

2ND Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2007, Liturgical Year A

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Romans 15:1- 11; Isaiah 11:1-11

“Written for Our Encouragement”

ONLY 15 DAYS UNTIL CHRISTMAS!

It's hard to believe but Christmas is only a little more than two weeks away. Are you ready? I don't know about you, but it seems the older I get, the faster everything goes. And it doesn't help when we try to cram so much in so little time.

But that's the world's way, isn't it? Shop until you drop, wrap those presents Christmas Eve, get up Christmas morning unwrap the presents, make and eat Christmas dinner and it's over. Like that little boy who gets all excited that he can finally blow up a balloon and he keeps blowing and blowing, filling the balloon with air and then it pops. No more balloon. The same thing happens for so many on Christmas Day, they rush to and fro, try to do so much and then no more Christmas.

Well, that's not Christmas. The season of Christmas is supposed to be a twelve day celebration *after* Advent. And Advent is a time to prepare spiritually for the celebration of the reality that God intercepted time and space and took on flesh to reveal Himself to us. And Advent is also a time to remember that Jesus is coming again. There's the first coming and the second coming and we are in between. So this time of year should be one of the most encouraging times of the year.

THE FALSE HOPE OF OUR WORLD

But for many it isn't. It is down right discouraging, disappointing and depressing. In effect, it's not what it is supposed to be. And I'll tell you why that is. They are putting their hope in stuff that doesn't last. You see the lights will eventually go out, the decorations will come down, the parties will end, and the season of good cheer will be over. The celebrations are just superficial fluff. They're nice but they aren't the season.

And then we can fall into another trap. We can allow Christmas past rob us of our joy. The problem focusing on Christmas past is that if it was great, nothing seems to compare. If it was bad, those negative feelings can put a damper on the present. Or worse, we can be in such a bad place – emotionally, physically, financially, maybe even spiritually - that all the good cheer is like putting salt on a wound.

So what's the answer? You've got to turn to the most trustworthy source there is. God's Word. Do you want to be encouraged? Get into the Word; turn off the television, get into the Word. Stop worrying and being anxious, get in the Word. Stop criticizing or worrying about what your neighbor thinks about you and get in the Word. Stop being too busy, and get into the Word.

THE TRUE HOPE OF OUR GOD

That's what we are going to do, right now. Please turn with me to **Romans 15:1-11**. What does Paul say? Not only are the Scriptures written for our instruction, they were written for our encouragement. Do you know what is the grounds for our encouragement? Hope. Why can we have a sure and certain hope? Because God has promised us that certain good things for our future. And

God will not break His promises. He is faithful and true and just. He cannot lie. That's why the Scriptures tell us, "***Let God be found true but every man a liar.***" (Rom. 3:4).

Do you know psychologists say that we need three things in life – someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to. We also need to know that God loves us. Our hope is grounded in the knowledge that God loves us and that we have something to look forward to.

Look further at what Paul has to say? What is he doing? He is quoting the Old Testament. And specifically he quotes from Isaiah and says, "***The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in Him.***" Who is He talking about? Jesus. In fact it is from the same passage the Old Testament lesson we read this morning – **Is. 11:1-11.**

THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH

Now if there was one prophetic book of the Old Testament that a believer should pay special attention, it would be Isaiah. In fact, I would say that it is the most important prophetic book of the Old Testament, because it foretells both Jesus' first and second comings.

So it shouldn't surprise us, then, that Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue when He returned to his hometown of Nazareth (cf. Lk. 4:17-21). And then He said, "***Today this reading has been fulfilled in your hearing.***"

And it also shouldn't be surprising that the name, *Isaiah*, means "Yahweh is salvation." It is almost identical in meaning to the name, Joshua, which is Yeshua in the Hebrew, and "*Jesus*" in the Greek. The name "*Jesus*" means "The salvation of Yahweh."

Do you see the connection? Do you see why Isaiah is so important to understanding our faith? Do you see why the Word of the Lord as recorded in Isaiah gives us hope?

It is in Isaiah that we hear the words, "***And the virgin shall be with Child and He shall be called Immanuel, God with us.***" (Is. 7:13-14).

It's in Isaiah that we hear, "***For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be on His shoulders and He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.***" (Is. 9:6-7).

It's in Isaiah that we hear the words, "***He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by his wounds we are healed.***" (Is. 53:5)

And it is in Isaiah that we heard this morning that "***There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.***" (Is. 11:1).

Do you remember who was Jesse? The father of the great King David. But do you remember what happened to King David? He committed adultery with Bathsheba and although he repented and God forgave him, the Lord said his Kingdom would eventually fall. After the reign of his son, King

Solomon, the kingdom of Israel eventually split into two and both kingdoms – the northern kingdom of Israel (by the Assyrians in 722 BC) and the southern kingdom of Judah (by the Babylonians in 586 BC) - were destroyed. So David's kingdom was cut down. But a shoot came out of that kingdom; a descendant of David, the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is that shoot. Jesus is that righteous branch. Jesus is the One whom all nations will one day worship. Jesus is why God told David that his kingdom would be forever.

But some say, "How can this be?" How did Isaiah know? He knew because he was told by the Spirit of the Lord. God told him. Only God knows the future. God stands outside of time though He can intercept it at any point. He is the God of the past, present and future. And God revealed to Isaiah glimpses of the future. Why? To give Isaiah hope, to give the Jews hope, to give the Gentiles hope, to give the entire world hope, to give us hope. Look again at the vision Isaiah sees, "***The wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the kid...and a little boy will lead them...They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.***" (Is. 11:6-9).

You know it's interesting, we are called by God to have faith. Jesus said, "***Unless you have faith like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God.***" (Mt. 18:3). Faith goes hand in hand with hope. Hope refers to that which will happen in the future. You can't see it but you still believe on your way to it. That's where faith comes in. You need the faith to get to the end. That's why **Hebrews 11:1** tells us that "***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.***" That's why the Apostle Paul said, "***Faith hope and love remain, these three.***"

But there is this element of doubt (part of our fallen human natures.) And that doubt often is directed towards God's Word. Can it be trustworthy, people ask?

GOD'S WORD IS TRUSTWORTHY

I remember when I was in Sunday School class as a young boy and the teacher had us get into a circle. She whispered a story into one of the student's ears and then that student was to tell the story to the next person until it went all the way around to the last person in the circle. Of course, the last person's version was nothing like the original. This was done to show us why we shouldn't gossip, but it also can cause us to doubt the transmission of God's Word.

For there are some who say how can we be sure that the Word of God is the same and hasn't been changed over time? The book of the prophet Isaiah is a perfect example to show that God's Word has been perfectly preserved over time. Before 1948, the earliest known Hebrew copies of Isaiah that we had were the Masoretic Texts. Written in Hebrew they were the work of the Masoretes, Hebrew Scribes that copied the Hebrew Scriptures by hand (before the printing press). These texts were dated from the 10th century AD. So someone could say that how do we know for sure these prophecies had not been altered over the centuries? Well, in 1948 thousands of ancient scrolls and manuscripts were discovered in Caves near Qumran, Israel. They are commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Do you know what they found in among the manuscripts? A complete scroll of the book of the prophet Isaiah. The 24 foot leather scroll now rests in a museum (the Great Shrine of the Book) in Jerusalem. It's the oldest complete copy of any book of the Bible, dated 125-150 BC – Before Christ! And did they find something that was different than the newer scrolls that had been written 1100 years later? No, in fact other than minor word and spelling variations there was no difference. That my friends tells us that what has been written has not been changed. And more importantly, what God has been promised will not change.

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Do you want to be encouraged? Get into God's Word.

THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

There's a song, played over and over again during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, and made popular by Andy Williams, "It's the most wonderful time of the year." The title might be right. But it's not because of what it sings about:

It's the most wonderful time of the year
With the kids jingle bells and everyone telling you
"Be of good cheer"
It's the most wonderful time of the year.

It's the hap - happiest season of all
With those holiday greetings and gay, happy meetings
When friends come to call,
it's the hap - happiest season of all.

There'll be parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting,
and caroling out in the snow.
There'll be scary ghost stories and tales of the glories
of Christmases long, long ago.

It's the most wonderful time of the year.
There'll be mistle-toeing, and hearts will be glowing
when loved ones are near.
It's the most wonderful time of the year. **GIVE ME A BREAK!**

No, it's not the most wonderful time of the year because of any of the above. It's the most wonderful time of the year because there is a God who loves us, a God who is in control of all things, a God who knows the past, present and future. It's the most wonderful time of the year because there is a God who has sent His Son to tell us that yes, we are loved and yes, we can be forgiven. A God who says, yes, we can have a relationship with the One who made us, and yes there is coming a day when our God shall reign forever and ever and all nations will live in peace. That, my friends, is why this is the most wonderful time of the year.

So until that day may we be encouraged, may we look to God's Word and know that God is with us. He is with us in Jesus Christ, He is with us through us His Holy Spirit and He is with us forever! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!