

Sermon #1,237: Rom. 15:4-13 (*Hymns 98,110.1.3.4, 95; comm. 94.3-8, 90, 97*)
12-4-16, 2nd Sunday in Advent, Bethany-Princeton MN

JESUS COMES IN THE SCRIPTURES; WHAT GIFTS DOES HE BRING?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Collect of the Word*)

The Text, Romans 15:4-13 (v. 4, 13). For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Lord this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In the name of Jesus, who has an Advent, a coming, to you when you hear His Word so that by the power of His Word, not by your reason or strength, you are able to come to Jesus Christ and believe in Him:

Here when St. Paul says “**the Scriptures**” he is talking about the Old Testament: as he says, “**whatever things were written before**” – that is, before Christ. He quotes four verses from these “Scriptures” – Old Testament verses, from the book of the law, the prophets and the psalms.

This is one of the things we love about Advent. We see through the eyes of the Old Testament believers, we hear the promises they must have been clinging to and relying upon. We imagine that they were waiting with baited breath for the light to shine into their darkness.

When we do this we’re actually thinking the best of them. The rest of the time we don’t speak so well of the Old Testament saints. We think they were awfully forgetful, they kept forgetting the Lord and returning to idol worship, they envied the heathen nations (coveting power, like we would never do that!), they never learned from their mistakes, they persecuted the prophets, and had to be taken to Babylon to wake up and then it was too late. That’s usually how uncharitably we view them. But in Advent we picture them being vigilant, waiting, *hoping*.

St. Paul uses that here in the first verse of this reading and then at the end of it; he writes: **“that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope,”** and then **“that you may abound in hope.”**

This is not how we use the word hope, as in: “I hope I get that for Christmas.” This means what you cling to, what you trust in and rely upon. It is the opposite of being hopeless. It is a firm, certain hope. So the people who had grown up on the Old Testament Scriptures, what were they learning, what would give them this hope? The promises of the Christ. They were learning to recognize the Christ when He came!

Now we can say they didn’t do that very well. So many rejected Him! We are thinking they should have known better. But then we are guilty of turning this knowledge of the Scriptures into an intellectual exercise. Like, we believe in Christ because we know better, or we’re just better at reading the Bible, keeping it current or taking care of our faith. But then what you are doing is actually practicing “works righteousness” when it comes to the Bible, as if God’s Word is spoken or read, but it’s only there as information and you have to do all the work, and you do it well. It can also lead to despair when you don’t do the faith thing well.

We act like we are able to keep believing in Christ. This contributes to the false idea that when a person is depressed or can’t find comfort it is some fault in them, a weakness that others can rise above. The truth is, it is a fault – but one we all have equally. It’s called a sinful nature. *“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ ... or come to Him.”*

So it is not that we are better than the Old Testament saints were. We’re all equally helpless, apart from what God does with us in His Word. This is proven in our experiences. Haven’t we forgotten God and returned to our daily idols of work and money and whatever distractions or obsessions we have? Think of what discourages you, what gets you angry and worked up, what it is that you think is holding you back. Where do you look for help? Do you let the bitterness fester? Hold onto resentment? Stay in the blame cycle? Do you think everything is dark for you, hopeless? Especially living in the last days, as Jesus said: *“men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of the things that are coming on the earth.”* Fear and worry drive out faith and hope, fill us with uncertainty.

This is when we prove ourselves to be just like the Old Testament people who so often disappoint us. We are often so full of the world and our problems that we feel we don't have time for God's Word. I know I'm guilty of this. In our crises we do not think it is time for God's Word. About the last place we go is to God's Word. One of my favorite preachers from the early church said: *"This is where our countless evils have arisen from - ignorance of the Scriptures"* (John Chrysostom, Romans Homily 1).

We can see in St. Paul's words that this is what we lack so often! We will have hope, he says, only **"through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures."** When we absent ourselves from the hearing or reading of Scripture, we make ourselves vulnerable to hopelessness.

But then look at it the other way around. This feeling of hopelessness is there to drive us to the Scriptures, not to keep us away! This statement is actually a promise. It's a Gospel statement: **"we, through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures, will have hope!"**

This is because there is only one source of such hope: Jesus. When you open the Scriptures you will see Jesus. What you need is for Jesus to come to you, and He does come, in a personal way, right to you, not only as true God but also as true Man. Isn't this wonderful? But where does He come to you this way? In the Scriptures, actually; in His Word.

This answers the mistake of thinking the Bible is just information and you have to do the work yourself. When Jesus comes He does things. He saves. He gives. He does powerful things. So His Word is powerful because He, the omnipotent one, is there. He is speaking. He is doing. Just like in His miracles He spoke and it was done, when He comes to you in His Word - His word of forgiveness - He speaks and it is done.

But what does He give? Here St. Paul says there are two things chiefly: patience and comfort. This is actually a surprise. I expect him to say comfort, but first he says patience.

In saying patience first, God is directing His apostle to point you to your trials, your crosses, your difficulties, your fears and worries, whatever tempts you to lose hope. There's a lot of that in these gray and latter days. It gets more and more difficult, it seems, just to live a Christian life.

The world discourages you from doing so. You are not praised for confessing your Christian faith, for denying yourself, crucifying your old Adam and making sacrifices, but the ungodly world persecutes you for it. It encourages what is worst and discourages you from what is best. So you are tempted to give up. To give up hope.

If you then seek inspiration or validation or encouragement outside of God's Word, if you are going to find your identity in peripheral things or in the support of others, or in the gods of work and money, if you are going to look out in the world for hope, you will only be disappointed and you are doomed to give up and despair. Your heart will fail you, as Jesus said in today's gospel.

But now Jesus comes to you in His Word. He is patience in the flesh. You hear that *"for the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross ... For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls"* (He 12:2-3). You hear that *"He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross"* (Ph 2:8). He did all of this for you. You hear that for you who are faithful unto death in bearing the cross - not by your strength but by Him preserving you in faith by means of His powerful Word - He says: *"I will give you the crown of life"* (Re 2:10).

This is the gift of patience. He gives it to you by speaking His Word, by coming to you in His Word and powerfully speaking patience into you.

Then comes comfort. This is a beautiful word and a beautiful gift. It means He comes to be right at your side. The meaning of this word is not only comfort, but even encourage or exhort. The forgiveness of your sins comforts you; this is the first and most important comfort He gives, so you can have a clear conscience. But that's not all. This also encourages you to do whatever is before you with a cheerful, glad heart, not held back by a bad conscience but going at it untroubled, with a clear conscience knowing all you do is good in God's sight, made right by Him.

Jesus comes in His Word to give you patience and comfort. Don't you see how when you are possessing these gifts from Him you can only have firm, certain hope? He is defeating hopelessness all the time, as you spend time with Him - rather He spending time with you - in His Word.

So even though by your own reason or strength you can't come to Him, He comes to you and through His Word He makes you "**abundant in hope**" so you do come to Him, you love to come to Him and hear His Word. You confess this is not your own doing. He builds this in you more and more, the more you are connected to Him in His Word.

He makes it so it is impossible for you to feel whole when you are apart from Him as He comes in His Word. He builds in you the delight in His Word, the love for His Word, the joy you get from His being with you in His Word. In this way He keeps drawing you to His Word, where He is. So He does "**fill you with all joy and peace in believing.**" Amen!