

12.6.2020 Second Sunday in Advent (Romans 15:4-13)

A school district in a large city had a program in place to help sick or injured kids keep up with their studies while they were staying at the hospital. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and spoke briefly with the child's regular class teacher, who told her that the class was currently studying nouns and adverbs, and that she'd like her to help this boy better understand them so that he doesn't fall too far behind.

The teacher decided to get right to work, and went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the him, she struggled to speak, and simply began by saying, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much of anything, but the next day a nurse asked her, "What did you say to that boy?" The teacher felt like she must've done something wrong and began to apologize. "Oh no," said the nurse. "You didn't do anything wrong. We've just been worried about that little guy, and ever since you spoke with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting. He's responding to treatment. It's as though suddenly he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he'd completely given up hope until the teacher arrived, but that everything changed because her visit helped him to come to a simple realization. He explained his thoughts by saying, "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

When people, like this boy, are facing the most difficult, life-threatening trials it's often said, "While there is life, there is hope." Meaning, as long as someone is alive there is hope for recovery, but when we consider the example of this young boy from a Christian perspective, perhaps it's better to say, "While there is hope, there is life." In his story we recognize that it was hope which sparked his recovery. It was hope for tomorrow that gave him the will to live today. Before the teacher arrived, when the boy was without hope, he'd given up on life. He wasn't responding to treatment. There was no life without hope, but after she came and taught him a simple lesson hope was restored, and while there is hope, there is life.

Hope is one of the great themes of Advent. In the Epistle we read this morning, St. Paul wrote, *“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope”* (Romans 15:4). Paul’s inspired words remind us of the truth that in the context of this sermon, we were once just like that boy, a people injured and suffering and without hope, or in the words of the prophet Isaiah, we were a people who walked in darkness, who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, but God sent us a teacher, He inspired Scripture to be written for our instruction, and Paul tells us that the point of this instruction is that we *“may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost”* (Romans 15:13).

Like a boy, whose hope was restored when he realized he wasn’t dying, Scripture is designed by God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to restore our hope, allowing us to lead the *abundant* life (John 10:10) Christ came to give us, by encouraging us to come to the same realization, the realization that we are not dying. In fact, that’s the message contained in the most well-known verse of Scripture. John 3:16 records Jesus’ promise that *“... all who believe in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”* Notice in the verse that Jesus not only states *all who believe in Him shall not perish*, He also speaks of eternal life in the present tense, saying *“all who believe in Him... have everlasting life.”* So often we think of life everlasting as something we receive at the moment of our physical death, but that’s clearly not what our Lord said, and St. Paul makes the same point in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). You won’t be a new creation. In Christ you are a new creation. Eternal life isn’t waiting for you beyond the grave. Eternal life is yours today.

Christians not only have hope, Christians *abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost* because of what Scripture has taught us, yet the truth that the abundant, eternal life Christ came to give us is ours today can be difficult to recognize among the many trials and sorrows that we face in this world, and while no analogy is perfect, perhaps it becomes easier for us to see that truth if we look at it this way. In a sense, the hopeful state we are in now resembles the life of an infant while the child is still in their mother’s womb. The life of a baby who has not yet been born is a life that’s mysterious and hidden, and shrouded in the darkness of a womb, but we all recognize that it

is that same life, that same person, who at the end of 40 weeks, through a difficult struggle, is born into this world and comes to see the full and miraculous light of day.

In a similar way, by the grace of God through faith in Christ our Lord, at our baptism we received spiritual, divine, eternal life from God, and while that life is also often mysterious and hidden this side of heaven, we know that it is that same life, that same person, who will one day move from the darkness of this world into the glorious light of God's heavenly kingdom. Like a baby in their mother's womb, we have no idea what awaits us, for *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT). We have no idea what awaits us, we only know, in the words of St. Paul, that *"because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ..."* (Ephesians 2:4-5).

God inspired Scripture to be written for our instruction, to the end that we *may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost*, and God's promise to you in His written Word is that you have eternal life, you are a new creation, and that because of His great love for you, you are alive in Christ. Each of these promises echo the words that Jesus said to Martha, in order to restore her hope, when she was heart-broken over the death of her brother Lazarus. When she came out to meet him near the tomb, Jesus said to her, *"Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."* Then He asked Martha, *"Do you believe this?"* (John 11:26). Jesus' question to Martha is His personal question to every one of us. *Do you believe this? Do you believe, and do you live as though eternal life is yours today? Do you believe that you are a new creation who God has made alive in Christ, and that for those who live and believe in Him, physical death isn't the end, it is instead, like physical birth, the process by which the life that God has given us moves from the darkness of this world into the glorious light of God's heavenly kingdom.*

The world will do everything it can to convince you, just like it'd convinced that little boy before the teacher visited him that this life is all we have, that you better scratch and claw and hang on to this earthly life because with every passing day you're one step closer to the grave, and hope is diminishing. This is what the world would have you believe, but God says otherwise. God sent us a teacher, He inspired Scripture to be written for us,

and in the words of St. John, the Scriptures “*are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*” (John 20:31). *Do you believe this?*