

Advent Mid-Week
The Gift of Hope
Romans 8:18-25
November 30, 2016
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Dear friends in Christ,

Inside of us is a feeling, better yet, a conviction, that what we experience right now is not all there is. C. S. Lewis went to a German word to describe it. He called it “Sehnsucht,” a deep longing for what we do not have but know must be out there. The apostle Paul sees it as universal when he writes that the creation “waits in eager expectation.” (v 19)

That longing can happen in sickness, fear, or deep disappointment. We Christians long for what we know is better. It is not surprising to read Paul’s observation that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (v 18) For Paul and for us, both present sufferings and anticipated glory are realities.

What we have here and now is only a shadow of what was and what is to come. We live in the in-between. The Creation was perfect then God subjected it to “frustration,” an aimlessness, a failure to remain how and why he had made it. Just as Adam and Eve brought decay and death on themselves and on us their children, God subjected all creation to decay and death.

Creation also has hope, eager expectation of going back to the way it was. Paul mentions hope repeatedly in these verses. Anticipating something more and better, we wait, we imagine, we believe, and we grow in character. These are the components of Christian hope: waiting, imagination, faith, and character.

As we hope for our and creation’s final freedom, we do not possess what we have been promised or expect. So we must wait. We do not wait like sitting idly in a waiting room reading magazines, or twiddling our thumbs. Paul likens it to the waiting of a woman in labor. This is active waiting. It is a fight against pain and anxiety and time. It is ancient Israel waiting for the Messiah with all its prophecies and sacrifices along the way. It is our waiting as the Church Militant for the day Jesus returns in glory.

Hope means time is passing, and we must wait. But wait for what? What are we New Testament Christians waiting for? “that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” (v 21) Our hope is “our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” All of that and more will be ours at the return of Jesus Christ. So whatever we know now about freedom or glory or being God’s children or redeemed bodies pales next to what is still to come. There is more ahead in Christ, and it is better, if we just wait.

While we wait for that wonderful day, we cannot see it with our eyes. Paul writes, “But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?” (v 24) Jesus said to

His disciples, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). We cannot see Christ now. We can see signs of His presence. We can see evidence of His love. The time will come when we will see Him, when "every eye will see Him" (Rev 1:7).

For now, we may not be able to see, but we can certainly imagine. I do not mean fanciful, groundless ideas of what Jesus might look like, or what heaven and even hell are like. I do not mean trying to reasonably or with preconceived ideas interpret Bible passages, for example in Revelation. I mean contemplating how perfect and blessed our eternal home will be. It is part of our hope to imagine the day when we no longer will be slaves to decay. To help us, the prophet Isaiah, for example, presents picture after picture, image after image, of what lies ahead for God's people. The New Testament does the same, especially Revelation when studied and understood using proper rules of interpretation and the rest of Holy Scripture.

This lack of sight where hope is concerned is so tightly connected to faith. We wait. We imagine. We trust. The writer to the Hebrews defines faith as "the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance about what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1). Faith and hope are partners. Faith gives hope its substance. Faith enables us to confidently and assuredly see that adoption and liberation from decay lie ahead through the sure promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. "For in this hope we were saved." Faith tells hope, "I know we're missing something right now. This is not all there is. God has promised more and better. We 'have the firstfruits of the Spirit.'" He is in our hearts guaranteeing what is to come.

We need to consider one other aspect of hope. That is character. Paul wrote earlier in this letter, in chapter 5. "We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Suffering over time works perseverance and stamina. This is always in the context of God's love for us in Christ in our hearts. In the process our character is strengthened, and one of the virtues produced on the field of hardship is hope.

God gives us time, imagination, faith, and even character through hardship. These all come together in our hope. Someone asked Florence Henderson who recently passed away how she was able to get through her dark and difficult childhood in poverty. She answered, "I always had hope."

We have hope; not just a wish and a prayer, but Christian hope. Jesus Christ is our hope. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is His love, His power, His wisdom, His victory over death. It is the certainty of His promises. His constant presence as our living and reigning Savior-King gives us hope! And this hope, Paul adds in chapter 5, "does not put us to shame." (v 5)
Amen. <SDG>