

Date: December 6, 2009

Title: Advent – A Celebration of Hope

Scripture: Romans 15:13, Galatians 5:22

Romans 15:13 (NLT) I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the second Sunday of Advent. I am sorry I missed last week's presentation as we began the Advent season. I caught little parts of it as people were preparing for it and I was really sad I couldn't see the actual presentation. I thank all of you who were a part of it.

Now, I know that for a lot of people who have not spent a lot of time in church this notion of *Advent* is a bit of a puzzle. I think most everybody gets Christmas. Even people who have not grown up hearing the stories of Mary and Joseph and the Wise men have probably seen enough Christmas cards to see that at least the Christian version of Christmas has something to do with those characters.

But then when you start talking about *Advent* you start talking about a historical term and practice that is pretty much confined to the church. The word Advent comes from a Latin word *adventus* that means coming. For centuries Christians have been taking about a month to get ready for... for what? I mean we started last week lighting a candle and I hear that Steve Lair did an excellent job of portraying Joseph. This morning, Paul and the

others helped us remember how far we have come from the times when shepherds were a common part of everyday life. We have lit two candles in expectation of lighting 3 more in the coming weeks. Some of you with children have been putting little icons on your Jesse Tree. We are doing all of this in expectation of something that is *coming*. So, what is that something?

Is it Jesus' birth? Kind of. I say kind of because we all know that Jesus was born about 20 centuries ago. We are not exactly expecting Jesus to be born again in the early morning hours of December 25th. No, that part of things is more about remembering and celebrating what already happened. So then, how about getting ready for the presumed *Second coming* of Jesus? Is that what is coming? Again, I think I would say, "Kind of." We do believe that Jesus will be making a second triumphal appearance at some time in the future. And I must admit that I don't have any better idea about when that may happen than anyone else might have. But I sort of doubt that Jesus will be riding a white stallion across the eastern sky this December 25th. Of course that could happen, but I don't think that most of us expect that to happen, nor are we supposed to expect that to happen on this coming Christmas day any more than any other day.

So.... what is coming?

The family Advent Celebration is coming this afternoon from 12-3. The singing group *Crosswalk* is coming to sing to our congregations on the 20th. The Christmas eve candlelight service is coming on December 24th. And of course I plan to be here for all of these things and I hope you will be able to be here too. All of these are events where something very tangible will occur, but none of these things are the end of the story. They are all pointing to something else that can be hard to put your finger on, but in reality it is the foundation of our faith. What they are all pointing to is the

understanding that God in the person of Jesus has walked on this earth with us and God will walk on this earth with us again. The Church word for this is Emanuel – *God with us*, or *God among us*. That is what all of this is about...at least that is what we as Christians mean for it to be about.

All of the decorations, the presents, the trees, the candles, the parties, the services are all about the belief that God has walked with us and God will walk with us again. And what I would like to suggest to you is that this one conviction, this one blessed assurance gives us the courage...and...**the hope**... to move forward with our lives no matter how challenging the circumstances we are facing.

- Because God, in the person of Jesus came to this earth and walked and talked with us, experiencing personally our everyday trials and struggles, we have hope.
- Because God, in the person of Jesus came and showed mercy and love to an oppressed people, we all have hope.
- Because God, in the person of Jesus came and confronted an oppressive religious elite, we all have hope.

The list goes on and on, but every item on the list begins with, “because God, in the person of Jesus Christ came,” and every item ends with, “we all have hope.” You want to talk about an amazing Christmas present this one tops them all.

Picture a beautifully wrapped package that comes special delivery just to you. The package is wrapped in such a way as to let you tear off a little bit more of the wrapping each day. With every little bit that you tear off, you reveal a little more of the gift. And ultimately, when the gift is completely unwrapped, you see it clearly: **Christ Is Coming**.

- I mean if *Emmanuel* was born in nothing more than a feeding trough, then it's not that much of a stretch to think of *Emmanuel* coming into your life no matter how badly you have messed it up. There's hope in *Emmanuel*.
- You remember how Mary and Joseph were homeless and probably hopeless for a time but God found a way for *Emmanuel* to come. If God found a way for this peasant couple, surely God can find a way for you. There's hope in *Emmanuel*.
- You think of how the birth was announced clearly to the lowly shepherds but the rich and powerful had to figure it out. Maybe if *Emmanuel* came to the shepherds, *Emmanuel* can come to you. There's hope in *Emmanuel*.
- You consider the stories of Jesus healing the sick and lame and you realize that *Emmanuel* can touch you in your illness. There's hope in *Emmanuel*.
- You remember how Jesus was tortured and yet he still loved; he was scorned and rejected and still he persevered. And even when *Emmanuel*, was put to death, forgiving words spilled from his mouth and forgiving blood flowed from his side. And in resurrection *Emmanuel* overcame death. Even in death there is hope in *Emmanuel*.

Today, *Emmanuel* walks with us in different ways than 2000 years ago. Today, the Body of Christ is the Church. Today, the word of God comes to us through the Bible. The power comes from the Holy Spirit active in us and through us. When we need physical healing God can send a doctor or some other form of help. When people are hungry, *Emmanuel* can be God working through friends, neighbors, and sometimes -even strangers to meet the needs of God's people. Whatever the need, we can be assured that God is aware of our plight and will be engaged in our redemption.

But even though the manifestation of God might be different than what we read about in the Bible, the fact is that *God is with us* and with that knowledge we can move boldly into our everyday lives knowing that what ever God calls us to do or wherever God calls us to go, we do not venture forth alone. God is with us. Emmanuel is with us. No matter what happens, we can have hope in a future that will be complete and in God's perfect time will be perfect.

In the book, *Club Sandwich* Jess Moody tells of a very ritzy Bible Study and the following story. He writes:

I taught a Bible class at the home of Barbara Holmyard, the Champion Spark Plug heiress. Princess Alexandra of Greece was invited to come, and she did. Rose Kennedy came with her.

When I saw that Rose was present, I immediately changed my subject for the day to a little homily on death, making three points:

- 1. You can fight it.*
- 2. You can take flight from it.*
- 3. You can make a deal with God.*

After the class, Rose whispered in my ear, "I made that deal a long time ago.

"I was a spoiled young bride of a strong-willed man, a socialite who attended every function possible," she began. "We were expecting a child and elated at the prospect. The day came when our child was born. She was a beautiful child.

"But it wasn't long until we realized that there was something terribly wrong with her. We took her to the doctor, who confirmed our fears. She was retarded, and nothing could be done."

"Anger grew within my heart," Rose said. "How could God do such a thing to this child — to me? I turned my back on God, my husband,

my closest friends — and became a recluse.

“One evening a major event was happening in the city. I wanted to go, but I was so filled with wrath that I thought I might create a scene. My husband feared it, too, so we decided to stay home. A lovely woman, who was one of our maids, gently said to me, ‘Please excuse me, Mrs. Kennedy, but I’ve been watching you the last few weeks. I love you very much, and I hate to see this destroy your life. Mrs. Kennedy, you’ll never be happy until you make your heart a manger where the Christ-child may be born.’

“I fired her on the spot! Yet later that night my mind ruminated relentlessly, keeping me awake. I could not forget that lovely face, the sweetness of the maid, the joy in her spirit, and especially her words.

“I have loved Christ all my life, and tried to be a good Catholic, but now I knelt beside my bed and prayed, ‘Dear God, make my heart a manger where the Christ-child may be born.’ I felt a fresh new divine entry into my life, and there was born in me a love for retarded children.

“Oh, by the way, I rehired the lovely maid. She was with us until her death.”

— *Jess Moody, Club Sandwich*
(Broadman & Holman, 1999)

That night Emmanuel came to Rose Kennedy in here time of deepest need; and through her actions and love also came to hundreds; maybe even thousands of mentally challenged people.

Today, we lit the candle of hope. But the hope we find in Advent is not confined to this one week. It is not confined to this one season. The hope we celebrate today is a hope that spans our lives both in this world and the next.

I'm guessing that most of you have a lot to get ready in the next 2 ½ weeks or so. I hope you get it all done. But as you are getting ready, may I suggest that you take a little time to remember that Jesus is coming. Emmanuel is coming. No matter what happens, God will be with us. Now, that... that is something to celebrate! Amen.