

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Romans 15:4-6,13 & Matthew 3:1-12

Romans 15:4-6, 13

⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹³ 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.

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”^[a] ³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ “I baptize you with^[b] water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with^[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

B.J. Honeycutt, a character on the T.V. series “M.*A.*S.*H.,” gave this reason for why he didn’t give into temptation in the midst of the Korean War: “I live in an insane world where nothing makes sense. Everyone around me lives for the now, because there may not be a tomorrow. But I have to live for tomorrow, because for me there is no now.”

For B.J., his hope for the future was seeing his family again. That hope was sufficient to define how he would behave in an extremely difficult situation. How much more so should our future hope of a better life—the kingdom of God—shape how we live?

On this second Sunday of Advent, our message from God’s Word is that of hope. Jesus brings hope to the hopeless. He brings hope to us as we live in a world swarming with chaos and divided by brokenness. Jesus gives us hope.

Thirty years after Jesus’s birth, his cousin, John the Baptist, a strange sort of fellow, announces a message of good news, a message of hope, that One, greater than he, is about to break on the scene, and point the way for something superior than what this world has to offer to take a hold in us, giving us hope. But his message was clear that it will find root in us only if first we repent.

Repentance means more than saying, “I’m sorry, God.” It means doing an about face—a complete turn-around—from the kind of self-centeredness that leads to wrong actions such as lying, cheating, gossiping, stealing, taking revenge, abusing, and indulging in sexual immorality.

Two hunters flew deep into the remote backwoods of Canada to hunt elk. They bagged six elk. The pilot told them the plane could carry out only four of the elk. “But the plane that carried us out last year was exactly like this one,” the hunters protested. “The horsepower was the same, the weather was similar, and we had six elk then.” Hearing this, the pilot reluctantly agreed to try. They loaded up and took off, but sure enough, there was insufficient power to climb out of the valley with all that weight, and they crashed. As they stumbled from the wreckage, one hunter asked the other if he knew where they were. “Well, I’m not sure,” replied the second, “but I think we are about two miles from where we crashed last year.”

Repentance means, making changes in our lives, not just a change that can be seen on the outside, but a change that occurs from within. For the same reason John baptized in the river Jordan, we are baptized symbolizing the change we commit to that occurs within us, the washing away of the old self and emerging into a new way of living. When we repent, we stop fighting God and begin following the way He calls us to live. We learn how to live from the Word, and we are empowered to live in God’s ways through the indwelling of the Spirit.

There’s that interesting portion in this reading from Matthew where John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came to hear John’s message, “a brood of vipers.” These were two prominent groups of religious leaders among the Jews. The Pharisees separated themselves from anything that was non-Jewish and carefully followed both the Old Testament laws and the oral traditions handed down from generation to generation.

The Sadducees believed that only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was God’s Word. They were descendants of priestly nobility, while the Pharisees came from all classes of people. The two groups didn’t like each other at all, but they both agreed on one thing—they didn’t like Jesus. John came down on the Pharisees for being overly legalistic and hypocritical, following the letter of the law while ignoring its true intent. He came down on the Sadducees for using religion to advance their political positions.

We don’t know why members of these two groups showed up on the scene. Perhaps, they were toying with a change of heart, flirting with the message of John, this strange man. Perhaps they really wanted a bit of his message for themselves, but not too much—just enough to clear their consciences and remove the guilt they felt, enough so that they no longer were haunted by their past mistakes. Was there something from within them that desperately longed for something better?

The same could be asked of us as we approach the manger this advent season. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we are not perfect. Christians can be legalistic, even when interpreting God’s Word, demanding that everything be taken literally without taking into consideration the context of what is written and refusing to allow the Word to speak the message it has for us today. The very first Brethren met in homes to read the Word together, to discuss its meaning for them, learning from it through their discussions.

Christians have been known to use religion to advance their agendas. Politicians are not the only ones who do this although we are quick to point our fingers at them. Christians do it, too.

Christians can be hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another. Did you know that studies show that this is the number one reason why people do not get involved with churches? For example, the non-Christian hears that we proclaim Christ’s second greatest commandment to

love one another, yet we do not embrace those who are or think differently than we do. They see that we are divided within our denominations and within our congregations, allowing our differences to give way to practices that shadow nothing of love and peace.

These behaviors trouble my heart as they should for all of us because they do not communicate to the world a message of hope, that there is something different from this chaotic world in which we live, a better way of living, and a hope found only through Christ.

The words of the apostle Paul to the Romans challenge us further in this line of thought. Listen again to what he said in verses 4-6: *“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so 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 harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

We are to know and study God’s Word, making it a part of who we are, who we really are by allowing it to change us from the inside out, filling us with the hope Christ brought to us, and proclaiming a message of hope through our words and actions to those living without hope.

We are a living testimony of this message of hope as we live together harmoniously within our faith communities, not necessarily united in our understanding of the Word, or agreeing on issues; but evidenced in how we deal with our differences, through respect, trust and communication with one another, agreeing to disagree and not allowing the tension to create disunity, nor paralyzing the body’s ability to minister to each other and the world surrounding us.

In 1997, the Washington Capitals were hot, skating their way into the Stanley Cup finals. By the fall of 1999, they slipped to one of the worst records in the NHL. Coach Ron Wilson decided drastic measures were necessary and quickly changed their strategy. Yet injuries abounded, and losses mounted. The team was skating on thin ice and couldn’t figure out what was wrong

Just before Christmas, the team embarked on a late-night, seven-hour flight from Vancouver and did what they typically do on a flight of that duration: they popped in a video to pass the time. Then the VCR froze.

As the plane winged its way through the evening sky, one by one the players started talking with each other. They talked strategy. Obstacles. Key plays. Out of necessity, they rediscovered the ancient art of conversation. By the time the plane touched down, the Capitals had picked apart their game and knew what needed to be done.

In the weeks that followed, they became virtually unstoppable, going on an eleven-game winning streak. Team goal-tender Olaf Kolzig reflected, “Maybe it was fate the VCR didn’t work. It gave us a chance to just roam about the plane and talk with guys. It was a good way to clear the air.” Indeed. They went 12-2-3 after the busted VCR incident.

Paul calls us to accountability to living our lives as Christ lived his, with grace, forgiveness, service, and most of all with love. Jesus did not live in a bubble to satisfy his own pleasures. Likewise, as we live together as brothers and sisters in Christ, we live as Christ with one another, not with selfish hearts, but with sacrificial hearts of grace, service, forgiveness and love.

And, in so doing, we show each other, we show the world around us that there is something better to be found in this life. We proclaim a message of hope, the same message of hope given as a gift to the world through the babe born in a manger.

Are we offering a message of hope? Or do we need to repent for a lack of showing those around us that there is something better than living the ways the world has to offer? We have the

December 8, 2019 - Hope Be Within You

Good News, a child came to earth from heaven above, to save us. It was God's only Son. Let's share the Good News, announce it, testify to it, through all that we say and do, and take to those around us, even to the ends of the earth, the promise of hope. Amen.