

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Second Sunday of Advent – December 10, 2023
Luke 21:25-36 – Our Certain Hope
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

In Romans 15, Paul focuses on hope. “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... 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.”

To our ears, hope is not confident. Hope means wishful thinking. Someone who says “I hope you get better,” has their doubts. Someone who says, “I hope I’ll go to heaven,” doesn’t know for sure. Maybe they’re trying to be humble and not presume on God’s mercy, but they need to learn about Christian hope.

Christian hope is not weak or doubtful. It’s confident. Because our hope does not come from within ourselves. It comes from a far more reliable source, from the outside, from God.

And Romans 15 says hope comes to us in two ways. “Through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we have hope.”

First, through endurance. But whose endurance? When we try to endure on our own we always fail. No matter how firmly we resolve to do better, if we are honest, we find ourselves unfaithful to God, half-hearted in our love of his word, impatient with one another. We have not lived in harmony, we have let the dissipations and cares of life weigh us down. So trying to endure only gets us discouragement. It seems hopeless. Our endurance cannot give us hope. We need endurance from someone else.

Our God is the one who endured to give us hope. He endured the cross, despising its shame, because of the hope of the joy set before him. He endured in love, to give his life as a ransom for many. He laid down his life so we might rejoice and extol our saving God. The root of Jesse has come, the ruler of the nations, not to rule with a rod of iron, but to bring hope to all the nations, to bring eternal joy and peace in believing. His endurance and his victory are bring us certain hope.

Second, hope comes from the encouragement of the Scriptures. Whatever was written in former days in the Bible was written for our instruction, to give us hope. And the Bible declares hope from the outside. Like Isaiah 41:10, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” God does it all. And Psalm 42:5, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” This is the sound of Christian hope.

So our God is the God of endurance and encouragement. Hope based on his promises in Scripture never doubts or hesitates. It’s full of joy, it brings certainty. For our God has said in Mark 16 that all who believe and are baptized will be saved. And our God has said that he has gone to prepare a place for us. To think otherwise, to doubt that your name is written in heaven, is to call God a liar. The gospel leaves no room for doubt.

Thanks be to God for the certain hope of the resurrection, of salvation, and of his return in glory. “Our hope and expectation, O Jesus now appear.” This is our Advent prayer.

Not only Romans 15, but the whole book of Romans has a great deal to say about Christian hope. Beginning in Romans 4, with the example of the faith of Abraham. “In hope Abraham believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

“Therefore,” says the next chapter of Romans, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

When our Lord gives his endurance and the encouragement of his word, he produces Godly hope. He has justified us, that is certain. And we can endure because we know our Redeemer already endured the cross and he conquered.

But the Christian life is still a struggle. Even though we have been justified, even though our hope is certain, our situation still feels hopeless. Romans 7 describes the Christian life. We want to do good, we want to live obediently as God's children, but even though we have been baptized, sin remains. The good we want to do we do not, and the evil we do not want we keep on doing. "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, for his abundant mercy. So Romans 8 answers with comfort. It gives us reason to lift our heads and see beyond our daily struggle with sin. "We wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience," And then a little later, the reason for our hope. "Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

By encouragement like this from the Scriptures, we can wait patiently for the day of our redemption. We can be confident in the day of the Lord. When it comes, burning like an oven, reducing all the arrogant and evildoers to stubble, it will be a day of rejoicing for those who trusted him. On the Last Day, we will not be condemned. The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings. We will go out leaping like calves from the stall. Because God is for us, and he did not spare his own Son, and nothing in all creation shall separate us from his love.

And since God loves us so steadfastly, since we have such comfort, Romans 12 calls us to rejoice, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

Straighten up and lift your heads. Your redemption is drawing near. Lo, he comes with clouds descending. He who departed into heaven, as the trustworthy eyewitnesses tell us in Scripture, he will return in the same way, and every eye behold him.

And as Jesus himself declared in Scripture, the signs that we see of his coming, distress of nations on earth, people fainting with fear and foreboding, the powers of the heavens shaken, these are not cause for alarm. They call for rejoicing. For they assure us that soon we will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. That it's time to lift up our heads, be encouraged, and strengthen our hope. Heaven and earth are passing away, but these words of Jesus, the living Word of God, will never pass away.

Until that day, let us watch ourselves, that we may not be weighed down with dissipation and cares of this life. Repent and pray constantly in the Holy Spirit, that the day of the Lord will not catch us like a trap. Pray that he keep us awake in the church. Pray for his strength, for his comfort and forgiveness and encouragement. Because our hope is from the outside. Our God will give us strength to endure, he will encourage us through the Scriptures, and he will make us stand confidently before the throne. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.