

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**

**December 4, 2016**

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**First Presbyterian Church**

**Clarksburg, WV**

**Romans 15:4-13**

*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. (Romans 15:13 N.R.S.V.)*

## The God of Hope

In Romans, Paul says, “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.”

The good news of Advent is that we serve a God of hope. We believe that when Christ came as a baby in Bethlehem, he came to make things better. Pain and suffering and evil shall not have the last word. In Christ came the seed of a new kingdom - a kingdom in which love and peace and joy are possible. A kingdom in which love and peace and joy are the new reality.

We are to abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let me pause to point out that there is a difference between hope and wishful thinking. I saw a cartoon the other day that shows two dinosaurs watching a huge meteorite falling toward earth. One dinosaur is saying to another, “Maybe it won’t be all that bad.”

I didn’t know that dinosaurs could talk, how about that? Even if they could, this would be mere wishful thinking. Scientists believe that a huge meteorite did hit the earth and resulted in an ice age which completely wiped out the dinosaurs.

Then there is the story of the optimist who fell off of a very tall building. As he passed the 30<sup>th</sup> story windows, he was heard to say, “Well, I’m not hurt yet.”

We are to abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, But that is not hope. That is wishful thinking.

As Christians we speak not just of hope, but of trusting in the God of hope. It is God who gives power to our hope that things will get better. That we ourselves can change.

In verse seven of our lesson, Paul urges us to “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Now it is fairly easy to welcome those who are like us, but it is very difficult to genuinely welcome those who are different from us. It is in fact, downright unnatural.

Psychologists suggest that we have a built in fear of people that are different from us. In a tribal society that was often a survival factor. Today we are not living in tribal societies, but our brain

still has those built in instincts. To make matters worse, when we are afraid, our brains go into the “flight or fight” mode. In that mode we are unable to take in new information and we have a very limited ability to think clearly.

There was a quote on face book the other day that said, “You who love to quote from Leviticus about homosexuality, should be welcoming the Syrian refugees. Lev. 19:33-34 says, “When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.”

We are to love immigrants as we do ourselves. That is a tall order. I think this face book post was intended as a zinger against certain Christians, but I take it as a challenge to all of us. We have received a few hundred thousand Syrian refugees to date. So far they have all been what they seem, frightened, innocent, suffering people fleeing for their lives. So far there have been no cases of terrorism committed by any of these refugees.

However, when our natural fears kicks in we get fixated on the possibility that one of them could be a terrorist. That fear quickly shuts down our thinking and our compassion. If that natural fear is allowed to control us, we will never be able to follow the commands in Leviticus and of Jesus himself to love and welcome strangers.

Here is the good news. Jesus brings with him the love and the power to change us, when we cannot change ourselves. If you have ever tried to break a bad habit and failed, you know what I mean. We need help to change. Jesus is that help, that hope, that love, that power to change. We do not have to be ruled by our fears, and insecurities.

History gives us many great examples of this. In Europe during the second world war, many citizens turned viciously against their Jewish neighbors. But there were a few, a remnant if you will, that sheltered Jewish families from the Nazis. That sheltering of Jews, that radical hospitality was dangerous. If the authorities found out, the whole family could be arrested and maybe killed.

Yet there were in that time, as in every dark time in history, brave Christians who allowed themselves to be used by God. There were brave Christians who burned like candles of hope in the darkness of fear and oppression.

In Advent we celebrate and long for the coming of Christ as the hope of the world.

In one of H.G. Well’s books, “In the Days of the Comet,” the earth is visited by aliens from outer space. From the comet there is a faint green haze that drops down over the whole world. Everyone falls into a deep sleep and doesn’t wake up for three days. When they do wake up, they have been profoundly changed. Petty quarreling comes to an end. Instead of working for fame, power, and wealth, the people of the world seek to serve one another. Love, kindness and generosity became far more important than wealth or success. In other words, it became the perfect world.

The prophet Isaiah had this kind of world in mind when he wrote that, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

Isaiah didn't talk about a green haze or aliens from outer space, instead he talked about a messiah being born, a descendant of Jesse and David. One who would usher in a peaceful kingdom.

Isaiah talked about the coming of Christ. Jesus didn't just instantly change all people - like the green haze. Instead he brought with him the seed of the kingdom - the ability with God's help to change. We are to nourish the seed of the kingdom both in ourselves and in others.

We do so even as we look forward to that day when Christ shall come again and the fullness of the kingdom shall be realized. For the promise of Christ is not just change in this world, but life everlasting in him.

There is a wonderful story about an old country doctor. His office, as everyone in town knew, was above Rice's Department store. There was a steep narrow stair that led to his office and on the wall was a sign that said, “Dr. Brackett, Office Upstairs.”

Dr. Brackett was the kind of doctor who was always willing to get up, even in the middle of the night, and drive for miles to help someone who was sick. For years the sick, the lame, and the blind climbed his office stairs and he never turned anyone away.

Dr. Brackett never married. He was engaged to be married once when he was younger. But a poor family called as was getting ready for his wedding. Their little girl was sick, could he please come right away? He went and carried for the little girl and saved her life.

His intended bride, realizing I guess that she would always be last, refused to marry him. So the good doctor continued for 70 years to devote himself full time to the health of the people of his town. One day he stretched out for a nap on the couch in his office and died in his sleep.

The doctor's funeral was one of the biggest that the town had ever had. Everyone loved Dr. Brackett. After the funeral, the town's people decided that they had to put up an appropriate monument in the cemetery. They couldn't decide what it should say or look like, so for quite some time the Doctor's grave went unmarked.

This didn't seem right to the poor family whose little girl he had saved so many years ago. They couldn't afford a stone so they took the sign that had been at the foot of the stairs for so many years and put it at the head of his grave. When the town's people saw it, they decided to leave it there, for it said exactly the right thing.

Dr. Brackett, Office Upstairs.

As we go to God in silence, what do you hear God saying to you this morning?  
What are you going to do in response? Amen.