



Sterner Stuff

Matthew 3:1-12 & Romans 15:4-13

Advent 2 - December 4, 2022

Rev. Dr. Martin R. Ankrum

Paul is convinced that because of the action of God in Jesus Christ in our lives, we followers of Jesus are those who are made of sterner stuff. I borrow here from a rather famous and well-used quote of the English Bard, William Shakespeare which read: ‘Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.’

Well, you and I are acquainted with ambition. We are an ambitious people overall, believing that we are fully capable of resolving any issue that we face, of traversing any mountain that confronts us. But Paul is not speaking of ambition, the human trait most often developed in self-focused egoism. Paul spoke of something all-together different: hope.

These are the words that close the passage selected for this Second Sunday of Advent:

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.

This is the wish that Paul has for the people of the small congregation in the imperial capital city ... that they may abound in a hope that comes from the power of the Holy Spirit and from the joy and peace that comes from believing that what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ has been done and is being done for us and for all humankind.

This sterner stuff is the hope that has been delivered to us in Jesus Christ. Yet, hope is a word that we throw around a lot in this hallowed sanctuary and because of the great ubiquity of its appearance in the verbal torrent of sermonizing, it might be best to stop for a moment and consider what Paul means by hope and what he doesn't mean.

What Paul does not mean is optimism. Optimism comes somewhat cheaply to us in our culture and in this country. We are said to be optimistic about the promise of the nation, the promise of our particular family's prospects for the future, the promise of ever pursuing our constitutionally-enshrined right to ‘be happy.’ That is optimism, but it is not hope.

Too often, we undersize our hope, having experienced our own disappointments in life and our fading expectations for the future, we downsize our hope so that they and we, all wrapped up in our dreams, aren't dashed against the stones of reality. Too often, we short ourselves and our world of hope.

A prominent preacher of the gospel once told a story about a British diplomat and his hopes for Christmas. Being interviewed by an international diplomatic organ, the British ambassador to the United States was asked what he wanted for Christmas. He replied that what he really wanted was the kind of candied fruit one could obtain at Harrod's Department Store. When the article was published, the reporter listed the wishes and hopes for the Christmas season from among a select assortment of diplomats:

The Russian ambassador hoped for peace and goodwill; the Swiss ambassador hoped for genuine disarmament around the world; the Spanish ambassador hoped for Gibraltar to be given back; the Israeli ambassador hoped for peace in the Middle East; and so on and so on and so forth. Sir Nicholas, the British ambassador, was recorded as hoping for a jar of preserved fruit. Now, obviously of all these things hoped for, Sir Nicolas' hope was the most obtainable and he was doubtless the only one who got what he wanted for Christmas; but by comparison, his hope seemed to lack a little in imagination or in courage. Sometimes we do not hope enough.

In fact, sometimes we are tempted to substitute the sterner stuff of hope with the bright and shiny elements of optimism. When we do that, we sell hope short in our own lives and in the life of the world.

Peter Gomes, Chaplain at Harvard University for a time, was helpful in pointing out to his congregation that hope indeed is made of sterner stuff. He said:

Hope, you see, is not an act of will so much as it is an act of imagination and of courage. Hope, it strikes me, is not that word that we utter at the bedside of the dying when we say unthinkingly, ‘I hope that this will all end well,’ and what we mean is that we hope that this life will not continue to go in the direction in which it is going. That is not hope, but a kind of mindless optimism. ... Christian hope is meant to guide you into the place where you have not yet been, and into becoming the person you have not yet become.

Here is where the season of Advent and the meaning that Paul intends for the passage we have just heard collides into providing us with something instructive to our faith; something that enlightens the path upon which we tread – the path to a future that we do not hold, but in which we have hope; a future that belongs wholly and completely to God.

This hope that is instilled in us by the presence of God’s loving Spirit is not a belief that somehow, in some way, we are all getting better and better. That is optimism and not hope. Hope tells us that regardless of the state of our lives and even the state of our faithfulness to God, God remains faithful still to us and to his promises in Jesus Christ. Hope is based not on how we feel or what we have done to feel better or more confident about something. Hope is built upon the realization that God has acted in Jesus Christ for us and for the rest of the world and no matter how the rest of our life shakes out, it is held in the hand of a loving and merciful God. With such a realization, with such a hope, we are enabled to finally live in the light of God’s great love rather than in our fear of a future over which we have no real control.

Again, Peter Gomes is helpful with this:

Advent hope, my friends, is meant to be the sobering antidote to false Christmas cheer. That is why the church drags you kicking and screaming through Advent; that is why it forces you to confront the promises and their lack of apparent deliverance now; that is why the church requires that you look ahead and not back to the manger of Bethlehem; that is why we light these Advent candles: to lighten the darkness and not simply to allow you a better rearview window view. ... Advent is not celebration; it is not the moment for dancing around the light pole. Advent hope is not an exercise in nostalgia or seasonal optimism. Advent is not celebration but fortification against the very forces that would drive us to despair and drag us downward. Advent is an exercise in endurance, in preparation for the long journey to a time and a place where we have not yet been, and for which all of the past and all of the present are mere preparation.

There is a little country church in England that bears an inscription that best defines Advent hope and it is upon such a signatory statement that we can build our lives as well. Over the threshold of the door to the sanctuary are placed these words:

When all things sacred were throughout the nation either destroyed or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, founded this church whose singular praise is to have done the best things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous.

This is the sterner stuff of Advent – the sterner stuff of hope in Jesus Christ. It is made of the sterner stuff of doing the best of things in the worst of times and hoping the better of things in times that are most calamitous. This is the sterner stuff of hope and the sterner stuff of Advent and of our faith.