

# "An Advent Blessing"

Romans 15:13

December 5, 2010

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday In Advent

What are you getting for Christmas? That seems to be the prevailing theme, if not among us, at least in the ads on television. In a story from the Chicago Tribune, picked up in the Great Falls Tribune last Thursday, the author was comparing potentially dangerous toys of my generation with the toys of today. He actually mentioned some toys that I remember getting for Christmas: the Johnny 7 O.M.A. (One Man Army) which was seven shootable weapons in one gun; and Creepy Crawlers. As he described it, "You filled metal plates with goop from a tube, plugged it all into the electric socket until the plates became red hot. A couple of second-degree burns later and presto, you had rubber insects to play with." The article reminded me personally of how much I wanted "stuff" for Christmas. If anything, this devotion to "stuff" has only gotten worse.

However, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Despite the oversaturation of things related to Christmas in the ads, the shopping centers, and televisions, we, in the Church, are still in the season of Advent. So, can we ask the question, "What are you getting for Advent?" What? You've never thought of that? I tell you that what you get for Advent is far better than anything you can get for Christmas.

Our text for today contains a blessing which tells us what we get for Advent: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Abound in hope? That sounds rather wimpy. It's like asking for a Johnny 7 O.M.A. for Christmas and getting new socks instead. It's rather sensible, but not very exciting and doesn't seem very valuable. Hope doesn't seem to be very important. To hope for something seems to be nothing more than a good wish which seems to be so uncertain. When somebody says, "I hope so", it

doesn't inspire confidence. It seems to say that you might get what you are hoping for but, on the other hand, you might not get it.

At the same time, "stuff" seems so certain and so important. We need material goods in order to survive. We desire material goods because they make our lives happier. We count on material good because we can see and touch them. "Hope", on the other hand, seems to be so fleeting and so theoretical.

If this is how we view "hope" and material things, then we've got it all wrong. In fact, we've got it just the reverse of reality. Material goods are temporary and fleeting. Hope is certain and enduring.

It may come as a surprise to no one, but I don't have my Johnny 7 O.M.A any more. As much as I desperately desired it and as much as I thoroughly enjoyed it and thought I needed it, it's gone. I haven't seen it in 45 years. Now you may say, "Well, it's just a toy," but what happened to it will happen to everything you have – your toys, your car, your house, your clothes, your money, everything. What you so desperately desire, fervently need, and thoroughly enjoy will one day be gone.

It's all because of sin. We often think of sin as simply violation against God's moral code. It's that, but its so much more. We live in a world broken by sin. As a result of sin in the world, everything has been corrupted. The relationship between God and humanity is first and foremost. However, the material world has been corrupted, as well. Everything we have, want to have, or ever will have will eventually be broken, fall apart, or be destroyed.

We are affected by sin in the same way. It keeps us separated from God. But it also is the reason that our bodies become old, break down, and eventually die. As much as we try to prevent this through good diet, regular exercise, medicine, and surgical procedures, we cannot prevent it or stop it. We can only slow it down.

Hope, on the other hand, is the thing that is real and endures. I'm talking, of course, about Biblical hope. Biblical hope is not an unsure wish ("Oh, I hope everything goes well and gets better.") Biblical hope is a sure expectation.

How is this possible? How, in this fleeting and unsure world can we have a certain expectation of anything? We already have a certain expectation of bad things. It's called fear. The source of fear is sin and the evil things we see in this world.

Hope, however, is the expectation of good things. It's source is God who is, according to our text, the God of hope. It is accomplished by the work of Jesus Christ in His first coming which we are preparing to celebrate in just a few weeks. Although it is His birth in the stable which gives us joy this time of year, it is His death on the cross which gives us hope. His death heals the rift between God and His creation which sin has caused. Not only are we right before God because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, but creation is, too. The Scriptures say, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Rom. 8:21).

It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead which guarantees our hope. St. Peter wrote in his first epistle, " Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5)

Hope is the expectation of salvation which is already ours but will be revealed at a later time. It is called an inheritance. An inheritance is something which belongs to us by virtue of our relationship with the one who has written our names in his will. We may not see the inheritance. We may have to wait many years to receive the inheritance. But we would never say that an inheritance is a good wish. It is something which belongs to us. It's just not in our possession yet, but it will be.

When we say that we have hope, we are not idly wishing for good things. We are saying we have an inheritance: eternal life in inexpressable joy and permanent pleasure in the presence of God the Father and the Lamb Jesus Christ. We do not see that inheritance. We may wait years to receive that inheritance. But it is an inheritance which is already ours. It has been paid for with the blood of Jesus Christ. It has been guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our names were written by God in the book of life when we were baptized. We receive a foretaste of our inheritance whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper which is Jesus' last will and testament for us. The inheritance belongs to us. It's just not in our possession yet, but it will be.

For me to say to you, "Have hope" means so much more than just wishing you good luck. Having hope as a Christian means, not to wish for good, but to expect good from the God of hope. It doesn't mean that life is easy and free of problems and suffering. The "here and now" is not the time of hope, nor is this world the place of hope. As Christians, we look at the big picture, focusing our hope on eternity.

Having hope means trusting the God of hope to deliver to us what He has willed to us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Believing His promises in faith, rather than trusting what we see with our eyes, results in "all joy and peace", our text says. We are joyful at what God promises and we are at peace while we wait for the fulfillment of those promises.

Having hope, although it is sure, is never easy. Satan will use suffering and affliction to try and destroy our hope. Our sinful nature will urge us to bail out on hope for the sake of some temporary worldly pleasure. Having hope means enduring for the long run. In fact, Paul praises the Thessalonian Christians for their "endurance inspired by hope." (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul describes it this way in the Book of Romans:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame,

because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:1-5)

As an adult, all the toys of my youth are gone and I'm not getting any more for Christmas. But what you and I are getting for Advent – hope – is so much better. In Jesus' first coming and what He did then, our hope has been established. In Jesus' final coming and what He will do then, our hope will be fulfilled. In the meantime, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Amen.