

Have you ever felt stuck in a hopeless situation? Relationship gone sour....work is a rat race – never catching up...always frustrated at school... always feeling like an outsider wherever you go.... Exhausted by normal activities. It may seem silly to you, but one thing that wears me out is a huge mound of papers needing attention on my desk. I can tackle an inbox full of emails, but a huge pile of papers I despise. So I avoid it, but by avoiding it, I make it worse, and then every time I see it, I feel bad for avoiding it so long, and it becomes worse to address it. But on Friday, I said to myself, “Have hope. Be of good cheer. Just tackle one piece of one stack on your desk, even though it is unpleasant.” And it did not take long really for my desk to look more than a pastor’s desk than a hoarder’s desk.

For you, it might be some other area of life – maybe it is body issue of exercise, eating, or drinking, or a relationship issue that needs your attention, or a bunch of bitter or negative or distracting thoughts. Sometimes hard things happen in our lives, and knock us back a few notches, and sometimes they happen over and over again. But I’m here to tell you: you do not have to stay stuck. Hopelessness is rooted in feelings of helplessness. And we are not helpless! We have a God who loves us, and a church ready to help us. And we can tackle big projects, difficult changes one little step at a time. There have been a couple of short flashes of time in my younger life when I felt so helpless that I wanted to escape life completely. That’s a terrible feeling, but by God’s grace, I was able to banish those escapist thoughts, and focus instead on addressing WHY I felt so helpless and HOW I could get the support I needed. One thing I’ve learned about myself is that spending some time in the beauty of God’s creation is always a healthy move for me. I watched with hopeful expectation for a couple of weeks as this ordinary-looking orchid found the strength to pop with these fantastic blooms.

We will read today from the ever-hopeful Apostle Paul as he writes to a church that gave him a good bit of grief, questioning his authority and turning congregational life into a mess of power-hungry, divisive, attention-seeking people with big egos about their spiritual life.

But before we read the opening to the 1st Corinthians, I want you to hear some words he wrote in other letters about hope. The Apostle Paul says to the Thessalonians, “I do not want you to be like those who grieve with no hope.”

We are people of hope because we have a helper, and not just any helper. We know with the writer of Psalm 124: *Our help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth.* We came to worship today because we know but we choose to know more deeply and resolutely that God is our help and our strength and is the hope of the world. You got up this morning to attend worship because it helps you to remember to put your hope in God. Every Sunday you are not here, and not actively practicing your faith at home, you are inviting yourself to slide into despair or cynicism over all the horrible news in the world, frustration over all the problems in your life and others, but when we come to worship we say with the Psalmist: ⁵ Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again-- my Savior and ⁶ my God! (Psalm 42 NLT)

No matter how dark and impossible a situation seems hope is the one thing that will carry you through. We are the people of hope and together we can build hope better than any of us can do alone. Paul’s letter to the Romans says, in chapter 8: ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:22 NRS)

Waiting with patience. Advent is about waiting. Now that’s how you find hope. Hope that is seen is not hope at all. It is instant gratification. No, real hope is something you long for, wait for, trust in without seeing fully. The prophet Isaiah says in chapter 40, “Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.” (Isaiah 40:31) The prophet Jeremiah in chapter 29 tells discouraged people stuck in a bad place that they have a future filled with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11-13) God’s people are people of hope. And real Christian hope takes faith muscles, and faith muscles must be built by exercise, deliberate exercise and that is why I will keep saying that weekly worship is so important. Just like it takes practice or exercise or study or rehearsal to improve in other areas of life, so it is with faith, with hope. As I said a couple of weeks ago with the Parable of the Talents – use it or lose it.

So let's think about how Paul, when facing disastrous conflict, divisiveness, and egotistical battles, had the hope to start his letter with these words of encouragement to others:

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (NRS)

Paul is able to say these words of hope and affirmation to a group of people who are driving him crazy, because his trust is in the grace and peace of God in Jesus Christ, not in the people themselves, not in himself their leader. Let's translate that to our lives: You are being driven crazy by your kid, by your in-law son, by your sibling or your parents or your spouse, or ex or by the people in Washington DC or the people in the media, or the people who are constantly going on and on about those issues, or by the people at work – whatever is driving you crazy – let's stop and consider where your hope rests. Does your hope depend on you being a perfect parent, on that family member treating you better, on seeing evidence that Washington getting something constructive done, or seeing peace come to the major conflicts of the world? That would be great, wouldn't it? These are things for which we pray and wait. But in the waiting, we often lose hope. We want it now, for good reason. But hope that is seen is not hope. We wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ to complete the transformation of the world. And that has not happened yet.

Hope, involves waiting, and this waiting apparently is good for our souls, otherwise, there would not be so many references to it.

Did you know that references to the words hope and waiting occur over 180 times each in the Bible? So let's talk about waiting. There are two types of waiting, right?

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Waiting with hope, expectation and patience. Like the kid who dances around with enthusiasm knowing that Christmas is coming, like the joyful bride and groom anticipating their wedding day, like the Hydes talking about when the next grandbaby is coming, like the senior in high school or college, waiting for graduation or Dirk Brinkmeyer counting down his days to retirement! Like the Christian who lives through life's hardships waiting for things to improve, believing with all their might, and above all evidence, trusting in God, filled with hope and expectation, and patience. Just watching a person like this – fills us with hope.

And the other kind of waiting is the grumbling, impatient type. This is the child screaming from the back seat, "When are we going to get there? And then dissolving into tears when it is another hour." This is the ever impatient person, who is griping at her family, sitting on his horn in traffic, raging at others online or in person, and never satisfied or grateful about life. This is the Eeyore who never has enough, always is the victim of every situation, the one who cannot find a way to thank God and others for the goodness all around. This kind of impatient, faithless waiting sucks the hope out of everyone around.

But hope, real hope, the kind that waits with eager longing, not miserable cynicism, is the best gift we can give in Advent. It is a blessing to all. It is the gift Paul gave the Corinthians when he pointed out that God is faithful. He said that the grace of God has enriched their lives so much that they speak well and are so knowledgeable. He affirmed the testimony of Christ growing in them so much that they are not lacking any spiritual gift as they wait for the revealing of Jesus Christ. Paul has just basically told them they are superstar Christians, because of the grace of God.

Now I'll let you in on a secret: this is not the whole truth about the Corinthians. Before we get to the end of chapter one, Paul will have challenged their divisiveness and pushed them toward humility and true beloved community of love. But he challenges them in the context of hope, of believing that God is sovereign and at work in them, and when you believe God is truly at work in another person, you are hopeful and positive and patient.

When I was a teenager, I went to a youth conference, and they passed out these pins – PBP-WM-GINF-WMY. Please be patient. God is not finished with me yet. In hope we wait. We wait with hope. Hope helps – a lot. 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. (Rom 15:13 NRS)