

**Making Room for Hope**  
**Rev. Matt Landry**  
**November 25, 2018**

**SCRIPTURE READING** Romans 15: 5-13

*<sup>5</sup> May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, <sup>6</sup> so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>7</sup> Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that 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, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; <sup>10</sup> and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";*

*<sup>11</sup> and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; <sup>12</sup> and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."*

*<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Can we start worship over again? I'm sorry, I just can't continue in this lie that we are somehow already in Advent. I mean it's only November 25<sup>th</sup>, it's not even December yet. According to the Liturgical Calendar we are on the final Sunday of the church year known as Christ the King Sunday, yet today we are observing the first Sunday of Advent. Alright, maybe we don't have to start over again, instead, if you leave today and you talk with friends in the Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopal traditions, just tell them that your church is just one week closer to Christmas!

I actually believe that this is a good way to observe Advent, because if we're really honest this morning, we all know that Advent gets overlooked every year by Santa Claus, retailers, shopping, and too often by the church. It's all about Christmas, and I don't mean Jesus' birthday. And I don't think Advent is a season to be missed. We're slightly modifying our worship and preaching schedule to accommodate all four topics of the season of hope, peace, joy and love; and we'll have joy two Sundays in a row as the Chancel Choir will offer their joyful cantata on December 16<sup>th</sup>. This year, we're making room for Advent. Every year, we're called to make room for hope.

Many people believe that the season of Advent is only a time to prepare for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, but there's a double meaning to this season. During Advent, we prepare for, and anticipate, the second coming of Christ. The word Advent is taken from a Latin word that means "coming." We celebrate Christ's coming and prepare for his coming again. During Advent, we remember the longing of the Jews for a Messiah and our own longing for, and need of, forgiveness, salvation and a new beginning. Even as we look back and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a humble stable in Bethlehem, we also look forward anticipating the second

coming of Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised by his first coming. Really, this theme fits with both Christ the King Sunday on the last day of the liturgical year and the beginning of the season of Advent. During Advent, we are called to prepare our lives to welcome Christ as King, not just in the future when Christ returns, but every single day, where we work to bring God's Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven, a Kingdom filled with hope, peace, joy, and love. The season of Advent can kind of seem like the opposite of Christmas that goes against the shopping and celebrations, but it's really a time to focus on our spiritual lives. And as we focus on developing our spiritual lives more deeply, we experience hope. Or hopefully we will. The dominant theme of Advent is hope! Since the very beginning, when this season started being observed in the church in the late 6<sup>th</sup>, early 7<sup>th</sup> Century, it was all about hope. The Israelites hoped for a Messiah to come and Christ entered the world. We are hopeful for the arrival of Christ again into the world today.

Paul's letter to the Romans encourages us to move deeper into the vision of hope that God has for us. It's easy to move on the periphery of hope or even be cautious of hope, yet through Christ, God calls us to enter into the fullness of hope. As Professor Dirk Lange from Luther Seminary writes, "In this passage, near the end of Romans, Paul begins by actually writing about Scripture and its purpose. This purpose is surprising in itself, given our present-day debates on the nature of Scripture! Paul doesn't write that it provides us with a moral code or a detailed recipe for a prosperous and good life. No, Scripture's primary goal is to create hope in us. But, we must still ask, what type of hope? Perhaps it is simply for a better, more prosperous life. Unfortunately, a too-narrow (that is self-centered) interpretation of hope is not permitted here (or most anywhere in Scripture!). The hope created by Scripture is distinctly communal. The hope that the Holy Spirit creates within me is not simply for my personal good. It is a hope that is shared with others. It is a hope in which I am a part with many others. In fact, it is the communal nature of this hope that makes it so joyful!"

In this communal hope that we have, as people who are ready to welcome Christ not just at Christmas, but every day; are given the opportunity to be hope for others. During this season, a common occurrence is family gatherings. We gathered for Thanksgiving this week and we will gather to celebrate Christmas together in the coming weeks. If you are anything like my family that means you have to prepare the inn or the house to welcome family. We started cleaning, I mean preparing our guest room to welcome family throughout December. We have to literally make room to welcome. It's true for all of us individually and communally. We have to make room in our hearts for Advent. We have to make room for hope. What do you have to clean out this Advent to make room? Many of us deal with mental clutter, too much information, too much news, staring too much at screens. Make room for silence, for prayer, for hope. Many of us struggle with having a peaceful heart. Make room, make the time to just be this Advent. As the quote by Jan Richardson at the top of your bulletin this morning says, "Stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon." It's all about making time, space, and room. In order to make room for others, we have to make room within first.

Author Daniel Kirk wrote on this theme of Romans, Advent and welcome. It's so good I want to quote him at length. "Romans 15 shows us that it takes the whole community working together to show itself to be a reflection of Christ. What does a Jesus-like body of Christ look like here on

earth? It looks like people whom the world would separate into different tribes rejecting those boundaries, gathering under the same roof, and mixing the voices that the world would keep separate in songs of praise to God. We show that we live in harmony by singing in harmony. And that can only be done when we are sitting in the same room.

In a recent episode of *On Being* on NPR, civil rights legend Ruby Sales commented that a crying need for theology, right now, is "to create a beloved, global community." One of the tragedies of the history of Christianity has been the ways that we have occluded Paul's breathtaking command, "Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you."

We falter every time we redefine "welcome" such that people are only allowed halfway in the door (you can be here but you can't join, you can join but you can't lead, you can lead but you can't preach). We falter every time we redefine "one another" such that it really only means people like us. We falter every time we fail to extend our welcome of others on the same basis as Christ's welcome of us: anytime we demand that another enact self-sacrificial love rather than loving sacrificially ourselves so that the formerly excluded can now be embraced.

We are at a time in our country's life in which tribalism is pulling us apart at the seams. Façades of unity are crumbling, revealing underlying contention and strife. This is so in national politics as much as it's true in church culture and politics. Romans 15 is telling us that the light of Advent will only fully shine on the world when the church becomes a people who better reflect the story of radical hospitality -- the story of Jesus during his time on earth, the story of the Christ who has accepted all into the presence of God."

Is this the hope we can find during Advent? Is this the way we should prepare for the coming of Christ again? It's illustrated well in Romans. During the Holidays and the Christmas season, we gather with people we agree with and people we don't. We gather to sing hymns of old and to remember there's a better way. As Paul writes, "I will confess you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name." For Jew and Gentile, for Methodists and Catholics, for those ready and for those who aren't, for liberals and conservatives, for all people; Christ has come, Christ will come again.

I'll freely admit that I struggle to see hope sometimes, whether it's for our nation or for our denomination, as we are so deeply fractured. It's easy to see the division that plaques us at every turn, whether it's theological, political, or socio-economic, we enter Advent this year possibly more divided as a people than ever. I have even seen articles throughout this week, as we prepared to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings in the coming weeks, about how to have civil conversations during the Holidays. One article read, "Experts suggest conversation ground rules at Thanksgiving." Is this what we have come to? That we have so lost the notion of community that we need ground rules at Thanksgiving? Really?

A few weeks ago, I gathered with clergy from around the Indiana Conference for a learning day. It was a reminder of the differences even among clergy that keep us divided into our various tribes. We were challenged that day by the keynote speaker, Rev. Dr. Maria Dixon from Texas, to see each other as God would see everyone, with eyes of love, as the beloved they are. She also challenged us by reminding us that we can be reconciled if we choose it. We can

be united, one body, if we choose it. She reminded us of Paul's words to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." It sounds like Romans, doesn't it?

What God calls us to in the incarnation, in coming to earth in Jesus, is to a communal hope; to live in such a way where we welcome, serve, and love one another. Mother Teresa once asked, "At this Christmas when Christ comes, will He find a warm heart?" Will we make room for hope this year? Or a better question to ask is how do we make room for hope this year? Let me quote Romans again, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other." Toward each other is the phrase. When disagreements arise, may we have spirit of grace and kindness toward each other. When we start to move away from that person, you know the one that just ticks you off, may we have a spirit of gentleness and understanding toward each other. It doesn't mean we always have to agree, yet in our disagreements, may we show love toward each other. In doing so, may we make room for hope.

You are probably thinking that Steve and I are starting to sound like a broken record in our preaching. You might be thinking I have already heard this message before. We preach a lot about love and grace and how we can overcome our divisions. We preach on this often, because we believe it is the prophetic call of the church today to transcend the divisions and call people back to this ancient idea of community. I firmly believe that the church, that means you and me, has an opportunity to really, truly change the world, to fill the world with hope, because we know the truth of communal hope. As individual followers of Christ, as a communal body of Christ, we can bring love, reconciliation, and hope; if we choose to.

To quote Professor Dirk Lange again, "The incarnation is about the infinite becoming fully embodied in the finite and yet never restricted by that finite. Christ's coming into the world, into the house of David, is God's coming into all of humanity, for all humanity. This coming, the advent of Christ, can never be claimed as a privilege by one group. Rather, everyone is invited into song, those who are inside and those who are not! I believe this is one of the most surprising twists of this reading in Romans. The goal but also the witness of living together in harmony, of welcoming one another, is communal song! The praises of God are sung in a community that welcomes one another, lives in harmony in accordance to Christ, and this song of praise is a witness to God's glory and God's intent for all people."

This year we are making room for Advent by starting a week early. How will you make room for hope this year? Will we be able to "welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us"? All the earth is waiting! The earth is waiting for you, for me, for our church to give birth to the Christ this year. Maybe it's not just about waiting for Christ to return; maybe it's about bringing Christ to earth here and now in his community of love, of reconciliation, of hope. All the earth is waiting for hope! Hope for the church! Hope for the nation! Hope for the world! Let's make room for hope by claiming it, living it, and sharing it!

Let's pray:

*This Advent, O God, we pray, Come Lord Jesus come. Into the disagreements and understandings that have caused divisions like chasms, Come Lord Jesus Come and bring*

*reconciliation. Into the anger and hatred that tear people and families apart, Come Lord Jesus  
Come and bring love. Into the violence and warfare that ends and ruins life, Come Lord Jesus  
Come and bring peace. Into the church, into our lives, Come Lord Jesus Come and bring hope.  
Give to us the endurance and encouragement to choose hope this Advent following the same  
attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice  
we may glorify you our God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all.  
Come Lord Jesus Come. Amen*