

**Populus Zion (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent): December 4, 2022**  
**“The Manger of Hope”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text for this morning is our Epistle lesson, Romans 15.

Today is the Second Sunday in Advent, and today we move one step closer to the very threshold of the stable where Jesus will be born. This is the season of repentance and preparation, and today is all about hope. The theme is hope, even in the midst of what seems like dark and trying times. It is on the basis of hope, that we examine our lives in order to expose all the sins and shortcomings that stand between us and the manger where our Savior is laid.

It would be wonderful, would it not, if we could come to Christmas Eve this year having conquered all the sins that nag at us? How wonderful if we could sit at the feet of the manger with every problem, every concern that weighs us down, and every worry 100% completely resolved. What a Merry Christmas it would be if only we could have that new start where everything is fresh and new and clean again, just like the birth of a new baby. The reality is, as anyone who has been involved in child birth knows, new births are not clean. It takes a bit of work to get them clean and presentable, and even then, it is never devoid of problems, difficulties, sorrows, pains and trials.

Yet, we enjoy those moments of clean diapers and baby smells. We revel in their smiles and coos, and we will come to Christmas in the midst of sin and darkness and dreariness and cold and we will join in singing “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” Our hopes and fears all meet here, in this child, in Jesus. This is our Christian hope.

This sounds strange, does it not? To hope and live as though something can become new even though it has not happened in your eyes yet. This is the Christian hope that Paul proclaims. The Roman Christians believed in the good news of great joy for them in Jesus, just as you do today. But things were not automatically perfect for them once they realized this love of God. In the chapter just before our text, St. Paul has just addressed a problem that was separating the people from each other.

There were believers on each side of the divide, but they were not getting along with each other. And what was it that they were divided about? It seems pretty petty today; they were arguing about diets and days. What one should eat and how one should spend their days was the source of their bitter divide.

The Jewish Christians observed a certain day as the only and proper day to worship, while the Gentile Christians said the same about a different day. Others also said that every day ought to be a day of worship, and one can easily see these sides being said with self-righteous smiles on their faces. They also fought about being vegetarians, or eating meat, and if there were foods they could not eat because the heathen peoples around them were eating certain foods sacrificed to idols.

Paul teaches them that each side was right and each side was wrong when it came to days and diets, because they didn't understand Christian liberty. They didn't understand the reasons involved in being sensitive to the conscience of weaker Christians. They did not understand at the time that God sees faith, not diet or day.

What St. Paul does to these arguing factions is simply divine. He writes to them to drop their differences and with one voice praise God. In verse 7, He tells them to ***“welcome one another.”*** Then in verses 9-12 he reminds them of God's faithfulness. It is not unusual that He reminds them of unity and points to God's faithfulness. What is so unusual here is Paul issues this plea and paints the picture for unity within the very frame of Christian hope. Our first verse, verse 4 says, ***“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”***<sup>1</sup> Our last verse, verse 13 says, ***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”***<sup>2</sup>

The problem was that Roman Christians were not praising God with one voice. They were arguing with each other and were not welcoming one another. They were shunning and condemning each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 15:4

<sup>2</sup> Romans 15:13

They based their hope on something and someone other than where it was to be placed. Christian hope is not “I hope you Christians at Rome get along with each other.” Christian hope declares, “Live like you are getting along right now!”

Hiding in the background here is a whole bunch of expectations, of course. The funny thing about expectations is they are never neutral. If you expect something, you either expect that it will be good or that it will be bad, and therefore you either hope or you fear. Sitting down in a chair without first testing it is an act of hope based on the expectation that it will work out for the good. Testing the chair first, before you sit, is an act of fear. It is driven by fear that something bad will happen.

We know and joke about how nothing in this world is guaranteed or endures forever. All chairs known to man will fail; yet, we still, mostly, act in hope. If we sit without first testing the chair because we trust in God’s mercy and believe that He is good so that it doesn’t really matter to us if the chair fails or not, then we do so as an act of faith. We are like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. But if we sit without first testing because we trust in wood and steel and the ingenuity of men, and think that it will last forever, then we are the most foolish of men.

I know that you, like me, have done both. Sometimes we have been wise and acted in accordance with God’s promises. Other times we have acted without a thought to God at all and been foolish. We have sat down in chairs with absolute confidence in man. And sometimes we’ve done both at the same time. As God’s children we can rejoice in the sights and sounds of the season, as well as the broken chairs and even in our aches and pains.

We can rejoice in all things precisely because we are people of godly hope. Our confidence is in Christ and what are these things but signs of the end. Instead of Santa down a chimney, Jesus is coming at a time when no one knows. We prepare for his coming, and we set out our works for our neighbors, even wrapping them in glittery paper and special bows. We give food and water to those who are in need and we hear the footsteps on the roof. The sounds are all around us and we know, “Repent. The kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

The world does not have this hope. They put out various platitudes and paint sugary pictures of gumdrops and silent posturing where not even mice are stirring, but the world is afraid.

We see this in its frantic efforts to calm itself by chasing after any image it can in order to cling to and possibly feel better about itself. From snowmen who will live forever as they work through the science of the water cycle to the disgruntled working-man who looks for love in all the wrong places until that one magical moment, one magical item, that puts it all into rightness, at least for a while.

The world rushes to things of this world, turns science and medicine into gods, as if the only things that matter are answers to death and taxes. As it sees these as the only unavoidable entities, the world rushes to hide itself in pleasure and in self-righteousness. The world is in distress. It is filled with anxiety, and worry, and doubt. Their hearts are failing them in fearful expectation of what is coming.

They aren't completely wrong, and they are right to be afraid. While it may not happen the way they think, one way or another, this world will end. And if they do not repent then they will be banished to the place prepared for Satan and his angels.

But this is not for us. The seeds of division and discord and fear are not for us who are in Christ. Our hope is not in the things where moth and rust destroy. Our hope is in the One who is come and is coming again with all His glory. We know of the seed promised to Adam and Eve who crushed the head of the old evil foe who means deadly woe. We live in this time of harvest and we can enjoy the figs and the fruits of His labor. We love the harvest even though it leaves the fields devastated.

Broken chairs and family anxieties and cancer and blindness and high blood pressure only mean that the end is now closer than it was before and we are filled with hope. We expect something most good; in not in this life, for sure in the life to come. For we know that even as the death of Jesus Christ is the life of the world, so this decaying earth, our dying bodies, and even the very destruction of the universe is our deliverance.

Nothing here endures or can be trusted, not chairs made of wood and steel, not good men elected by a fair process, not competent doctors and nurses with the best of intentions and deep knowledge. Only the Word of God endures forever. We lift up our heads. Christ, Our Redemption, draws near. We don't belong here. Jesus is coming for us and we gladly go with Him.

Thus does the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing and cause us to abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not wishful thinking. It is trust in God's Word. Scripture was written for our learning. It was also written so that through its patience and comfort we would have hope. Godly hope is discontent in this broken world, angry at injustices and wickedness, ready to leave the chairs behind, and yet, at the same time, hope rebels against despair. Christ is risen!

All is not lost. In fact, in terms of what matters and endures, everything has been gained. Hope therefore has courage to look to the future. It rejoices in the expectation of Divine justice tempered by steadfast mercy. Hope energizes the faithful in the midst of civilization's destruction so that they found schools, plant trees, and produce art. Hope loves Advent and Christmas for even in sadness and uncertainty about the immediate future, it has all joy and peace in believing.

This is true Christian hope. Your problems, sins, sorrows and weaknesses may be with you this Christmas Eve. When you stand at the foot of the manger there may be fears of past sins and fear of future anxieties. That does not mean you are less of a Christian. That does not mean you cannot celebrate Christmas in all of its joy – not if you have Christian hope; that is hope in God's forgiveness that you rise with Jesus every morning. You make the sign of the cross in the morning and remember your Baptism, as a visible reminder that you have a New Adam, you are God's child. That is a reality, even if you do not feel that way.

No one can set up a projector and tell you exactly how all of your problems will be resolved. But the Bible does teach us that in Christian hope, we live as though they have been resolved, because in Christ, they have been. To live as though the weaknesses and failures that still accompany you to the stable have been overcome is to live in hope. That is the great now, not yet.

The Christmas event is evidence of God keeping His promise. The very reality of Good Friday, the day when the Lord Jesus Christ died for all of your sins, is the payment for your very life from sin, death, and all the power of the devil. His rising from the dead is the very guarantee of the hope in which you and I dwell.

Christian hope remains ever focused on the reality of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb. It is this hope that we shout with one voice from our lips. It is this hope that we celebrate as we eat the very feast of Thanksgiving upon the altar. Our gaze is directed to the altar where we eat for forgiveness, life, and salvation. The supper is the visible guarantee when there are no other guarantees that can give us any hope at all. This is the very pledge of Christ Himself to sustain us, in body and soul, to life everlasting. He has conquered sin and death and gives you spoils of war. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Christ, and it is my prayer for you this Advent Season, ***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”***<sup>3</sup>  
Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 15:13

**Prayer of the Church—Responsive Form**  
**Second Sunday in Advent (Populus Zion)**  
**4 December 2022**

Almighty and everlasting God, the heavenly bodies give signs, the nations are in chaos, the seas are roaring, the hearts of men are failing and these things all point to the coming of the Son of Man. Strengthen our hearts to lift up our heads and rejoice in the coming of our redemption in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Grant us repentant hearts to turn from our sin and so stand before Him. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, You lead Your people as a shepherd leads his flock. Look down upon Your Church in mercy. Grant health and wisdom to Matthew, our Synod president; Brian, our district president; Sam, our circuit visitor; and to all those You have sent to speak Your Word to us. Grant faithful pastors to all vacant congregations. Send Your Holy Spirit upon us, that we may be wise for salvation and demonstrate brotherly love within our congregations and to the world around us. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, preserve the schools of the Church and our baptized children, that our people may constantly be nurtured in the hope of our redemption at Christ's appearing. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, in the midst of strife and conflict, and wars and rumors of wars, remind us that You have given all authority in heaven and earth to Your Son, our ascended Lord. Call to faithfulness the leaders of the earth, and bless those who govern. Thwart those who would hinder Your reign among all peoples, that peace may be established in every place. Be with those who served in the armed forces, especially Caden, strengthen those who serve in any capacity for the public good, our police, firefighters, and emergency personnel. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving Father, we give thanks that in Holy Baptism we receive forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation, bless those who celebrate baptismal anniversaries this week, especially, *Marina* grant that by Your Word and Spirit they may faithfully keep the covenant into which they have been called, boldly confess their Savior, and finally share with all Your saints the joys of eternal life; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, You have promised to send Your holy angels to guard and keep Your children. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Gabe, Gavin, and Marrina* celebrate their birthdays. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven; Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, Your Son is Christ, the Sun who rises with healing in His wings. Shine the light of Christ upon the sick, those who suffer loss and persecution for the sake of Your name, those whose hearts are heavy with grief, and all who have requested our prayers *especially Marvin, Ruth, Zoey, Laurel, Wanda, Duane, Greg, Pastor Jerry Doelinger, Jill, Pastor Small (St. Silas, North Liberty) and those we name in our hearts.* Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, You have taught us to straighten up and raise our heads when we see the coming of the Son of Man. Even now, Your Son comes to us under the bread and wine in the Sacrament. Grant that all who commune today may receive the very body and true blood of Christ for the forgiveness of all their sins. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and everlasting God, grant that we may be kept in joy and sustained in hope through every trouble and trial of this mortal life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**