



## Sermon for Second Sunday in Advent Romans 15:4-13 & St. Luke 21:25-33

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As I was walking home from the Church this past Thursday afternoon I was thinking about today's Epistle. As I walked out the back entrance of the cemetery, a lost puppy ran up to me. It sniffed at me for a minute, ran a couple of circles around me, and then ran off down the path. Have you ever watched a lost puppy? This guy had a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but he didn't have any direction. He went to whatever new and exciting thing his nose sniffed out—going from fencepost to fencepost, from tree to tree, running off into the tall grass when he heard something move, then going back to sniff at more fenceposts, then chasing some ducks that had left the safety of the pond. Again, he had a lot of enthusiasm, but no direction, no real purpose, no goal; he just went around examining anything and everything that caught his attention. As much as he was no doubt have fun doing all that aimless wandering, it wasn't going to get him back home and, unless his owners were to find him, he'd be spending a cold night out in the wind and rain.

With that image in mind, consider how we saw in the lessons last week that Advent calls us to be *prepared*. To be prepared requires that we have a clear goal before us and we be focused and intent on it. Jesus has ushered in his kingdom, he's established it by the power of his Spirit in our hearts, he has made us a new temple, and then he left; he went back to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, to rule his kingdom, but he's left us here to do his work. He promised he would come back to consummate it—to make the spiritual reality of his kingdom a physical reality—but in the meantime he made it very clear that we have work to do. His Spirit is at work in the world, turning and regenerating hearts and making them ready to receive the Gospel message, but he's given *us* the job of living out and

preaching that message so that hearts ready to receive it will come to faith. That's how the kingdom grows.

Jesus has left us with everything we need to do the job. He's empowered us by his Spirit, he's given us the gifts and talents to do the work, and he's even given us directions. Our problem is that all too often we forget about the direction. We end up like lost puppies: we're full of enthusiasm and energy, but we don't know where we're headed or what we're supposed to be doing—maybe we don't even know where home is—so we flit from thing to thing, to whatever attracts our spiritual attention, we get distracted, we get lost, we forget about the job and the mission Jesus has given us. Because of our being so often ungrounded, instead of hearing Jesus say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant" on the final day when he comes back for us, we're more likely to hear him ask us why we wasted the time, the talent, and the treasure he gave us; we run the risk of ending up in the "outer darkness", not unlike a lost puppy who didn't make it home.

It's no wonder that so many Christians flit from church to church or from one spiritual distraction to another, never really making a commitment and never really doing much kingdom work. Whole sections of the Church seem to do the same thing. Instead of committing themselves to the pure and unadulterated Gospel of the Scriptures, instead of holding fast to the faith once delivered to the saints, we wander from this fad to that fad, trying to be "relevant", conforming to the culture, or looking to the latest ecclesiastical craze, "signs and wonders", or man-centred teaching to draw people to the kingdom rather than simply preaching and faithfully living the Cross of Christ.

Last week Jesus warned us that we need to be prepared—that we need to be living in obedience like the disciples and in trust like the people who welcomed him to Jerusalem, lest we end up like the hypocritical religious leaders in the temple who took God's grace for granted and corrupted the faith into something they could use to get rich. Today the lessons give us an anchor for our faith; they remind us that it's not just about being obedient, but that it's about being obedient to the precepts of God *in Scripture*, and it's not just about blind trust, but about trusting in the promises he's given us in those same Scriptures. *The Bible is our*

*anchor*. Without it we can never be prepared for Jesus' Second Advent. Without it we'll wander like lost puppies.

In the Epistle—Romans 15:4-13—St. Paul points us to the Old Testament, saying:

**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.** (Romans 15:4)

Think about the entire Old Testament, from Adam and Eve though the Jews who returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile, and consider how full these pages are of God's precepts and promises. It was a book, inspired and given by God, to people who had fallen into sin, who faced eternal spiritual death, and whom God was leading back to himself. God gave the Scriptures to his people so that they could know him—to know about him and to know his character and his ways. Sin had clouded their vision, it had darkened the mirror, and it had cut them off from God. On their own they stumbled around in the dark with no hope, but as the Scriptures instructed the people in the knowledge of God, it brought hope into the darkness. Even more, the Old Testament Scriptures are a source of hope for Christians. They show us God's love for his people and his plans for them. The Old Testament pointed the people to the fulfilment of God's love in the person of Jesus Christ—something the Old Testament saints never saw fulfilled. But as Christians we've experienced the reality of that fulfilment. And so when we see how Jesus has fulfilled the Old Testament promises, it should give us profound and life-changing hope, because we can trust that just as he fulfilled those Old Testament promises, he will also fulfil the New Testament promises he has made to us.

And hope changes our lives—but only for the better if our hope is anchored in Scripture. St. Paul was writing this to the Roman Church, because they were have some major disagreements. The Jewish Christians there were insisting that their Gentile brothers and sisters follow Jewish practices and the Gentile believers were looking down on the Jewish Christians for being hung up on things that didn't matter anymore. Paul steps in and points out that all of them should be finding their future hope in the same Scriptures and that the evidence of that hope, that faith, is unity in Christ—and not just a theoretical unity,

but real-world, lived-out unity. Look at verses 5-7:

**May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.**

Paul gives us a picture of what the Church is supposed to look like—of what it means to be *prepared* for the Second Advent. As we Christians live in God’s grace—as he gives us the strength and endurance to overcome the “old man” and to put on the new—we ought to be living in harmony with each other. Think about the fact that the Church brings together people from every culture and every walk of life. Jews and Romans were being brought together in the Roman Church. Historically the Jews hated the Romans, because the Romans had conquered them, and the Romans thought the Jews were just a bunch of crazy religious zealots and malcontents. Jews and Romans were like oil and water—and we can see that in the problems they had in the Roman Church—but Paul reminds them they were brought together by the Word: by a common life in the Word Incarnate, by a common grounding and hope in the Word Written, and by a common sharing in the Sacramental life of the Word, given at his own Table and in his own Feast. We share that same common life in the Word too. That means that we should be welcoming—*loving*—our brothers and sisters in Christ not because they’re like us or share common interests, but because all of us have been welcomed by Christ into his body. If we will only do that, we’ll be united not just in our life together, but in our praise of God as we live out our hope and faith before the eyes of the world.

Paul goes on in verse 8:

**For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs...**

So, yes, the Old Testament Scriptures are Jewish scriptures. Jesus came in fulfilment of all those promises to the Jews. But Paul goes on in verse 9. God’s

purpose wasn’t simply to save the Jewish people, but to use them to show his glory to the whole world.

**...and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**

Paul bridges the Old and New Testaments. God’s kingdom was never about a particular people or a particular place. God used a particular people and place so that when the fulfilment of his promises came, the whole world—all nations—would be drawn to the kingdom established by Jesus in his Church. And now, for the benefit of the Jews in his audience, Paul quotes all three of the historic divisions of the Torah to remind them that God’s plan was always there:

**As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” [2 Samuel 22:50] And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” [Deuteronomy 32:43] And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.” [Psalm 117:1] And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” [Isaiah 11:1, 10]**

Paul’s stressing their unity by reminding them that *neither* the Jews nor the Gentiles knew Jesus, but that both are now one in him. And as he opens their understanding they can now see what had been there all the time. Jesus is the one who opens the Book, which is what we see in Revelation: “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5). And the result of the understanding Jesus gives is that we grab hold of him, trusting in him and in the redemption he offers through the Cross. If we will only do that, Paul prays:

**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. (Romans 15:13)**

God is not only the God of endurance and encouragement, but he’s also the God of hope. Think about those words. If our God is a God of hope, how can we ever despair? If our God is the God of endurance and encouragement, how can we ever fail to endure? The key is to rest

on the Word: Incarnate *and* Written. He is our source of life and hope.

And, brothers and sisters, we need that hope. It’s part of our preparation for his return. The Epistle shows us the source of our hope by pointing back to the Old Testament and how the promises there were fulfilled in Christ and in his kingdom. But in the Gospel lesson, Jesus reminds us that while his kingdom is real and that is here, it exists alongside the world’s kingdoms for the time being—until his Second Advent when he’ll make it a physical reality. That’s what we’re preparing for. The Gospel is taken from the Olivet Discourse—where Jesus, a few days before his death, told his disciple what to expect in the coming years—that following him meant persecution. He warned them about the persecution that they would experience at the hands of the Jews, most of whom would not only reject him as the Messiah, but would reject, persecute, and brutally murder his disciples. Jesus tells the disciples about the coming judgement on the Jews for their rejection of him and of the end of the Old Testament age, with the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, which took place in A.D. 70—forty years, or a “generation”, later. But Jesus also uses that time of tribulation as an illustration to prepare the rest of us for what life will be like in the kingdom on this side of the Last Day, and he uses that judgement on Jerusalem as an illustration of the judgement that will come on the Last Day, and through that he gives *us* hope.

Jesus warns that in that day the people would be wondering what the world was coming to because of all the tumult. Palestine faced natural disasters and terrible famines. Under the leadership of Titus, the Emperor’s son, Judea was beaten down. And in addition to the difficult times faced by everyone, we know from the records of that time that the Jewish Christians were persecuted horribly by the Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus, himself a Pharisee, wrote that the Jews of his day were amongst the most wicked people who had ever lived. It was not a pleasant time or place for anyone and was even worse for Christians. But Jesus gives hope. He wanted his people to know that he hadn’t forgotten them and so he exhorts them, saying:

**And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.** (Luke 21:27-28)

At the time when his people were inclined to utter despair, Jesus says instead to lift their heads up high—he was coming, their Saviour would take care of them. Jesus gives a promise like the ones he gave through the Old Testament prophets. When things were at their worst; when the Assyrians or the Babylonians were camped around the cities of Israel and Judah; when the people were starving; after the people had been carried off to exile in a foreign land and their cities had been destroyed; God had promised through the prophets: Lift your heads! I've brought my judgment on the wicked, but I will preserve and save my faithful remnant through it all. And as we see in the Old Testament record, God fulfilled those promises, and fulfilled the most important ones in sending Jesus. Now Jesus, the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, gives this prophecy of hope to his disciples.

Now, consider how absurd it would be for them to despair or to lose faith when the tribulation came. Not only do they have the witness to God's faithfulness that fills the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures from beginning to end, but they have the One who came as the very fulfilment of those promises now giving them more promises! And so after telling them how bad things are going to get, he exhorts them with a parable:

**And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.** (Luke 21:29-31)

They won't know the time—as Jesus says in St. Matthew's gospel: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13)—but they will know that the day is getting closer. Just as the changing colours of the leaves on the trees tell us that a change of the seasons is near, their persecution would point to their coming salvation. Jesus'

point is that rather than the signs of the times being something to despair over, they should be signs of hope for the disciples. And he explains why:

**Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.** (Matthew 21:32-33)

Jesus says that the coming persecution and the coming judgement were a sure thing—they would happen before the generation alive in that day passed away. Were the disciples ready to take his word for it? Would they start doubting once they were in the midst of all that trouble? Jesus reminds them of the trustworthiness of his words: They're more enduring, more sure even than heaven and earth. Jesus, the Word Incarnate, is the very foundation of Creation itself—it was by his power as the Word, that God spoke everything into existence—and so when Jesus gives his word we can trust what he has to say—we can trust his promises. Brothers and sisters, there's our hope! And this is why as we wait for his Second Advent and that Final Judgement—as we prepare ourselves—we need to prepare ourselves by the *Word*.

The Word is as much our hope as it was the disciples'. We've seen the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus. We can see these words he spoke to the disciples fulfilled too. History shows us that what Jesus predicted on the Mount of Olives that day came to pass forty years later. His words are true. And so we too can have hope as we live through our own tribulations and as we wait for his final coming in glory to judge the living and the dead. God will always care for his faithful people.

Consider the message he gave to the Church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3. He gave them his promise that as they stood under great temptation, that they would stand steadfast—but the reason they would stand steadfast was because of their commitment to the Word: "I know that you have but little power, and yet you have *kept my word and have not denied my name*" (Revelation 3:8). Those words are profoundly true. We have but little power. We are weak—but *he is strong*. And God chooses to show his strength through weak people so that the world

might see him at work and be drawn to him. So instead of flitting from one thing to another, instead of being carried away by the latest ecclesiastical fad and every wave of doctrine, let us be grounded in the Word that we might be confident and diligent in our mission and focused wholly on preaching and living out the Cross of Christ. Let us faithfully trust in God's promises and just as faithfully obey his precepts that we might patiently endure, strengthened by him.

When the Israelites were surrounded by the Syrian army, Elisha wasn't afraid. His servant was in a panic and couldn't understand why Elisha wasn't, so Elisha prayed that God would open the young man's eyes. God opened them and the young man saw the innumerable hosts of heaven—horses and chariots of fire—all around them. Josephus reports that at the outset of the Jewish War, when the Romans came as God's instrument of judgement on Jerusalem, that the armies of heaven appeared in the clouds. And brothers and sisters, we can rest secure on the promises of Jesus—whose Word is sure and will never pass away—that no matter how bad things get for us, we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and that the hosts of heaven are camped around us. As the Psalmist wrote, "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress" (Psalm 46:7).

Let us pray: "Blessed Lord, who caused the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that through patience and the comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the joyful hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen."