Homily: Advent 2, December 7, 2025
Emmanuel/St. Anne's Episcopal Church
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Tough-Minded Hope
Romans 15:4-13

An elderly Frenchman said these words at Verdon after almost countless months of agony and frustration: **"There are no hopeless situations. There are only men and women who have grown hopeless about them." @**

I encounter hopelessness frequently—about the future of the planet, the Republic, the church. The temptation to bathe in that hopelessness can overwhelm. I was ordained as a Baptist at College Place Baptist Church in Monroe, LA when the attendance was 600 per Sunday. That church no longer exists. What will happen to struggling churches?

Paul ends Romans on a strong note of hope and love. Note Romans 15:13. "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." These closing majestic words in Romans 15 bring to mind a line from William Stafford's poem "Climbing Along the River."
"Even the upper end of the river
believes in the ocean." #

We may be at the head of the river but we must constantly maintain our vision of the ocean of God's coming reign. Let's unpack this majestic passage.

Who Is This God?

What kind of God talks like Paul's letter indicates? Christ became a minister to the circumcised so that all, circumcised and uncircumcised would be gathered into one loving, worshipping community. God values each person exactly alike and intends to create a new humanity bonded together by mutual respect and love. Note the context in Romans 14 and the verses immediately before today's reading. **15 1 We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."**

In a world where difference seems taboo, we encounter a God who treasures difference. Where do all these differences come from —racial, ethnic, language, gender? From God our creator. We resist and disrespect difference to our hurt and run counter to God's intent in doing so.

Second, God works through people to accomplish this purpose. Paul had this vision of God's coming reign with almost no supporting evidence. One estimate I saw said that by the end of the first century, 2% of the Mediterranean basin was Christian. Paul founded small communities worshipping in larger homes and shops and in his day there was almost no institutional structure or influence. But for him, even the upper end of the river believes in the ocean. He believed God would bring in a new age. This text brims with confidence about that. His example tells us that it does not take many visionaries to generate a movement or sustain a community's hope and momentum.

Third, God wants us to live with a sense of stability and encouragement. When all around us seems to be quaking, we stand on the bedrock of God's steadfast faithfulness. We can count on God to keep raising up visionaries who, like Paul, may sound nuts and out of touch. God will continue to generate diversity. God will be the bedrock of steadfast love, unrelenting until the new day of God's kingly reign dawns on all of us and that loving, diverse community becomes THE social network on the planet.

This God speaks words of instruction via Scripture. Paul says the Scriptures were written with a central focus, divine love and intent—to give us steadfastness and encouragement. God breathes en-couragement into our hearts when we feel dis-couraged. God brings a sense of steadiness into our walk when the ground seems to be shaking. Paul's appeal to Abraham having received the promise that Jesus fulfills has a long time span, much delay. We can guess 1700-1800 years. We're not more than 2000 years from Jesus' coming. God does not relent. What looks like hopelessness and failed promises gets realized, no matter how long it takes.

Fourth, God's Spirit enables our hope and love and joy, v. 13. Note the plurals through out - "you all." Any hope we feel, any encouragement we feel, any love we express—all comes from Spirit in our common life.
U 2 in one of their songs sing, **Jesus, can you take the time to throw a drowning man a line?"** The answer is **Yes.**

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How Do We Respond?

If we worship and serve a God like this, how are we to respond?

First, if we are in touch with God's Spirit, we drown our hopeless and unsteadiness and dis-couragement in gratitude and praise. God pours a sense of steadiness and encouragement and joyful celebration into our lives. We're not just celebrating what HAS

happened. Paul is dancing in the Spirit over the coming kingdom, over what HAS NOT happened. So, we too, in our worship each Sunday celebrate communion. I would that we celebrate it with more joyful energy, knowing that in God's coming kingly reign, we'll dine at table with Jesus. We dance in Spirit over what is coming more so than over what has come. Note the language of this reading. **6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

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Second, We deepen our commitment to divine mission. God will not relent nor rest until this loving community that treasures diversity becomes the new creation, THE community on the planet. Paul was driven by that passion, to be a part of God's great gathering of people. What is my role? What is OUR role as a community, along with other communities with whom we have serious differences? How do we serve and join in with God's great mission of new creation? Everything we do and say must point toward that mission.

Third, I have believed strongly for years that the mission of the Gospel will continue to thrive, regardless of the fate of particular institutional expressions of church. We keep our eyes on the far horizon of God's coming new creation and do not allow dis-couragement and hopelessness to have the final word. While not ignoring our institution and its health, we take our focus off that and put it on the Gospel. I love the way Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell put it. He says the church needs **""more joyful, less anxious and more effective in sharing that story [of the gospel]", he said. "We need to be more like Christ."**

He continued: "Where the Church is flourishing and growing, it's actually because they are not worried about the Church, they are worried about the gospel and how do we live a distinctive Christian life in a way that is good news for the world? When that happens, people are very interested." $

Third, we must deepen our spirit of hospitality. We must treasure difference and receive others as Christ receives us. Paul's Roman believers were struggling with cultural differences between Jewish and nonJewish members. Some even struggled with sitting at a common meal with others. No matter what our differences, we all have been touched by the Gospel and we all bear Christ's Spirit. How we treat each other reflects how we treat the Christ in each other. **I remember vividly the day Gerald, a Jesuit theologian and colleague took my elbow during a communion service at Loyola University and said, "I'm tired of this. You're coming with us." He and a nun he had engaged too me by the elbows and led me to the altar to receive communion as a Baptist**

teaching Scripture among Roman Catholics.. Warm feelings of love flowed over me. Not long afterwards I became an Episcopalian. Difference did not matter to them. They took a Baptist faculty member to communion in a Catholic mass.

God treasures difference and so must we—Republicans/Democrats, white/brown/black, social liberals/conservatives, gay/straight/trans. None of this matters. May we have the spirit of Gerald, embrace those with whom we differ and accept their embrace.

Finally, we persist in hope via Spirit. Note verse 13 again. When we feel unsteady and dis-couraged, we must put our eyes on the far horizon. God's kingly rule is coming. We can't take our eyes off that reality for one second. God's Spirit seeks to encourage us, to embolden us, to fill us with hope and love. German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann put it very well in his comments on verse 13.
" . . . the point now is that the cosmic goal of redemption is not to be forgotten for a single moment and that the burdens and necessities of daily life are to remain against this background That is possible only in the Power of the Spirit." &

Or as poet William Stafford put it
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My Invitation to You

Can you see yourself as a missionary of hospitality, of hope, of encouragement, of love? Can you see your dally life as a share in God's gathering mission in the world? Can our church see herself as a vital co-worker with God in bringing the realities of that new creation into our present experience.

Can we keep our eyes on our hope and not let fear, instability, and dis-couragement have the last word? Can we praise God with equal vigor for what is coming as with what has been? Whatever hope and encouragement we feel comes from Spirit. God intends that we be a celebratory community with our eyes on that far horizon and on the gnawing hunger of our world for God's love.

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Notes

@ Cited by Douglas V. Steere, T*ogether in Solitude.*

William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1998), p. 242.

$ Cited in Madeleine Davies, *Church Times*. Wednesday, December 18, 2019. https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/20-december/news/uk/greater-diversity-in-leadership-and-the-beauty-of-holiness-bishop-cottrell-sets-out-his-hopes-as-archbishop-of-york

& Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans,* trans. & ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: SCM, 1980), p. 187.