

What Comes After

Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent; December 4, 2022

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“I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

And with that, the final line of the greatest movie of all-time comes to a close.

“I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.”

There is so much in there. And if you know the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, this sums it up perfectly. But even if you don't. Those three short lines underline the essence of being human. To have a friend, and someone who gets you. To have a dream, and a direction to follow. To have hope, and a desire to see what comes next.

If you've been here consistently enough for the last 15-years then you already know this is my favorite movie. Not only for its testimony to the human spirit, but also for its Biblical-like witness, as it artfully imagines the faithful qualities of perseverance, justice, and hope.

Andy Dufresne says to his friend Red, “Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” That's as Christo-logical as it gets. Paul could have saved a lot of ink and just written that.

In his penultimate chapter to his final benediction, much like this penultimate message to my final sermon, Paul here in Romans 15 employs the word *hope* 4 times. 4 times in just 9 verses. In the total of his authentic writings (remember as per the recent Jeopardy controversy, not every epistle attributed to him was written by him), Paul uses *hope* 58 times. 58 times across 7 letters and 61 chapters. And yet here in just 9 little verses we get it in quadruple form. You don't need to be a Biblical scholar to see that this section (and our lectionary) today has a lot to do with Hope.

Hope in a hopeful, providential God.

Hope in a hopeful messiah to come, who will far surpass all who've come before.

“So that by steadfastness and encouragement we might have hope.” – Romans 15:4

Steadfastness and encouragement. To me this implies that hope does not arise on its own. But after some experience with discouragement and impatience. Some trial and difficulty. Be Steadfast, not impatient; be Encouraged, not discouraged, Paul writes, so that even when times get hard, you might yet find hope.

I remember one Women's Circle meeting not so long ago in our reception room over there. It was before the pandemic. They were having a Bible Study, and after noticing me walk by, they called me in to see if I could give my opinion on a text that was causing them some difficulty. It was Paul's second letter to the Corinthians chapter 12, which has a verse (9) that reads:

*“But he said, ‘My grace is sufficient, for power is made perfect in weakness.’
Therefore be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ.”*

The Circle’s difficulty was in trying to reconcile how power is made perfect in weakness, especially when weakness sometimes gives way to things like addiction, disease, or death. I also remember a question about if God really authors insult and calamity just to test us and our faith.

Pretty loaded stuff for a guy just walking by. I think I remember saying at first to them, that I too have had this question. That I too have struggled with it. And that I too don’t have an easy answer. But I think I also said just as I say now, that no, I don’t believe God tests us, nor gets a kick out of seeing us suffer. However... that I do think there is some truth in the idea that sometimes our pains and our challenges are important to build character. That sometimes, we “need” to experience the wilderness and get through it, so that we can get to where we are needed to go after, and into who we are hoping to become next.

Paul himself writes this beautifully just some chapters earlier than ours in Romans 5:3-5: “...knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Like Shawshank, I think sometimes we need to crawl through a murky tunnel, a river and period of excrement, so to walk out clean and redeemed on the other side.

My friends, no matter what we are facing, no matter the reasons why we might need some encouragement, we have hope because God is with us, rooting us on and towards our redemption. We will then get through our trials, we will then get through these uncertain times, our faith testifies to this! But here’s the catch... it can’t be done alone. Paul doesn’t say “because God’s love has been poured into YOUR heart.” No, he says, “Because God’s love has been poured into OUR hearts;” for the Holy Spirit was not just given to YOU, or to ME, but “to US.” To us.

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It’s got to be done together. With others. With friends. So, “welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Romans 15:7). And “live in harmony with one another, so that together you may with one voice glorify God” (Romans 15:5-6).

Together. With one voice.

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” (Matthew 3:1-2).

Sometimes I like to read this as “In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come *here*.’” Here, as in, into the Wilderness, the Kingdom of Heaven has come. Where life isn’t peachy. Where it is sometimes hot and murky, and you are left hungry and thirsty; lost and surrounded by strange dudes eating locusts and honey.

In the commentary we read in Bible Study this week, we heard that when Matthew uses “repent” here in verse 2, he is not intending it as “repent/turn away from *your* sin;” but more like, “repent/turn away from yourself by turning towards a changed and shared society.”

And I think this is why later in verse 7 John gets so upset at the Pharisees and Sadducees, naming them a “brood of vipers.” I mean, at first glance it seems so harsh, calling people willing to get baptized a bunch of snakes. But understood in this context, that repentance is worthless unless you are also going to commit yourself to your other, it makes sense.

For Baptism is not really only about YOU, or ME, but US. About a total life and societal change. So it’s like John is saying here that until you are ready to step out from your comforts, from your pulpits and your towers, and down into the wilderness where we are/where life is held in the balance... then just don’t come here, go away, and stop with all the pretense.

My friends, the wonder of baptism is not only that you are loved, sealed, and saved, but that we are. And that together, we remember and are remembered, and have redemption.

Just like what happens here at this table. We come forward together, and not alone. For this is not a private gospel but a communal one.

And in communion, in community, we are the body of Christ.

We sing the carols and present our gifts. We look to the star at its rising. We follow him.

For in community we live with him and in community we die with him, who first came and died for us, so that we might all yet live again with him in the eternal community.

You see, where Shawshank was about a redemption of one... in this faith, we have a redemption of ALL, secured by one. Not by me, or by John, but by Jesus and Him alone.

So have faith, my friends. Be not afraid. Everything will be okay. Be expectant. Have anticipation. Stay steadfast and be encouraged. And, in hope, remain together.

For God is always at work, and what comes after, will be both awesome and amazing, and won’t compare to what has come before.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.