

Our Advent Hope

Sermon for Advent 1

This morning we are beginning the Advent Season. The word Advent comes from a Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming"). Advent is a period of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas and also of preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. It begins on the Sunday nearest to November 30 (St. Andrew's Day) and is the beginning of the church year. The earliest recorded date for the Advent observance is from 567 where at the Council of Tours it is mentioned.

Advent is a season that has a special association with certain words, represented by the four candles corresponding to these four Sundays leading up to Christmas. These candles represent the Christian virtues of hope, joy, peace and love.

This morning we are going to think about the virtue of hope and so our sermon is entitled "Our Advent Hope."

But before we do this I want to help you understand the meaning of the word virtue. The Merriam Webster Unabridged dictionary defines the word this way:

- 1 A supernatural power or influence exerted by a divine being.
- 2 A particular beneficial quality or efficacy in something for example a large spring of unusually fine water ... credited with unusual *virtues* -- certain herbs have greater *virtue* when they are picked at midnight
- 3 a characteristic, quality, or trait known or felt to be excellent .

Each of these definitions helps us to better understand the four virtues we will be considering this Advent. Hope, joy, peace and love are given to us by our Father in heaven through the in-filling of his Holy Spirit so that both we ourselves and those around us may benefit from these qualities at work within us. They are gifts that when at work in our lives will be experienced as excellent and of great value.

I hope to show you that this is indeed the case when it comes to the virtue of hope.

A United States submarine sank off the coast of New England. The rescue operation led to the discovery of the disabled vessel in the bottom of the ocean. When the divers approached the submarine, they heard a tapping sound from the inside. When they stopped to listen, they heard this message tapped in Morse code: "Is there hope?"

That is the question still tapped from within the depths of the human heart. In the hour of tragedy and of impending death it is most poignant, but hope is never a luxury that we can get along without. It is an absolute necessity if we are to have a zest for life. Hope looks to the future in such a way that it gives courage and strength to face the present. Young people usually are full of hope. The future lies ahead of them and they set their sights on it. But as we live our lives and we experience more of the knocks that come with age we can become discouraged and in some cases become hopeless. Such a state of mind and soul can be described as nothing less than a kind of hell. Dante saw inscribed over the portals of Inferno: "Abandon all hope you that enter here."

I want to tell you the story of Pandora's Box. It is a story taken from Greek Mythology. The lovely Pandora was sent by Zeus to be the bride of Epimetheus. One of Pandora's more endearing charms was her curiosity, but that quality also proved to nearly be her undoing. One day Mercury, the messenger, sent a box to the young couple. It was meant for them to enjoy, but under no circumstances were they to open it. Well, of course, it is the old story of the forbidden fruit. Told that she could not do it, it became the thing that she desired to do the most. So one day she pried it open and peeked inside. Suddenly out flew swarms of insects that began attacking them. Both lovers were stung with the poison of suspicion, hatred, fear and malice. Now the once happy couple began to argue. Epimetheus became bitter and Pandora wept with a broken heart. But in the midst of the quarreling, they heard a tiny voice cry out: Let me out, to sooth your pain. Fearfully they opened the box again, and this time a beautiful butterfly flew out. It touched the couple and miraculously their pain was healed and they were happy again. The butterfly we are told was hope. It is hope that sustains us; it is hope that sooths our pain.

As Christians we have a faith that is hopeful and so the good news of Advent declares: "Yes, there is hope." The men in the sunken submarine were utterly unable to cope with their tragic situation. Their only hope was rescue coming from

the outside. That, says the message of Advent, is precisely the situation of all people. Trapped by the powers of evil and death, sickened by the poison of suspicion, hatred, fear and malice we are helpless and doomed. But there is hope, for rescue has come from the outside. The butterfly has been loosed to set us free. As we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives hope heals our pains.

In the text before us the apostle proclaims this message loud and clear. Again and again he uses the word hope. He concludes on this high note: "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.

"Abound in hope," says the *New Revised Standard* translation.

"Radiant with hope," says *The Phillips Translation*.

"Overflowing with hope," says the *New English Bible*.

"Brim over with hope!" says *The Message*.

Takakkaw Falls in Yoho National Park is I think a metaphor for hope. The source waters for the falls never run dry and the water is always overflowing. Like the Falls the Christian is invited to be overflowing with hope as the Spirit works in us.

Here Paul describes God as the God of hope. And he says that it is as we believe the message about Jesus Christ that we are filled with the virtues of joy and peace (words we will look at next week and the week after that). As the object of our faith Jesus Christ because more real to us then we will abound in hope. As we grow in faith we see more clearly the source of this radiant and overflowing hope. In this passage from Romans Paul's describes three sources for this hope.

First, the word of God. "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." (Romans 15.4)

Listening to the medley of conflicting voices in the world we can become discouraged. Encouragement comes when we hear the voice of God speaking to us in the Holy Scriptures. The apostle quotes the prophets who spoke the word of God's

promise to discouraged Israel. In the gloomy night of distress and defeat they kept the candle of hope burning. Take heart, they said, for the Messiah is coming. He will establish his kingdom of everlasting righteousness and peace. The New Testament announces: the promise has been fulfilled. The Messiah has come. Prepare to receive him. It is the Bible that brings us this word of hope. As Martin Luther says in his picturesque way, the Bible is the lowly donkey which brings the Advent King into the Jerusalem of our hearts.

The center of the Bible, and the center of our hope, is indeed the Advent King, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the second and basic emphasis Paul makes in this passage.. Quoting Isaiah, the apostle says, "The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the Gentiles, in him shall the Gentiles hope." (Romans 15.12)

Jesus is not only the Jewish Messiah, he is the hope of all nations. He is the Savior of all people. He brings the rescue from outside ourselves. He delivers us from sin and death and despair. He gives us the joy and peace of God's children and enables us to live as God's children.

And how does he do it? "By the power of the Holy Spirit" he gives us faith so that we can be radiant with hope, no matter what situation we must face. This is the apostle's third emphasis. Christ is not only a historical figure but the indwelling Christ who through his Spirit lives in the heart of the believer and empowers him or her to surmount all obstacles. The last enemy to be overcome is death. The hope of the Christian in facing death does not lie in our power to defy death but in God's power to raise us from the dead. Death is real, and people do not have an inherent capacity to leap over the grave into another existence. But what happened on the first Easter is the ground for our hope of what will happen in the end when all of God's creation will have its Easter. Our individual existence, like the existence of humankind and of the universe as a whole, is bounded by death.

Against this boundary-wall all earth-born hopes dash themselves in pieces. But the Christian hope gives us the assurance that the power which once broke through the rock-hewn tomb in Joseph's garden, the power by which the church lives, will destroy even this barrier. This power is the Holy Spirit. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

In the eighth chapter of Romans, where Christians are given this promise, Paul portrays the vastness of the Christian hope. He describes Christians as being sustained in the midst of the sufferings of the present time by the expectancy of the glory to be revealed. But he goes on to portray the whole world as standing on tiptoe waiting with eager longing for the unfolding of God's purpose in history. In another image he compares all creation to a woman writhing and groaning in labor pains, anxious for the appearance of the new life of the future. The message of hope centers on the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose in Christ.

In an art gallery in London hangs a painting by Frederick Watts, titled "Hope." It presents a beautiful maiden seated upon a globe. She is blindfolded and in her hand she holds a harp, of which all the strings but one are broken. The blindfolded girl is touching the one string with her hand, and her head is bent toward it, earnestly waiting to catch the note of that one string. All the strings on which we play the melody of life are indeed destined to break - health, peace, security, finally life itself. There remains only one string - Jesus Christ our hope, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The gospel proclaims the fulfillment of the Messianic hope, for in Christ the Kingdom of God has already come, but it also points to its full consummation in the future. The death and resurrection of Christ have ushered in the new age, and the people of the Messiah live here and now by the power of the world to come. Yet the church also looks forward to the second coming of her Lord when the inevitable consequences of the victory he has already won will become fully manifest. The Christian hope has the double aspect of "already" and "not yet," of "I have come" and "I shall come again."

The Kingdom of God as a present reality is the key to the Christian interpretation of history and the ground of the Christian hope for the world. The risen and glorified Christ is the lord of history and the determiner of destiny. The hope of the world lies in the mighty power by which he conquered death and which he releases into the world through his church. The kingdoms of the world, however, will not be gradually transformed into the kingdom of Christ. As our Lord expresses it, the world is like a field in which wheat and weeds grow side by side. The weeds are not changed into wheat, but both mature until the harvest. Good gets better and evil gets worse. The final scene in the drama of history is not a utopia but a climactic clash between Christ and Antichrist. It would be wrong,

however, to focus attention on the antichristian aspects alone and to regard with suspicion Christian efforts toward a better world. Since the future belongs to Christ, the Christian attitude toward the world is not despair but hope. It is confident consecration to the tasks implied in the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

But for its final consummation the Advent hope looks beyond history to the fulfillment of Christ's promise of his return in glory. The ultimate triumph of Christ is based upon the victory achieved by his resurrection. We can describe what I am getting at this way. Here is a photo of high mountains bearing a tremendous mass of snow. A gunshot or some other vibration of sound is sufficient to set in motion an avalanche which rolls into the valley burying everything it meets. Before the avalanche the enormous energy contained in the mass of snow, capable of annihilating everything that gets in its path is potential rather than actual. In the same way the power of Christ's resurrection, which is sufficient to change the world and annihilate all the enemies of God, hangs over the world until the sound of the last trumpet releases the avalanche. The full power is there but it is being held back. The result is the breathless tension of which the apostle speaks. Viewed from eternity, Calvary and the second coming occupy a single moment. They are two aspects of the same divine act. The atonement and the new creation belong as inseparably together as lightning and the thunder which follows it. Lightning and thunder are the effects of the same eruption of electricity. There is an interval between them only because sound waves travel more slowly than light waves. But once the lightning has flashed the sound of thunder must come.

In the perspective of eternity we are living in the interval between the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder. With the eyes of faith we see the victorious lordship of Christ, and when the thunder of judgment sounds, the whole world will experience it.

It is on this ground that we affirm with assurance: "He shall come again with glory." This faith is not based on speculation of what we do not know but on affirmation of what we most surely know, the victory which Christ has already won and the certainty of the ultimate consummation of that victory.

We do not know the day or the hour of the final fulfillment of our Advent hope. But to keep this hope alive among his people the Lord has given us "signs of his

coming." Reflecting the impending climactic clash between the divine will and the demonic will, there will be extraordinary upheavals in nature and in history. Our Lord speaks of earthquakes, wars, and famines. On the one hand, the gospel will be preached to all nations, and on the other hand, the Antichrist will be manifest in the growth of godlessness, the persecution of Christians, and the rise of deceptive heresies. Many sincere Christians today are convinced that the signs of the times are the signs that the Lord is coming soon. In our shrunken and interdependent world the evangelization of the nations appears to be more possible than ever before, and the forces of Christ are closing ranks and mobilizing for world conquest. But so are the forces opposed to Christ. Godlessness and decay of moral standards, false prophets and falling away from faith, even militant atheism - all these are clearly in evidence. Wars have assumed a more and more diabolical destructiveness. Famines have taken on terrifying proportions. The atomic age has made dreadfully realistic the biblical picture: "the elements will be dissolved with fire and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10).

Yet we must be careful not to attach too much importance to our own conclusions. Our Lord has placed these matters beyond human calculation, and our generation cannot determine either the time or the manner of the Second Coming with any greater accuracy than previous generations. The right attitude toward the Advent message is neither careless indifference nor morbid curiosity but steady and dedicated vigilance. Thus Paul concludes his portrayal of the final fulfillment of the Advent hope with these words:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Ever since the days of the apostles, the church most expectant has also been the church most zealous to carry out its mission in the world. Doing the work which he has given us to do, we respond to the Lord's promise "Surely I am coming soon" with calm confidence, "Amen, come Lord Jesus."