



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent Romans 15:4-13

Fr. William Klock

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In our Epistle, in Romans 15:4, St. Paul writes, “Whatever was written ahead of time, you see, was written for us to learn from, so that through patience and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.”

Maybe more than any of our other Advent scripture lessons, that verse sums up what Advent is about. There’s a big story. The story of God and his people and the world. And the Christmas story is just one part of it. A very importantly part, without a doubt, but still just one part. Pull it out, try to make it stand on all on its own, and it ends up becoming something else. And that’s what secular culture has done. Contrast how the world prepares us for Christmas and how the church prepares us. Our commercialistic, materialistic, entertainment focused culture just starts shoving Christmas at us as soon as Halloween is over. How do you get ready for Christmas? You buy Christmas stuff. You start listening to Christmas music. You start watching all the Christmas movies on TV. Our culture prepares for Christmas by doing Christmas. And then Christmas comes and then it’s suddenly over in a day...or maybe two, if you count Boxing Day. And I hear it all the time: people are left wondering what happened, feeling like they missed something.

It occurred to me that this is like trying to explain to someone that Die Hard is a Christmas movie by making them watch the scene of Hans Gruber falling from Nakatomi Plaza...over and over and over. It’s an iconic scene. It says Christmas almost as much as Baby Jesus in the manger. But your friend will still have no idea what Die Hard is about, let alone why it’s a Christmas movie. He

just knows it ends with a bad guy falling off a building into a big explosion. If you want him to understand, you’ve got to start at the beginning. He has to know the story all the way back to the opening with John McClane on the airplane. *Then* your friend will get it...and maybe he’ll even understand why it’s the best Christmas movie ever. And when the time comes for that scene, the grand crescendo of the movie, and Hans Gruber falls from Nakatomi Tower, he’s gonna cheer, because it’s not just a cool scene. It’s not just iconic. It’s the denouement of the story.

And *that* is what the church does with Advent, Brothers and Sisters. It takes us back into the story of Israel and Israel’s God, it shows us the darkness of the world and the fallenness of humanity, it reminds us God’s plan and his promises to set it all to rights, to make everything new again. That’s why our daily readings through Advent are taken from Isaiah. And so, when Christmas comes, it’s more than just an orgy of consumerism and it’s more than just sentimental feelings about Baby Jesus in a manger, it’s more than vague good thoughts about God. No, when Christmas comes and we’ve been reading the promises in the scripture and singing the promises and songs of longing during Advent, we recognise the light and life that have been born into the midst of darkness and sin, we see God’s saving Messiah, and most of all we’re moved to give him glory because Christmas shows that he is faithful to his promises.

And for Paul, that was kind of everything. Because when you know what the story is all about and when you know where it’s going, you realise that following Jesus isn’t just about sentimental feelings, or about being good until you die so you can go to heaven, it’s about the fact that in Jesus, God has sent his king to bring new creation into the midst of the old and to make us a part of it. In fact, to make us the agents of that new creation and his saving work. To be the stewards of his good news and his Spirit who carry his light and life into the darkness and death of the world in preparation for the day when Jesus’ work is consummated. When people don’t know the story, they

too often reduce Christianity to fire insurance, to a “Get out of hell free” card. Christmas becomes a sentimental holiday about a baby. But when you know the story, you that Christianity is all about is a vocation—to be the people of God for the sake of the world—and the baby in the manger shows us what our vocation looks like.

And this is precisely why Paul writes what he does here in Romans 15. Because when you forget the story, or when you forget where it’s going, and especially when you stop living in hope of God’s future, it becomes very, very easy to just go with the flow. To take the path of least resistance. To let the world and its values and ideas carry you away back into the darkness. To give up on the vocation that the gospel and the Spirit have given us. The big problem Paul saw in the Roman churches was that the Jewish believers in Jesus and the Gentile believers in Jesus were splitting up. They were letting ethnicity define them instead of Jesus and because of that they were losing their gospel witness and letting the darkness and division of the world define who they were.

And Brothers and Sisters, the same thing happens to us. It still happens with churches dividing up over ethnicity and language and things like that, but it happens all sorts of other ways too. We lose sight of our hope. We lose sight of God’s future. And when we do, we lose our vocation and instead of being gospel people of light and life swimming upstream, we end up just going with the worldly flow. Sometimes it happens without us even realising it. Other times we knowingly give up because it seems like there’s no other option. I was talking with someone this week about politics in my country and he said, “Well, you have to be a Democrat or a Republican! There’s no other choice!” And I kept saying, there is another choice. You commit to doing the right thing, the kingdom thing, to following Jesus and being light and life. These days that means saying no to the options that everyone else is making. It means making a deliberate choice to lose, but you do so knowing that God’s justice will win in the end—because the story shows us that God is always faithful to

do what he's promised and to finish what he starts. If you understand the cross, this shouldn't be a difficult concept.

This is why Paul starts out with some of that scripture that was written in the past, some "Old Testament" as we call it. In verse 3 he writes, "The Messiah, you see, didn't please himself. Instead, as it was written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you are fallen on me.'" In other words, Jesus took on himself a punishment he didn't deserve. When David wrote that psalm he was thinking of his own situation. It's Psalm 69. He cries out to God because the flood waters are rising around him. Because he feels like he's sinking in the mud with no footing to be found. His enemies were surrounding him and kicking him when he was down. But he knew the Lord and he knew his promises and he knew the Lord is faithful, so he cried out for justice and salvation. And as he closes the psalm, he cries out with hope-filled praise. God hadn't delivered him yet, but David still praises the Lord for his salvation—what he knows God will do.

And this wasn't just David's story and vocation, it was the story and vocation of Israel and that meant that when Jesus came as the faithful Israelite to represent his people, it became his story and his vocation. David knew, Israel knew, Jesus knew because it had been written, because they had God's word and because of that they had God's promises. The way of God's people is the way of the servant who suffers. It's the way of unjust suffering for the sake of others and for the sake of the whole world. But through that suffering God has brought redemption and kingdom and new life.

As the Mandalorian says, "This is the way." Looking to the good of others instead of our own good is the way of the cross. Just as it was for Jesus the way to his throne, it is for us the way to his kingdom. Jesus could have given in to the devil's temptation in the wilderness. He could have bowed down to him and received his throne. And he'd be king, but he'd be king of a

people still enslaved to sin and death. The world would still be dark and broken and fallen. Think of our Gospel last week. Jesus could have let the Palm Sunday crowd carry him into Jerusalem and seat him on a throne. But again, he'd have his throne, but the primary mission would have failed. He'd be king over a dead people. Instead, he had to come as a humble servant, he had to face the rejection of his people, he had to face their jeers and their mocking, and he had to go to his death in a way so humiliating that polite people wouldn't even discuss it. But through the cross, by letting all the forces of evil come together to do their worst in one place, Jesus defeated them and brought light and life back to God's good world. And now, as Jesus said, he calls us to take up our cross and to follow him. Not when it's expedient. Not when the cross is light. The point of a cross is that it's heavy! It's our calling, no matter what. But it's a joyful calling in the end, because we know the story and we have the promises of a God who is faithful. The lowly birth, the constant antagonism, the humiliating and painful death make possible the glory and the joy of the resurrection and new creation.

So, Paul goes on writing in Romans 15:5, "May the God of patience and encouragement grant you to come to a common mind among yourselves, in accordance with Jesus the Messiah, so that, with one mind and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah."

That's the mission, Brothers and Sisters: to glorify God. And not just when we come to church and pray and praise and give thanks. That's certainly one way we give him glory, but one of the things the story teaches us is that God is glorified when we respond to his faithfulness with faithfulness of our own—and especially when the watching world sees it, especially when it involves humility and even suffering. God was glorified as the world watched Jesus go to the cross, trusting his Father's promises. And God is glorified today as, trusting our Father's promises, we take up our crosses and follow him. As we walk in faith, as we do good, as

we live in hope, and as we do it *without compromise*, even it means trouble or loss. Think of the apostles. Think of all the Christians in the first centuries after Jesus who lived in hope of God's future and who trusted in his promises and refused to compromise their gospel life and witness and gave their lives for it. At first it seemed like a pointless failure, but as the world watched, their gospel witness made a difference and eventually—not in a single generation, but eventually—their witness brought an entire empire to Jesus and taught it grace and mercy and lifted it up out of barbarism and sexual immorality the likes of which—even in light of the world today—we'd be hard-pressed to imagine. And it happened because Jesus' people were united in him and faithful in hope and witness.

That unity part is a major theme of Paul's letter to the Romans, because the unity of the church across the Jew-gentile divide was one of the most significant ways the early church broke with both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture and swam against the current. We don't think about that nearly as often as we should. Unity is essential to our Christian vocation. It reveals that our identity is Jesus the Messiah. Those early Christians showed the world what it looks like to find your identity, not in your ethnicity or language, not in your customs or biological kin, not in your social class, but in Jesus. Jews and gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free came together as brothers and sisters in those churches and it shocked the world, Jews and Greeks alike. It became a powerful witness to God's new creation. It was that witness coupled with the proclamation that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the world's true lord, that brought the nations—a few at first, but eventually a whole empire—that's what moved them to give glory to the God of Israel. Something absolutely unthinkable. Romans giving glory to a loser God of a loser people. But Jesus changes everything and the faithful witness of a servant church backed that truth up.

So, going on in our Epistle, Paul says in verse 7: "Welcome one another!" Don't

let the values, identities, and prejudices of the world divide the church. Paul says, instead, “Welcome one another as the Messiah has welcomed you, to God’s glory. Let me tell you why: the Messiah became a servant of the circumcised people in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of God—that is, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, and to bring the nations to praise God for his mercy.”

That was the plan all along. This is the big story. God called Abraham and through him created a people, a holy nation through whom he would eventually save the whole world. Jesus was the culmination of that chapter of the story: the perfect, faithful Israelite, the humble Davidic king, who died the death his people deserved in order to deliver them. In doing that, God fulfilled what he’d promised the patriarchs, what he’d promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, what he’d promised to David.

The unity of the church, the bringing in of the gentiles into the covenant family, is a witness to the faithfulness of God, so Paul keeps hammering away at it. These are the things, the scriptures, that were written in the past and that tell us the story. And so Psalm 18:49. It’s the Psalmist celebrating the victory that the God of Israel has given him as he declares that he will praise him not just in Israel, but in the midst of the nations *so that* they hear of the glory of God, too. He sings: “That is why I will praise you among the nations, and will sing to your name.” And then, in verse 10 Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:43: “Rejoice, you nations, with his people!” This was the song of Moses celebrating God’s victory over and just judgement on both rebellious Israel *and* the gentile nations and Moses calls those pagan nations, having seen the victory of Israel’s God, to join in his praises. And then, verse 11, Paul is back to the Psalms, to Psalm 117:1: “Praise the Lord, all nations, and let all the peoples sing his praise.” Again, the Psalmist calls to the nations to come and praise the God of Israel with him. And then, finally, the Prophet Isaiah: “There shall be the root of Jesse,

the one who rises up to rule the nations; the nations shall hope in him.”

The bit from Isaiah is important. Because Paul’s showing the Roman Christians (and he’s showing us), that it was God’s plan all along for the nations to join Israel in praising and glorifying Israel’s God. And in the days of Moses and the days of David, that was crazy talk. People didn’t glorify other people’s gods. The gods were the strength of their respective nations, so not only was it unpatriotic to give glory to a foreign god, it was sort of like inviting the defeat of your nation and your king. But this was God’s plan all along. To bring the nations to him in faith. And Paul’s reminding the Roman Christians that this is exactly what’s happened to them. Pagan Romans heard the gospel and they saw the uncompromising witness of the believers there—probably mostly Jews—who believed Jesus was truly the Messiah. And those pagans were moved to faith. And in the early days of the church there, Jewish and Gentile believers were doing the unthinkable: they were worshipping the God of Israel side by side. And that only served to witness the power of the gospel even more powerfully. But things happened and those Christians started to go with the flow and the unity began to fall apart: Jews worshipping in that house and Gentiles in this one over here. And so Paul reminds them how God has fulfilled his promises in Jesus. The root of Jesse promised by Isaiah has come and he was raised up on the cross to the glory of God, and the nations have begun to come to him. And Paul’s saying: don’t lose that that or you risk losing the whole gospel. I know it’s hard. The gentile believers will be mocked by their friends and family for worshipping the God of the weirdo Jews, with weirdo Jews at their side, no less. And the Jewish believers, they were going to be hassled by their Jewish family and friends for worshipping beside those unclean gentiles. And Paul’s saying, “Don’t give in to the pressure from the world. Keep witnessing the power of the gospel. Remember that you worship the God who was born in humility as one of us

and who went humble to a cross for our sake. Live humbly for the sake of each other—and live humbly for the sake of the world. Romans, you show your people that the God of Israel is faithful and full of mercy and grace and unlike any god your people have ever known. And Jews, you show your people that in Jesus, your God has purified the gentiles and is fulfilling his promises. And he wraps it up exhorting them, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Paul knew that persecution was coming and the temptation to fragment would be even strong, but the hope-filled joy that began with the birth of Jesus and that carries through the story to the cross, burst out of the tomb with joy on Easter—and that resurrection hope, that light and life, would keep them faithful to their calling. Will keep *us* faithful to our calling.

A people overflowing with hope. Hope in the fulfilment of what God has promised and what he’s revealed in Jesus: hope for a world where the darkness is gone, hope for a final end to sin and death, hope for the day when heaven and earth are brought back together and men and women live and serve in the presence of God as he created us in the beginning.

And here’s the thing, Brothers and Sisters, it’s that gospel- and Spirit-filled hope that will make us the gospel force Jesus calls us to be. It’s that hope that makes us heaven-on-earth people even when it means swimming upstream, even when it means choosing the option that no one else will choose, even when it means that the world is angry with us, even when it means rejection—and in some cases even martyrdom. It’s that hope that will drive us to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection; it’s that hope that will give us the hearts of servants ready to humbly teach the world mercy and grace; it’s that hope that will move us to love our enemies and even to die for them; it’s that hope that will move us to take uncompromising stands against what is wrong and for what is right,

even if it means losing in the short term. Because our hope is sure and certain—that what God began in humility at the manger, he will surely one day bring to completion in an all-consuming burst of glory. Let's close with our collect. Think on that prayer and how it calls us, not just to read the scriptures, but to so immerse ourselves in them that they become a part of us.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to 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 hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*