

Growing in Hope

Sermon 39 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 1, 2019

Romans 15: 4 -13

Today is the first day of Advent, which means, at my house it was finally time to pull out the new Harry Potter Lego Advent Calendar. It's been waiting on the top shelf of our hallway closet for nearly a month now. Since this is the first year we've done an advent calendar, words do not describe the magnitude of Mia's expectations of how amazing this whole Experience would be.

We have tried to tell her that it's not everything all at once. We have tried to set the bar nice and low to make sure she understands that she's just getting one small piece at a time. We have tried to explain how Advent calendars work - one small gift per day... then more waiting... We have tried to shield her from the inevitable disappointment that will come when she realizes it would probably be Christmas before she could see the whole scene take shape. That will require all the pieces.

Even though we tried to manage expectations to avoid major heartache and disappointment, there was something pure and untamed about Mia's Advent Harry Potter Lego hope. I heard her wake up this morning, feet hit the floor- run down the hallway, down the stairs and into the kitchen where I was sitting, working, and waiting for her to find the first treasure inside the box... I watched her this morning, and noticed something special, something beautiful, something in her that I seem to have lost along the way... I saw excitement, I saw joy and curiosity about the future, I saw commitment and confidence that whatever was in this box behind door number 1 was going to be absolutely amazing! ... really... I saw hope.

And look at what she found!!!!

The older we get, the more (I think) we struggle with hope. Perhaps we struggle because of some hard lessons we may have learned along the way. Perhaps we had hoped for health in a year plagued with illness. Maybe we hoped for prosperity in a year of scarcity. Maybe we hoped for companionship in a year of loneliness... whatever it is that we hoped for, sooner or later - for most of us anyway - life teaches us not to get our hopes up too much... or we might get hurt.

With this logic, hope is understood as weakness covered up in optimism and thus it is relegated to the children, to the naïve, to the young, and to the simple minded. With this logic, hope is merely a feeling. It is an emotional response that covers up the pain of our grown-up realities.

As adults we try to protect ourselves from hopes like these... lowering our expectations so that we are not surprised by outcomes, so that we don't have to feel the pain of disappointment when reality sets in.

But this morning I am convinced that hope is none of these things at all! Rather, hope is a stubborn refusal to accept things as they are and a commitment to work for change. Hope is the active partner of faith which believes that God is at work in the world. Or, as David Orr puts it: "... Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up."¹ Said with a Christian twist, Hope is ready and eager to join in the work of kingdom building - even as we wait for God's presence to be made known, even when it seems that all is lost. Hope does not, will not stop.

When Paul writes the letter to the Romans, he addresses a church growing weary in their waiting...a church that has endured much and a church that is in jeopardy of being torn apart by the increasing cultural and political differences amongst the people. He has seen the vitality of the early church threatened by the anti-Jewish sentiments endorsed under the reign of the former emperor, Claudius. Under whose rule, Jews like Prisca and Aquila who we know from the book of Acts (chapter 18) were discriminated against and kicked out of their own homes. Their property stolen from them by the political powers of their day, and if they survived, they were forced to make a new life in exile.

Nero, the new emperor was more sympathetic to the Roman Jews and permitted them to re-enter. But the damage was done, the traumatic realities of exile remained, and the church (which was young and made up of both Jews and Gentiles) had to re-discover how to move forward given all that had taken place. It had to rediscover Hope in the midst of brokenness. How could those returning from exile trust the Gentiles who remained in Rome, reaping the benefits of the empire? How could those who remained, welcome and accept the exiles back into their community without accepting some amount of personal risk? The church had to rediscover its unity in Christ, but tensions were high, the situation seemed hopeless. Differences of political affiliation and ethnic identity had begun to seep into the church and dilute the unity born of a shared commitment to follow Jesus all the way to the Roman cross. There were differences of opinion about what that following looked like. There was judgment about whose faith was strong and whose was weak. There were assumptions about who had it figured out and who had it all wrong... So to this broken and still-fracturing church, Paul writes words of encouragement, of endurance... and ironically, a word of hope.

On this first Sunday of Advent, Christians everywhere are talking about hope. Many of them are reading scriptures from the lectionary that predict the return of Christ and the redemption of the world. Many will hear from Matthew's Gospel:

*About that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son... therefore, you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.
(Mt. 24: 36 and 44)*

And if we were to read a few chapters earlier in Romans, we would find a similar message:

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers... (Romans 13:11a)

On this first Sunday of Advent as we hear the message, or perhaps the warning, that Christ's return will happen, we are called to *hope* (to believe and to act like...)it might just be true.

In this season of Advent, we find ourselves caught between the urgency and the long delay of God's coming kingdom. We remember the words of the prophet Isaiah who insists that one day God will reign and judge between the nations, arbitrating conflicts and smoothing out disagreements between the people, until (in familiar poetic terms...)

"they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more..." (Is. 2:4)

And as we remember these words we long for the day when they might be realized. But no sooner than we begin to see it, to picture the world at peace with itself and at peace with God, we are startled awake with reports of violence in London, war and escalating conflict further east, and impeachment inquiries in Washington, DC. The whole world seems to be full of violence, hatred... lies and brokenness... solutions are nowhere to be found and to be quite frank, whether or not it is the first week of Advent, things are not feeling so hopeful.

Then I remember that hope - as described in the Bible - is not naïveté covered up in a healthy dose of optimism. Hope is not an emotion or a passive wish that we have. Hope is not a refusal to accept the world as it is and simply long for something more... Hope is an active posture, hope is a commitment to hold onto God's promises for a new heaven and a new earth, hope is a lived confidence that with God's help our world will one day be redeemed... just as it has been promised. And hope is action taken to join God in the work of new creation right here, in the midst of our brokenness, with all of our shortcomings, trusting God to take care of all that we cannot do on our own.

In this recognition, the plight of the ancient Roman Christians doesn't feel so far off, and the encouragement from the apostle Paul don't seem so foreign. Rather, they seem to speak to us today... still living in our broken world.

There was a false sense of unity that had grown in the Roman churches based on the institutions of politics, economics, and human understanding. Those who shared the same life experiences, ethnic identities, political ideas, and theological conclusions found it easier to rally together claiming superiority and strength over the others. No wonder they kept coming up short, they are all based on human experience and human potential. But Paul reminds them that if there is any hope to be found, it will not be found in earthly power, but in the lived example of Jesus who fed the hungry, who healed the broken, and

liberated the oppressed, and welcomed everyone to the table. So perhaps if we have lost our hope, we might begin to find it by following the same advice, by opening ourselves to those who don't look like us, who don't speak like us, who don't share our life experience, who don't think like us and perhaps who don't even worship like us. "Welcome one another... just as Christ has welcomed you." Paul says.

Live in harmony with one another, whether Jew or Gentile, because Christ has welcomed all of you *just as you are*, with all of your limitations, your flaws and imperfections. Christ has welcomed you without expecting perfection. Christ has welcomed you without any required documentation. Christ has welcomed you without question, without requirement, without hesitation, and without condition.

In that experience of being welcomed in, God's kingdom has drawn near.

And... In this experience of being welcomed, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit, and we can begin to hope beyond the brokenness and pain that we see in our world and that we know in our own lives. When we are welcomed into the body of Christ and the Spirit gets to work on us, hope begins to grow within us because we remember that we are not alone. We are not alone in our struggles. We are not alone in our brokenness. We are not alone in our grief. We are never alone.

Standing here, in the pulpit, on this first day of Advent, I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I struggled with hope this week. I struggled to believe that somehow, someday, all the pain and sin and brokenness could somehow be made new.

But looking at this Lego, I remember that I am not alone, in fact, there is a whole scene yet to build. There are other characters to create, there are more props to add, there are new storylines to create. This adventure is only just beginning and only God knows when and where and how it will end.

Looking at this Lego, I humbly remember that I alone cannot bring about new creation. I alone cannot beat swords into ploughshares, I alone cannot make lions and lambs... or perhaps donkeys and elephants... lie down together. But with steadfastness, with courage, and with God's help I am growing in hope.

¹ David Orr. *The Designer's Challenge*. 2007.