

The Second Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Isaiah 11:1-10 |
| <i>Response</i> | In his days may righteousness flourish, and peace abound |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Romans 15:4-9 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Matthew 3:1-12 |

The Second Sunday of Advent for Year A is another passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. In this case, the lectionary skips a couple of chapters down to Romans 15:4-9. So let's read through the passage. We'll try to unpack it, and we'll ask ourselves why the Church may have chosen this particular passage for the second week of Advent and then what it might mean for our own spiritual and moral life in Christ. In Romans 15:4, we read these words:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness 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.

Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 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, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Alright, end of passage. Okay, so what's going on here? If you remember, I've mentioned elsewhere that the context of the letters to the Romans is that Paul is writing to the Church at Rome, which doesn't know him—or at least, they've only heard of him. He doesn't know them personally. And it's apparent—a lot of scholars think, and I think this is right—that there's been conflict between some of the Jews and the Gentiles in the Christian churches at Rome...in the Christian communities at Rome.

You can kind of infer this from when Paul says “that Christ became a servant to the circumcised” and that He came “in order that the Gentiles might glorify God.” So he mentions both the circumcised and the Gentiles, and he says to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. So that verse has actually led some scholars to suggest that Paul's kind of alluding to conflicts that he's heard about between the Jews and the Gentiles of the Christian community in Rome.

In any case, if you go back to the beginning of the reading, Paul starts off by laying out a principle of how to read the Old Testament and what is the purpose of Jewish Scripture. It's very interesting here, because he says “whatever was written in former days”—that would refer, of course, to the law and the prophets in the writings, the writings of Jewish Scripture, which we now call the Old Testament —“was written for our instruction.” Alright, so pause there.

This is a very important principle. We've seen it throughout our study of the lectionary when we're looking at the Gospels and the Old Testament—the idea that the New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New. This typological approach to the Old Testament is something that Paul himself embraced.

In other words, the writings of the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, weren't just written for the people to whom they were addressed, whether that be people at the time of Moses or people at the time of David or people at the time of Jeremiah—you know, the centuries, the many centuries that the Old Testament itself spans. But rather, precisely because they're inspired by God, they're actually also written

for us. They're written for those of us living in the period after the passion, death, and resurrection of the Messiah—the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.

So Paul here is laying this foundation of the typological purpose of Scripture and the idea that, even in the Old Testament, God was, in a sense, anticipating our situation and speaking to us through them. Now with that in mind, though, he says something that for years when I used to read the Bible, I didn't notice it, but it really struck me just recently...not that long ago. Namely that, one of the aims of Scripture was not just our instruction (we're familiar with that), but “that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

So there are three words there that stand out: steadfastness (number one), encouragement (number two), and then hope (number three). So let's look at each one of those in turn.

First, Paul mentions steadfastness. Now what does he mean when he says steadfastness? That English word is not a very common word. The Greek word there is *hypomonē*, and you'll sometimes see it translated as “endurance” or “perseverance” or “fortitude.” And it has all of those connotations. By definition, what *hypomonē* means is the capacity to endure, even through times of difficulty. Paul frequently mentions this word; he uses it over and over again, lots of other times in his writings. There is, however, one example of it that I find particularly striking. It's not from Paul, it's from the Gospels. If you go back and you look at Luke 21:17-19, Jesus Himself actually mentions *hypomonē* or endurance. And He says that it's actually necessary for salvation. The context is His discourse on the persecutions that the Apostles are going to face. In chapter 21, verse 17, Jesus says:

...you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.

...or literally, by your endurance you will gain your souls. The Greek word there is for souls. It's weird that the RSV translates it as “lives” because they're not going to keep their lives; they're going to lose their lives, they're going to be martyred. But what they will gain is their souls. When I was looking at this, I was fascinated to see that the Latin Vulgate actually translates the Greek word as patience—so by

your patience you will gain your souls. So that's scary for those of us who lack patience—that patience is necessary for salvation.

And what Jesus means here is endurance, endurance in the face of persecution, endurance in the face of hatred, endurance in the face of trials and tribulations. So when Paul speaks about the endurance that God is giving to us as a gift in Romans 15, he's talking about the capacity to endure tribulation and suffering and trial, and not lose heart and not lose hope. So if you go back to Romans 15, what he says is, the Scriptures were given for our instruction, so that by *hypomonē* (endurance) and by the encouragement of the Scriptures.

So what's that word? The Greek word there for encouragement is *paraklēsis*. You know the word paraclete, you've heard that before. It's one of the titles of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, when He calls Him the Comforter or the Consoler or the Advocate, the Paraclete. So Paul here, by definition, the word he's using literally means to encourage or to lift someone's spirits in the face of difficulty or being downcast. And again, Paul's frequently going to use this term of encouragement. Probably the most famous example is in 2 Corinthians 1. This is Paul's letter that he writes to the Corinthians after he's really been hurt by some of the things that have happened to him after his visit to them. And he is discouraged. And in the context of that affliction, he writes these words in 2 Corinthians 1:4-7:

God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

No fear of redundancy on Paul's part here. Over and over again, he's using the word comfort there. It's *parakaleó*. It's the verb that he's using in the letters to the Romans to describe the consolation or the comfort or the encouragement that is given to us by Scripture itself. So, we have endurance. We also have consolation or comfort from Scripture. And the third and final thing Paul mentions is hope. And the Greek word for hope is *elpis*. It can be defined as looking forward to something that we don't possess with confidence and trust that God will in fact bring it about. So if you want to kind of contrast it, we often think of faith as the knowledge of

things unseen. So I believe something even though I can't see it. I can't grasp it with my intellect.

Hope is the confidence that I will possess something that I don't yet possess. It's the hope that I will attain to something that I can't yet touch or taste, or that I don't yet have—whatever that might be. And so in this case, Paul is saying that not only do the Scriptures encourage us, but the encouragement of the Scripture is meant to give us *elpis*. It's meant to give us hope that we will indeed possess, that we will indeed attain things that we do not yet have.

And so in context there, you'll notice what Paul is referring to is the prophecies of the Old Testament—the things that were written down in former days—and how if we read the Scriptures, they can give us hope that “the God of steadfastness and encouragement” is going to in fact bring His promises to fulfillment.

So Paul goes on here to speak about the promises made to the patriarchs. And you might think, “Oh yeah, promises made to the patriarchs, let's move on.” But it's really important that we recall exactly what those promises were. So if you go back to the Old Testament, who were the patriarchs? Well...Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the three main patriarchs. They're the three main fathers of the people of Israel. And in terms of the promises that were made to them, the premiere or the promises par excellence were three for Abraham. Namely, he was promised that he would dwell in the land (the Promised Land). Second, that a great nation, a great multitude of peoples would come from him. And then third and finally, and this one is almost the most important, that all the nations of the world would be blessed through Abram's name. That was the promise made to the patriarch.

If you go back to Genesis chapter 12:1-3, you can actually see this threefold promise made to Abram when God calls him initially, when He says (chapter 12, verse 1):

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you

will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

You can also translate it “in you” all the families of the earth shall be blessed. End quote. So notice there, when it uses the terms “all the families of the earth”, or later in Genesis, it’s actually going to...chapter 22, it’s actually going to say “all nations.” Chapter 22, verse 18...“all the nations of the earth” shall be blessed through you. The Hebrew word there is *goyim*, and it’s going to later be translated into Greek as “the Gentiles.” So all the Gentiles will be blessed through Abram.

Now, put yourself in Abraham’s shoes for a minute. You don’t even have a child yet, right? So at the time of the promise, Abraham’s seventy-five years old. He doesn’t even have his own son, and yet God is promising him that he can count the stars of Heaven, and they are not going to be more numerous than his descendents will be. So it’s something he can’t possibly see through human reason alone. It doesn’t make sense to believe that all of the families of the earth would be somehow members of his inheritance—you know, part of the kingdom of peoples coming from him—and that they would all be blessed through him, that they would all in some way be his offspring.

And yet, what Genesis tells us is, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And that’s going to be one of the foundational texts for St. Paul throughout his writings, especially in the letter to the Romans and the letter to the Galatians. Paul is going to use Abraham’s faith and what he couldn’t see as the model for a Christian living a life of faith.

So if we go back to Romans 15 here, what he’s saying is that if we look back at the promises that were made to the patriarchs, and we can see that in Christ they are actually being fulfilled, the fact of their fulfillment should give us hope that the things that we don’t see right now—for example, like the resurrection of the body and the glory of the New Creation—is something that we too can believe we will in fact possess, if we have confidence in God and if we are steadfast, if we endure, if we have *hypomonē*, that virtue of endurance even in the face of trial.

Because the Christians in Rome are already starting to experience strife and division and difficulty. Paul himself has been persecuted throughout his apostolic ministry and his apostolic travels, and so one of the great temptations of the Christian life is that when suffering comes, it's easy for us to lose hope and to forget that just as God fulfilled His seemingly impossible promises to Abraham, to make him the father of a multitude of nations, so too will God fulfill His promises to us to bring us into the glory of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. That's what Paul's saying here, that Christians have to maintain the virtue of hope even in the face of the trials and tribulations that we have in this present life.

And as a result, Paul exhorts them: "together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" as Jews and Gentiles together in Christ, to sing glory to His name. So in other words, He's using the prophecy of the ingathering of the nations as a reminder to the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, to put the divisions between them aside and to realize that in their very existence, the promises of Abraham had been fulfilled. Therefore, if that has come to pass, then our own individual personal hopes for the future will surely come to pass if we are confident in God, if we are steadfast and if we don't lose hope but continue to be encouraged by the Scriptures.

Alright, so with that said then, why does the Church pick this passage for us today and what can we draw from it for our own spiritual life? The first thing I would do is quote from St. John Chrysostom. In an earlier video, I brought up the commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas on all the letters of Paul. Well, in the fourth century AD, St. John Chrysostom also wrote commentaries on all of the letters of Paul, although he preached them in the form of homilies. So I'll frequently be quoting from St. John Chrysostom, who was—by the way, in Greek his name means "golden mouth" because he's one of the greatest preachers of all time. And in his commentary on Romans, St. John Chrysostom says this:

These things were written so that we might not fall away, for we have many battles to fight, both inward and outward. But being comforted by the Scriptures we can exhibit patience, so that by living in patience we might

dwell in hope. For these things produce one another—hope brings forth patience, and patience, hope.”²

That’s from his *Homilies on Romans*, number 27. That’s a really powerful verse for me, because in my own life, the more I’ve studied Scripture and the more I’ve looked at how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New and how the New Testament explains the Old, the more it’s given me comfort and consolation that history—that all of human history, including my life in human history, my little tiny chapter in this long book of history—is in fact in the hands of God.

It’s very easy when you encounter trials and tribulations and difficulties, to feel like God has abandoned you. And it’s also easy to look at human history and all of the wreckage and carnage and bloodshed and warfare and strife and think, where is God in all of this? It’s easy to lose hope and lose heart, because if you look at history just from the surface, it can look like no one’s in charge and that it’s just one thing after another. It’s a kind of a random series of events that are mostly punctuated by violence and bloodshed and evil and death. It can be very depressing to look at.

What John Chrysostom is saying here, though, is the Scriptures however give us God’s point of view (so to speak) on the book of history and help us to realize that He is in fact in charge, that His providence is at work, and that we need to be encouraged by these Scriptures because we have many battles to fight. The tribulations and difficulties are going to come our way. And so the Scriptures are meant to give us hope so that we can be encouraged and that we can grow in the virtue of patience or endurance that Paul mentions there—and that these two things relate to one other.

And it’s very true—people who are patient tend to be hopeful. And people who are hopeful tend to exhibit patience. And by contrast, people who are impatient tend to be discouraged very easily and very quickly. So something to think about as you’re reflecting on the reading for today. If you are a person who struggles with impatience, ask yourself that question. Do I get discouraged easily as well? Do

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans 27*; trans. *NPNF1*, 11:536

those two things relate? And if so, ask yourself another question: How often do you read the Scriptures? How often do you study the Scriptures?

I mean, obviously if you're watching the Mass Readings Explained here, you're probably devoted to Scripture. But it's fascinating to me that Paul says here that "by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." In other words, one of the reasons that God gives us the gift of Scripture is to help us grow in the virtue of hope. So for all those of you out there who might be feeling discouraged or disconsolate or afraid of what the future holds, take that discouragement, take that fear and bring it to the Word of God. Bring it to the Scriptures and allow the God of steadfastness and the God of encouragement to encourage you and to give you consolation and to build up the virtue of hope in you by the reading of the sacred Word of God.

And I think in particular, too, for us as modern-day Christians, we need to make sure that that includes the Old Testament. It's real easy to forget that God's in charge of human history if we just start in the New Testament and never look at the Old Testament. But when you look at the New in light of the Old and you start to see all of those promises being fulfilled, then you realize Christianity is not just one more religion. It's a divine revelation and that God really is governing and guiding all of human history from the beginning all the way to the end. And He's governing your life as well. And that should give us cause for hope, especially in this Advent season, as we're preparing to celebrate the first Advent of Christ, the coming of Christ at Christmas. Put yourself back in the shoes of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets, to whom God said, "The coming is near, the Messiah is coming, just wait for it." And what had to happen? Centuries had to pass before those promises came to fulfillment. But they did come to fulfillment in the baby at Bethlehem, whose birth we are now preparing to celebrate.