

**Devotions - December 9-15, 2007**  
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**Sunday, December 9**

*Our God of Hope*

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Hope! True hope is not some flimsy, ephemeral fantasy that we conjure up to make ourselves feel better. True hope is not something we manufacture by thinking good thoughts or praying polite prayers. True hope is not the brave face we put on at the funeral home or when your boss tells you that your job is being eliminated. True hope is a tangible determined gift from our God of hope that comes into our lives -- in what ever shape they are in -- and lives and dwells with us. True hope is the hope of God that helps us to overcome even the most difficult of situations. True hope is the hope of God that helps us to put one foot in front of the other, even when we don't feel like walking.

Look for the hope of God to come to you this Advent season in the reading of scripture, in times of worship, in your preparations to celebrate the birth of the Christ. Look for the hope of God to come to you this Advent season in the love of a family member or friend, in the joy of holiday music, in your times of praying to God and then listening for God to speak to you. Make room for the hope of God to live in your life, for God's hope is surely coming to you. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

*Prayer: O God, help me to recognize and welcome your hope as it comes to me, even in the difficult times of life. Amen*

**Monday, December 10**

*Hope For The Messiah*

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Isaiah 11:1)

A number of years ago the Church Council decided to plant a new tree in the church yard. It was mid fall and someone went out and bought a crab apple tree. It was about five feet high and about as big around as a pencil. We planted that tree and then waited for spring. Well, spring came and nothing was going on with the new tree. Other bushes and trees were starting to sprout and put forth leaves, but our new tree did nothing. We began to wonder if it had died out during the winter. But then, one day a small bud appeared, and then several more, and that tree began to grow. The tree is now about ten feet tall and every spring it has the most beautiful pink blossoms.

Isaiah presents us with a similar picture. From an apparently dead stump a surprising shoot busts forth.

Perhaps it seems like an odd way to introduce the Messiah. Yet as we look back at the life of Jesus, it makes miraculous sense. For every year we behold the beauty of God’s love as it blossoms in the form of a baby, Immanuel, come into this world and in the death and resurrection of the Christ.

May you find hope in the prophecy of Isaiah. For the shoot from the stump of Jesse is coming to you once again. Rejoice in Emmanuel!

*Prayer: Come, O Come Emmanuel. Help your people to see this world as you do--a world for which you were willing to die. Then with these new eyes, help us to love and to live more faithfully. Amen.*

**Tuesday, December 11**

*Hope For Peace*

“ The wolf shall live with the lamb ... ” (Isaiah 11:6a)

A wolf lie down with a lamb? While we don't have many sheep across the territory of our Synod we do have a number of wolves. Yet, a wolf lying down with a lamb? It just isn't "natural."

But, then, isn't that the point. In Isaiah's 11<sup>th</sup> chapter litany of unlikely scenarios, the prophet paints a picture of nature that is highly, "unnatural." I don't believe that anyone this side of the second coming of Jesus has ever experienced nature like this. It is an echo of the Garden of Eden and a beautiful picture of the restored creation for which the whole creation aches, especially during the Advent season.

Part of the pain of Advent is that Isaiah's vision of peace is not yet fully realized. Yet, part of Advent's promise lies in the fact that the Prince of Peace has come and is going to come again. Nature as we know it was knocked for a loop when Jesus rose from the grave. And that, the Bible reassures us, is only the beginning.

If peace on earth depended on us there would be little cause for hope in this or any other season. But peace, it seems, is part of God's grand plan. And that should give us hope as we seek to follow the Prince of Peace. After all, as Isaiah says, "a little child shall lead them."

***Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, grant to your people your peace. Amen.***

**Wednesday, December 12**

*Hope For Justice*

“Give the king your justice, O God, ...” (Psalm 72:1a)

Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king. And what a beautiful prayer it is, asking that the king would “judge the people with righteousness and the poor with justice” (v 2); be “like the rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth” (v. 6); “deliver the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper” (v. 12); “have pity on the weak and the needy” (v. 13a). And there is even more.

As we in America see political campaigns for President of our country moving into high gear, it is hard to imagine any of the candidates who are running being described in such extravagant terms.

One of the priorities in this prayer is that the ruler would be about justice for the poor and the oppressed. With a government leader like that who wouldn't pray that he or she would rule “as long as the moon, throughout all generations” (v.5b)?

While I think all earthly rulers would do well to study this prayer's priorities, I suspect that the only ruler who truly lives up to this psalmist's standards is God. And when we read these words during Advent, they help us to understand the priorities of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. They also call us to reevaluate our own priorities. How high is justice for the poor on your Christmas list? May this Advent seasons kindle within you a hope for justice.

***Prayer: O God, may the rulers of this earth strive for justice; and may righteousness and peace abound, until the moon is no more. Amen.***

**Thursday, December 13**

*The Hope of Forgiveness*

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” (Matthew 3:3)

John the Baptist functioned as a kind of advance man for the Jesus the Messiah. For us, the season of Advent functions in much the same way. For Advent calls us to prepare, to make ready for the one who is coming and the celebration of his birth.

Part of our Advent preparation should include the confession of our sin. It was for our sin that Jesus was born in the stable in Bethlehem. He came to bring to all forgiveness. Knowing that we are redeemed, made right with God, and washed clean in the blood of Jesus is a wonderful source of hope for all of us. Let us not be deceived that we have no need for forgiveness. For “if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1: 8-9). This Advent season believe in the hope of forgiveness.

*Prayer: In your mercy, O God, forgive what I have been, help me to amend what I am, and direct what I shall be. Amen*

**Friday, December 14**

*Hope For Harmony*

"May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus." (Romans 15:5)

A number of years ago I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" How are you doing at living your Christian faith this Advent season? How it must grieve our Lord Jesus when those of us who bear his name are often such poor representatives of it.

I have to believe that lack of harmony among believers is one of the ways we pain Jesus the most. In our congregations we have become so good at back-stabbing, gossiping, being hypocritical, and being just down right mean to each other. Given the way we treat each other it is no wonder that folks often don't want to become a part of our church families.

Maybe if we took our cue from Jesus, we would be better representatives of him. In the opening verses of Romans 15 Paul writes about how "Christ did not please himself" (v. 3). How would life in our congregations look if we worried less about pleasing ourselves and more about pleasing our Lord Jesus by loving and serving our neighbor? This Advent season hope for harmony amongst God's people, and "may the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus."

***Prayer: Lord Jesus the Christ, help us, your people, to live in harmony for your name's sake.  
Amen***

**Saturday, December 15**

*Hope For The Gentiles*

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again he says,  
“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the people praise him.”  
(Romans 15: 10b-11)

Throughout the New Testament of the Bible we read about the Gentiles -- all those people who were not Jews. I would have to guess that most of us don't really give much thought to the Bible's references to "Gentiles." But I think we should. In fact I think our ears should be tingling every time we read or hear about the Gentiles. Because, unless we came to faith in Jesus the Christ along a Jewish path, the Bible is talking about us -- you and me!

In the first thirteen verses of the fifteenth chapter of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul has included a number of quotations from the Old Testament. The one thing these quotations all have in common is a concern for the Gentiles. That concern has been on God's agenda since God called Abraham -- who was blessed so that he might be a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3).

This extravagant example of God's grace is the basis for Paul's exhortation: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

For the rest of the Advent season, and beyond, remember that your invitation to celebrate the birth and the blessing of the Messiah is nothing less than an act of God's extravagant grace. So let your hope overflow from God's blessings in your life, and share the good news with everyone you meet.

*Prayer: As you have welcomed me, Lord Jesus, help me to welcome others into the joy and peace of believing. Amen*