

Abound in Hope / Early Morning Service

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[0 : 0 0] On page 611 of your book of common prayer, which you don't need to turn to, unless you want to make sure that I'm telling you the truth and quoting accurately, is an exhortation prescribed on the day of Ash Wednesday in the penitential rite that invites disciples, and I begin the quote, to the observance of a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditation upon God's holy word.

Well, Advent doesn't have an explicit exhortation for the beginning of this season, but the epistles for the four weeks of Advent encourage discipline from followers of Jesus.

Last week was, if you remember, the discipline of love, to love one another. And the way to do that was to, from Romans chapter 14, wake up from our sleep and to cast off the works of darkness.

Today's discipline for Advent is hope. Today's reading begins with hope and it ends with hope. At the beginning, in verse 4, is an exhortation of hope, and at the end is a benediction of hope in verse 13.

Now, I know that we tend to think that God is love, and he is. But do you ever think the same of hope? Does God equal hope?

[1 : 4 6] And furthermore, I wonder if you think of hope as a discipline. I like to think of hope as the shoot of a root called faith, and bears forth the fruit of love.

That's helpful. Then you can see that our hope is rooted in faith, and it results in love. Whenever I hear the word love, I want to know about faith and hope.

So hope is something that grows and increases and requires work and effort. Hope is a discipline to practice in Advent as we anticipate the second coming of Christ.

So let's look at hope. These three ways, in fact. Hope grows when we pray the scriptures. Hope unites us when we accept or welcome one another.

And then finally, hope increases as we rejoice in the Lord. Hope, a second discipline for the season of Advent. So let's look at this then.

[2 : 5 0] Hope grows when we pray the scriptures. Paul begins chapter 15 with an exhortation about the strong needing to bear witness with the failings of the weak. That's in verse 1.

The Christian's responsibility of building up our neighbor. This is the theme and the thrust of this reading with respect to hope. The synthesis of verses 4 through 6, this first section of this reading, is this.

Everything was written so that we might have hope. Paul makes this link between scripture and hope. And so if we're low on hope, we find ourselves lacking boldness.

Or if the future seems bleak or isn't bright for us. Paul says, turn back to God's word written. In verse 4, Paul makes this reference to the scripture three times.

He says this. For everything was written, that was the first time, in the past, was written to teach us. So that through the endurance taught in the scriptures, it's the second time.

[3 : 54] And the encouragement, they, that's the third time, provide we might have hope. Three times he makes reference to scripture with respect to hope. And so the scriptures were written to teach, help us to endure, and to encourage one another.

And when we learn, persevere, and boldly serve through a knowledge of the scriptures, then we grow in hope, is what Paul's saying. Our hope and the hope of others comes by knowing God through the scriptures where he speaks to us.

And so as the colic prescribes today, we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the scriptures. That prayer then prods and provokes and prescribes, I think, that to us.

But we also need to pray the scriptures if we are to have hope, not just know what they say. And so hope begins with knowing the word of God.

And the best way after learning the word of God and learning about hope is to pray the words of scripture back to the Lord. And this is what Paul models then in verse 5.

[5 : 04] A prayer beginning with, as I read, May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another and accord with Christ Jesus.

That's his prayer. That's him praying actually to the Lord, this hope that the Lord has actually entrusted to him and to us. And the Lord actually delights in his children when we actually say his words back to him.

Much like we as parents or we as children have noticed the delight that's brought to our parents when our parents then hear the words actually that we say back to them. So too is the Lord delighted when his children, when we, pray his words actually back to him.

And even more so when we kind of improvise on those words like a jazz musician does themes. Well, when we know and pray the scriptures back to the Lord, we grow in hope.

Secondly then, hope unites us when we accept or when we welcome one another. So Paul doesn't stop with praying the scriptures. Praying the scriptures leads to action, not inaction.

[6 : 09] And prayer is what the Lord then uses to change us. And what kind of change is it that he's about for our lives? Well, look at verse 7 with me.

Paul says, therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. This is a transition, I think, of praying the scriptures to then what we're to do next, which is to accept or to welcome one another.

Paul exhorts the church to this acceptance. And why is that? Well, because sin alienates us from our Father in heaven. But we all know that that's not the end of it.

We are alienated and not in union with one another. We fail to be in union or in sync with the people that are right next to us, sometimes in our own household, in our own neighborhoods, in our own workplaces.

And we fail to be in union with people because we sin. We dismiss, we reject, we ignore one another. And Paul says this, just as Christ accepted you, so we, Christians, are to accept and to welcome one another.

[7 : 23] And the basis for our acceptance of one another is the acceptance of Christ. Accept here, or welcome, is a word of reception, or interest, or intrigue, or union.

It doesn't mean ignoring our differences. In fact, I think unity presumes diversity. But the key is union in Christ, and his acceptance of us then leads to our acceptance and welcome of others.

Sadly, the church often looks like an association of similar people. The early church was more dynamic. Gentile and Jew, weak and strong, poor and rich, masters and servants, adults, children.

And Paul urges the church to grow in hope through accepting, welcoming, inviting one another. In chapter 14, the previous chapter of this one, Paul urges those with differing opinions over dietary practices to welcome one another.

And in that case, as in this one in chapter 15, it is the strong that are encouraged to welcome, accept the weak. But there's more at stake in this chapter in chapter 15.

[8 : 42] It's not lifestyle, but now it's about race and formally religion. Now the Gentiles and the Jews, who share the same Lord and faith, are to embrace one another.

Implicit maybe they were not doing that. Keeping separate, not welcoming, inviting, showing hospitality to one another. And that's radical like the acceptance of the father to the prodigal sons.

Both of them. Think of it. The one who left was accepted back. The one who stayed was also accepted. I figure the Gentiles were a little bit like the one who left.

And the Jews were like the one who stayed in that story. And Paul prescribes accepting one another and celebrating with one another.

Something like that of accepting and celebrating the one who was lost. And both the Jews and the Gentiles and you and I were once lost but now found.

[9 : 43] Well, this acceptance, this welcome, is a sign of unity displaying God's hope for his people. So it is the hope of the world when the Christians, when we Christians, when we gather, are united to one another through this acceptance and welcome and invitation.

The one that is extended to God, sorry, extended to us by God first, and then us to one another. And in fact, him through us to one another. That's the second thing.

This hope that actually displays itself in our unity with God and acceptance of one another. Finally then, hope increases when we rejoice in the name of the Lord.

How does this hope grow? In a word or two, by praising and rejoicing, it seems that Paul is saying. Not by our praise and rejoicing first though, but by the praise of Christ in the name of the Lord.

Paul shows us by this in quoting four verses from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Old Testament, starting with Psalm 18 and then ending with Isaiah chapter 11 verse 10.

[10 : 53] The first thing he's pointing out here is that it has to do with the respect to the nature of God and his name. Paul quotes Psalm 18 verse 49 first by saying this, Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles.

I will sing the praises of your name. Paul shows us first that David praises the name of the Lord. But so too did the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus, when he came to the world.

David praised and declared the Lord's name, but then Jesus following him as the Messiah did so perfectly. And what is that name?

This is a name that's none other than Yahweh. I am was praised by David and then Jesus, which means, I am exactly what you need and more than you know.

In other words, I am your hope today, tomorrow, and for eternity. It is true that what the world needs now is love, sweet love, as an old pop song goes.

[12 : 10] But don't you think that the world also needs hope? And how much it needs this hope? Paul then continues on, and I won't go through all the second and the third quotes that he made, but the fourth quote, which comes from Isaiah.

He quotes, What a shock to God's chosen people this must have been.

A shock because God's own Son came for the Gentiles too. He didn't come only for them, but to rule them, just like was prophesied in Psalm 2.

Jesus is the one who sprung up like a shoot, like hope, right? That's who Jesus is.

He is the one who is for Israel and the nations who they need him to be. Jesus is the one who rose up and will rise, as they knew, in resurrection, which is a sign and a miracle of hope.

[13 : 25] Jesus is the hope of all the nations, every single one in this world. And so hope increases because Jesus, when he came, proclaimed and praised the Lord's name.

And hope increases when we too praise the name of this Lord. Well, in closing then, this discipline of hope, which is our practice during this season of Advent.

We have this in prayer and acceptance and welcome, and praising and rejoicing in the name of the Lord. This is a discipline that requires something we are short of in our culture, in our world, and in a word, we find it hard and even absurd to wait.

Yes, wait, and that's what we do during this season of Advent. But wait and hope is what we do before the Lord comes again. In fact, hope waits.

In prayer, in acceptance, and in rejoicing. Hope doesn't idle like a car in neutral. But in drive, with the foot on the brake, ready to release.

[14 : 39] Hope drives us to learn, and to love, and to long for the coming of our Lord again. Hope draws us, and even drives us, to praise the name of our Lord forever, not only with our lips, but in our lives, and as we say this benediction.

May the God of all hope fill you with all joy, and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may abound in hope.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.