

HOPE ABOUND! *[based on I Corinthians 1:3-9]*

Several years ago, the Peanuts comic strip had Lucy and Charlie Brown practicing football. Lucy would hold the ball for Charlie's placekicking, and then Charlie would kick the ball. But every time Lucy ever held the ball for Charlie, he would approach the ball, and kick with all his might. At the precise moment of the point of no return, Lucy would pick up the ball, and Charlie would kick. His momentum, unchecked by the ball... which was not there to kick...would cause him to fall flat on his back.

The strip opened with Lucy holding the ball, but Charlie would not kick it, even though Lucy begged him to! Charlie Brown said, "Every time I try to kick the ball, you remove it, and I fall flat on my back."

They went back and forth for the longest time, and finally Lucy burst into tears and admitted, "Charlie Brown, I have been so terrible to you over the years, picking up the ball like I have. I have played so many cruel tricks on you, but I have seen the error of my ways! I've seen the hurt look in your eyes when I've deceived you. I've been wrong, so wrong! Won't you give a poor penitent girl another chance?"

Charlie was moved by her display of grief and responded to her, "Of course, I'll give you another chance." He stepped back as she held the ball, and he ran! At the last moment, Lucy picked up the ball, and guess what, he fell flat on his back. Lucy's final retort was, "Recognizing your faults, and actually changing your ways, are two entirely different things Charlie Brown!"

So, the season of Advent is upon us again, the season which begins the liturgical year in the church. In Roman times, 'adventus' was a reference to the arrival of a dignitary. For us, that translates to the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Christians know that there is a strong prophetic parallel between waiting for that baby to be born in Bethlehem, and the second coming at an unspecified date. In the secular world, the advent of Christmas seems like it's been with us for months, with the reds and greens decorating the stores since October.

However, the season in which we anticipate the birth of our Saviour in Bethlehem, starts today. As we bring out our own decorations, we make lists of gifts to buy, people to visit, and goodies to bake. It's the season to attend Christmas concerts, make appearances at parties, and schedule family gatherings.

It almost seems routine. We do the same things every year...and we get exhausted every year, swearing that we'll do things differently next year. Yet we say these things to no avail. It is as if by the time the first Sunday of Advent arrives, we are already overloaded, and looking forward to the end of the season, when there will, at last, be time to rest.

Is this really what we have done to Advent? Has the lighting of the Advent wreath become a chore or a check list to get us through the holiday season? Are we focusing on Hope to get us *through* Advent, rather than hoping for the babe in a manger?

Paul, the devout Jew who converted to Christianity, is the author of this morning's scripture. Around the year 55, while the apostle was in Ephesus making a series of missionary trips, Paul wrote his letter to the church he started in Corinth.

How appropriate is this reading for the first Sunday in Advent, because Paul mentions the name of Jesus eight times in the first nine verses of the chapter. He certainly wants to hit home to his congregation in Corinth, that Jesus is the centre of everything.

The love and power of God is made real by the life events of His 'human' Son. The narrative of Jesus is a true story - it is historical. The life lessons He taught provide hope...for us in the 21st century, and to the members of the Corinthian church in the 1st.

Paul knew that every church has issues, and so he tries to guide that congregation into a deeper understanding of God's will and encouraging them (and us) to live a life of love for God, and for each-other. Paul gives us the encouragement to make it through the waiting and the anxiousness by proclaiming, "God is faithful."

His letter assures them that there is meaning and purpose for those who accept Christ. We have a common journey and we need each other. Having hope assures us in that journey. Originating 'somewhere', we find ourselves now 'here', moving together into 'whatever' future God has planned for us. And we learn God's will for our lives by reading our Bibles and showing our devotion to Him through our prayer life. Only then can we strengthen one another. This is the reason we gather together at Advent...to serve a faithful God, together.

We know the end of the Christmas story. The census will be called. Mary and Joseph will make the journey to Bethlehem. There will be no room for them to let. God's son will be born in a manger.

Indeed, there is much to be done to prepare our hearts, our minds, and our homes for the coming of the babe, but we are assured that because we serve a faithful God, these things will come to pass.

This morning's verses, remind us of the strength and knowledge given to us, to be the faithful body of Christ we have been called to be. It is as though Paul is commiserating with us in all the duties and obligations that lie before us. He understands the amount of faith it takes to wait for what seems to be an eternity, for Christ to come.

We must enact the waiting, as seriously as we go about our other Advent duties. It is in the waiting, that we find the peace in knowing what will come. It is in the waiting, that we find the rest to help us through to the end. And it is in the waiting, that we are in community with those who wait with us. What better gift can we give this Advent season than to give ourselves the time and space to wait?

I would like to close with some paraphrased thoughts of the Rev. Dr. John Bombaro, a Lutheran pastor in the United States...The Christian life has a shape, and Jesus is its shaper at every point. Only He can infuse both the commonplace and the difficult days with purpose, meaning, and enduring hope. Because our story is going somewhere, and Christ has made us part of His Church, we can rest assured that God is in charge, altering and shaping the world. We must never despair. Hope abounds.
AMEN