been limited in their abilities to move around with families and in their community were given hope with accessibility through the simple gift of a wheelchair.

Persons who are disable in developing nations particularly in Guatemala face very steep challenges in their lives. Birth Defects are high in this country mostly due to poor prenatal nutrition and education for expecting mothers. Children who are born with disabling conditions are sometimes left to die and others who survive, are often left in homes, sometimes unsupervised due to the inability of parents to care for them. Accessibility in and round their community is difficult.

Adults who become disabled find unemployment at the highest rates. Accessibility is limited in a county that is rural, mountainous, and not surrounded by health care to meet their needs.

Persons who were coming to the wheelchair distribution and fitting ranged from children to the very old and most infirm. They were vetted in advance of the fitting and came from hours away just to receive their gift.

We offloaded from a box truck more than fifty rehabilitated wheelchairs that came from the states to be restored. We unwrapped and sorted the chairs by size and special chairs for children to be set off to the side.

Recipients and their families came very early on Thursday, registered, and waited patiently for every person's number to be called. Guests are interviewed for their needs, measured, and wheelchairs are meticulously fit to each person.

The first woman that I had to fit on that day was a 78 year old woman who had a stroke recently. Her daughter and husband brought her in a very crude chair held together with planks of wood. She sat on a piece of plywood.

While I was measuring her and fitting her to a perfect chair, my partner discussed some things in their native tongue, things that would make her more comfortable along the way and how to avoid sores on her posterior. I adjusted the footrests, added a cushion for chair, and added a seatbelt.

The whole time that I fitted this woman, I couldn't help but think about the barriers that her family had to overcome just to get here let alone live with every day. I thought about my mother and her own disability and I was overcome with raw emotion as I fit this mother.

But in a powerful moment of God's grace and mercy, we were able to pray with this family. As we did the mother, without words began to cry with tears that flowed freely. I could only imagine that it was a moment of experiencing a level of hope that she had not previously been given in many months.

Every person who came that day in need, left with a wheel chair - but with so much more. A prayer, an invitation to relationship with Jesus, and a Bible to take home with them. They received salvation - the gift of life - and a gift of hope.

Sometimes, I think that our lives are sometimes no different than those in Guatemala. We have so much, and yet we live in a world that lives sometimes without hope. We live in a day and age that needs hope now more than ever - and because of that need, God saw fit to reach down from where he is to where we are to bring us the gift of Jesus.

Friends, we are not people who live without hope, but we know and trust and place ourselves into the loving arms of a savior who will heal and restore. We are a people of hope who share that love with those who need it the most.

And in some cases - those that need it most, just maybe you and me.

Let us pray.