

"THE HOPE THAT NEVER LETS US DOWN"

December 3, 1989

TEXT: Romans 5:5 "And hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which is given to us."

If that scripture reading does not seem to be very "Christmasy," it is for good reason. On the Church's calendar, this is the first Sunday of Advent. And Advent is a time of preparation. Preparation so that when Christmas comes, it may come in our hearts and lives and not just on the calendar.

As a part of that preparation, I would like to share some thoughts with you about "the most important thing in the world." But, before I do, I would like to make sure that we are talking about the same thing. So I would like to begin with a question. Other than God, what word comes to your mind when you hear that phrase, "the most important thing in the world"? What means more to you than anything else?

If I were a mind-reader, I suspect I would find some rather interesting answers. Some, perhaps, in the privacy of their own minds, would have thought of the word, "me." Most of us probably know people, not necessarily in this church, whose lives seem to center on themselves. If they thought of the word, "me", at least they would get high marks for honesty.

Others might have thought of words like "money," or "power," or "knowledge," or "health." Still others, a bit more altruistic perhaps, might have thought of "service," or "love," or "peace." But I have something else in mind. As important as those other things are, I am thinking of "hope." If that surprises you, let me turn the question around for just a minute. What one word in the English language would you think most terrible of all? Might it not be the word, "hopeless?"

As important as I am to myself, I can still imagine a very good world without me in it. And to have no money, no security, or poor health would certainly be unpleasant, but not unbearable. To be without peace or without love would be even worse, but I do not think there is anything you could say to me that would be more terrible than, "It's hopeless."

Do you remember Dante Alighieri's magnificent epic, *The Divine Comedy*? In the first major section, he describes the horrors of hell. But what makes hell so "hellish"? Is it the fire, constantly burning, but never mercifully destroying, the souls of the damned? Or the demons who take

such fiendish glee in tormenting those who dwell there? Is it their separation from God or the knowledge that they are where they are because of their own foolish choices? Not really. What makes Hell "Hell" are those terrible words inscribed above the entrance: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate," which means "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!"

We human beings are so created that we can endure almost anything as long as there is hope. But take hope from us, and even the most comfortable of lives becomes a living "hell." Thomas Carlyle, the great 19th century English essayist, was surely close to the mark when he wrote, "Man is, properly speaking, based on Hope; he has no other possession but Hope; this world is emphatically the place of Hope."

And, yet, not everyone seems to agree. There are those who not only have no hope themselves, but who scorn it in others. Men like Nietzsche, H. L. Mencken, and Robert Ingersoll. Here is what they have to say about hope. "Hope in reality is the worst of all possible evils...." "Hope, a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible." "Hope is the only universal liar who never loses his reputation for veracity." What is there about hope that makes it so essential to some, yet so loathsome to others? Is it not this? Hope can be the greatest possible good or the worst of disappointments depending on what we hope in.

There are hopes to which some people cling --often with desperate intensity-- which can only prove illusory. Some, for instance, hope that chance will bring them great wealth. (How else can you explain the enormous attraction of the Lottery?) But winners are few. When the Pennsylvania lottery was at an all time high, I remember hearing that you had a greater chance of being struck by lightning on your way to buy a ticket than you had of winning. And, even when won, wealth, by itself, can never bring us happiness. If it could, there would not be so many miserable rich people?

Others hope for power and social position, the good life of the Jet Set. You know the definition of the Jet Set: "Breakfast in London, lunch in New York, dinner in San Francisco, bags in Buenos Aires." But even those who make it often find not peace, but an endless merry-go-round of frenzied activities laced with alcohol, cocaine, and analysts' couches.

Still others hope in other people and are disappointed when they find that others either will not or cannot make them happy. Usually it is "cannot", for the only one who can make me happy is myself. And to put that terrible burden on someone else is as unfair to me as it is to them. Some hope in science and technology only to find that, helpful as these are, they also lead to atom bombs and long range missiles. Omar Khayyam said it centuries ago:

"The Worldly Hope men set their hearts upon
Turns Ashes...or it prospers and anon

Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two...is gone."

That is not to say that there is anything wrong with money, or power, or people, or technology. Only that none of them can be the ultimate in life. Those who put their hope in such things are bound for disappointment. And that disappointment may explain why men like Nietzsche, Mencken, and Ingersoll, have turned on hope, cursing it so bitterly.

But in our scripture reading this morning, St. Paul speaks of a very different kind of hope, the hope that never lets us down, "the hope that maketh not ashamed." In all the Universe there is only one hope that fits that description. And that is hope in God. The Psalmist says, "Why art thou cast down, O my Soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope in God: for I shall yet praise Him who is the health of my countenance and my God." When our hope is in God, not just in what we want Him to do for us, it cannot turn to ashes, it cannot disappoint you. When our hope is in God, it can never let us down, for God's love is an everlasting love and His power is an everlasting power.

Now I do not mean that if you only hope in God your life will always be pleasant and good. That is certainly not what the Bible teaches. Listen, for instance, to the prophet Jeremiah in the third chapter of Lamentations:

"I am a man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light . . . He has made my flesh and my skin waste away and broken my bones. He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation. He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago."

Not exactly your usual description of living happily ever after. But, even in his affliction, Jeremiah has hope. And, just a few verses later, he writes:

"But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases . . . 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in Him!'"

Some may call it superstition, a neurotic inability to face life as it really is. Let them trust in what they will, or in nothing at all. But I will echo the words of Mohandas Gandhi:

"When every hope is gone, 'when helpers fail and comforts flee', I find that help arrives somehow, from I know not where. Supplication, worship, prayer are no superstitions; they are

acts more real than the acts of eating, drinking, or walking. It is no exaggeration to say that they alone are real, all else is unreal."

But remember this. You cannot put a great hope into a little soul. In his famous *Confessions*, St. Augustine prayed, "Narrow is the mansion of my soul; enlarge Thou it, that Thou mayest enter it." That is what Advent is all about. Not just buying gifts, addressing cards, and trimming trees, but a time for enlarging the mansions of our souls. A time for prayer, for the Bible, for quiet communion with God that He may make our souls more fit to house the hope that never lets us down.