

Romans 15: 4-13 Is There Any Hope? Rev. Janet Chapman 12/8/19

A story is told about the British ambassador to the United States who at the height of the Cold War was being interviewed and was asked, “Mr. Ambassador, what do you want for Christmas?” Sir Nicholas Henderson, a master of British reserve and understatement, and not wanting to appear greedy but wanting to be truthful, answered that all he really wanted was a jar of fruit preserved in ginger. It was his favorite food and he hoped that Lady Henderson or someone would give him such a jar. A few days later, the newspaper article came out describing in detail what the diplomatic corps hoped for during the Christmas season: The Russian ambassador hoped for peace and goodwill; the Swiss ambassador hope for genuine disarmament around the world; the Spanish ambassador hoped for Gibraltar to be given back; the Israeli ambassador hoped for peace in the Middle East; and so on. Sir Nicholas, the British ambassador, was recorded as hoping for a jar of preserved fruit. Now, obviously of all those things hoped for, he was the only one who got what he wanted. But by comparison, his hope seemed to lack both imagination and courage.

Peter Gomes notes that sometimes our hope seems doomed and we dare not ask for more than we can see amid the bitter reality in which we live. I remember getting a Christmas letter a few years ago from a colleague packed with all sorts of news about people I hardly knew. Yet dutifully, I read through it all but was most caught up with his conclusion: “As Christmas comes, I want to wish you all the joy and happiness possible in a world so filled with poverty, hunger, greed, violence, and partisanship that hoping for anything else seems useless. Still, my hope is that somehow the tide will turn... I confess, however, that I have little, if any confidence of this occurring.” Well, then. That same year, in the December, 2017 issue of Time’s article on “How We Deserted Common Ground,” Nancy Gibbs writes, “We’re not frayed

at the edges – we’re ripped at the (dang) seams. The Pew Research Center found that across a range of issues – immigration, race, security, and the environment, the partisan split is now greater than any differences in age, race, gender, and income. The center has all but vanished... You could conclude the United States is so deeply divided that our name is little more than wishful thinking. Not since the Civil War has American culture been so divided.

Considering such a depressing statement, I was drawn back to the preamble of our Constitution, a document which has gotten a lot of press this week. “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” Seeing it in print once more, one scholar noted this week that the authors desired this nation to be a community, a more perfect union, distinguished by these values – justice, tranquility, general welfare, and the blessings of liberty. Of course, many fell short of their own high aspirations as some were slave owners and others displaced and exterminated the native peoples already present on this great land. Nevertheless, “We the People,” with a capital P, implied a connection, a unity, a promise to attend to one another’s welfare. They had high hopes. But do we? How high are your hopes this Advent Sunday?

Paul writes to a profoundly diverse people within 1st century Rome. They are separated primarily by race, social class, and geographical proximity, who come together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. For these believers, this important event had caused conflict and divisiveness. They were struggling to find any hope of resolving their issues, so it appeared that the expedient thing to do was to simply break apart, to stop fellowshiping together. Thus, Paul

stresses the essential unity we have in Christ, a unity that transcends everything that would divide “We the People.” In the first few verses of chapter 15, Paul especially urges the strong to put aside their personal opinions, preferences, and principles in order to affirm and empower the weak. A perfect union, in Paul’s mind, involved embracing the mission of caring for and building up of others. Therefore, there is no walking away from one another in Christ, and I would assert this goes for a nation and its leaders as well who seek to promote the general welfare of all. Of course, individuals will still disagree with each other, hold different opinions and convictions, on everything including religious practices. But not showing up, withdrawing from the dialogue is not an option. Unity will be most threatened by individuals insisting that their way is the only way. Romans expert Beverly Gaventa explains that “being members of one another means there is a relationship from which there is no exit plan.”

With this as the backdrop, therefore, Paul speaks of the importance of hope. His reference to hope is not a glossy optimism, like when we play the slots and hope for 3 cherries or finish off a scratchers card hoping for a big pay-out. That is luck or chance. Paul isn’t speaking of a mindless hope such as the little boy on Christmas morning who discovered a heap of horse manure with all his Christmas gifts and quickly starts digging through the pile saying, “There’s got to be a pony in here somewhere.” It is not hope based only on experience, which tells us where we have been, like driving a car by the light of the rearview mirror. It is not that kind of hope which tells us what life will be like based solely on facts; where we are content to address only the tangible, the material, the mundane and the way things once were and should somehow be again. That is not the hope Paul is addressing here. No, the hope Paul is talking of is an Advent kind of hope which is meant to be the sobering antidote to false Christmas

optimism or depressing skepticism. It is why the church drags you kicking and screaming through Advent. This kind of hope prods us to confront God's promises and why they are not yet fulfilled. Advent pushes us to confront the problems of our world rather than gloss them over with glitz while dancing around a light pole and relishing in nostalgic optimism. It is why the church invites you to look ahead and not back to the manger at Bethlehem; it is why we light these Advent candles one at a time and not all at once, to lighten the darkness going forward and not simply allow us a rearview window perspective. Keeping our eyes forever locked behind us, we will find glimpses of light becoming less frequent and much dimmer while our hope grows weaker. It is why my job every Advent is to place these facts, promises, and hopes before us, and it is our duty as people of faith to consider them. Advent is fortification and a strengthening against the very forces that will drive us to despair and drag us downward. This season of Advent demands courage lest we succumb to holiday depression which affects so many this time of year. It is an exercise in endurance, in preparation for that long journey to a time and a place where we have not yet been. Advent is for a people such as you and I who have heard of Isaiah's visionary promise about the root of Jesse coming to bring deliverance, of a time when the lamb and wolf will lie down together in peace, but who also know the experience of bitter disappointment. Advent is for We the People who value justice, tranquility, union, liberty, posterity, and welfare but recognize we are not there yet, despite those who pretend we are. Paul knows that the church and likewise the world, if it is to have a future, must be hopeful that God will come among us to heal and save us. Paul's kind of hope draws us forward toward the peace and harmony only God can give, not just individually, but on a communal, national, and world level. Rainer Maria Rilke puts it this way, "My eyes already

touch the sunny hill / going far ahead of the road I have begun / So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp / it has its inner light, even from a distance - / and changes us, even if we do not reach it, / into something else, which, hardly sensing it, we already are.”

Over the west door of an English country church is an inscription written in the 17th century at the time of the English Civil War between the Royalists and Puritans, a nasty and unpleasant confrontation. It says, “When all things sacred were throughout the nation either destroyed or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley founded this church whose singular praise is to have done the best things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous.” To have done the best of things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous times – it is a monument to the hope of Advent and a testament to the courage of one man. Our current reality is no less serious than that one, with the stakes even higher now, and so to find our perfect union together, especially in these Advent days, “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.”