

Romans 15:4-13
December 5, 2020

Overflowing Faith

Advent represents the beginning of the Christian liturgical year, and it starts out with high expectations as it points to the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is, of course, overflowing with joy and hope. Part of that overflowing is a kind of adrenalin that comes simply from the energy surrounding birth, which is almost always overflowing with joy and hope, even when it comes in difficult circumstances.

Maybe the reason we love Christmas so much is because before it is anything else, it is a birth, and we are filled with excitement at the dawn of new life. It is good to be excited by birth whenever it comes, but it is a mistake to leave it there, and fail to ask after its deeper meaning. If there is a banality in our cultural expressions of Christmas joy, it is not that we are excited and inspired by birth, but that we go a little overboard, and then leave it without going deeper.

Advent gives us a way to go deeper. The text in Romans is not ordinarily associated with Christmas, except in the sense that all scripture is associated with Christ, and thus with Christ's birth, and this text compels us to ask for significance beyond the continuation of life inherit in every birth.

The text starts out by telling us that part of the biblical message is about endurance, encouragement, and hope. One must imagine the difficulties of a faith practiced largely by indigenous people living under a

massive, and foreign, imperial dynasty being contentious, and that is not hard to imagine, because even though the context has changed, the world is still contentious and difficult. There are many changes about the world these last 2,000 years, but "contentious and difficult" still applies.

It is not necessary to list all the major contentions that divide the world. It is enough to say that, for the New Testament world, one of the major divides was between Jew and Gentile. It not only pervades the letters of Paul where it is specifically mentioned, because he was the apostle to the Gentiles, but even in the gospels in places where it is not mentioned, and the prophets, it is implied. The question of the Jew/Gentile divide hovers over everything in the Bible.

And it came down to very practical questions about interpersonal relationships in the church and in the communities where the believers lived. How does one interact with a person who has a different genealogical background; maybe speaks a different language and has different cultural traditions, and a different religious background, and who has become a neighbor, and a friend and is interested in being a part of the group? What are the implications of the message of endurance, encouragement, and hope?

Paul does not leave us hanging. The answer is acceptance . . . ! "Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you . . . in order to bring praise to God."

Which of the world's divisions run superior to this command for acceptance? This is a rhetorical question with an implied answer: none of them.

As we contemplate that question and its answer, let me shift gears a bit, just. There are a couple things that I believe every person innately knows about themselves, and about the world, even those who are in denial.

The first is that we are a mess, that is the colloquial way of saying that we are sinful, which is the theological way of saying it. And there are other ways to address it besides the language of sin. There is the idea of being unhealthy or sick and in need of healing, or the language of psychological integrity, we are divided within ourselves and in need of inner unity.

Many are not sinful in the conventional ways that everyone can see because they run on the surface of things, and might land us in front of judge and executioner, or unhealthy in ways that send us to the hospital. It is easy to fool ourselves into believing it is not universally true. Even the best con artists know the truth at some level of their being.

The other is that if there is any redemption or healing, it will be with the mess that it has to start. God does not rescue us by removing us from the mess but by meeting us in it. That is what the birth of Jesus is, God coming down to us and meeting us in the mess. It must be made known and acknowledged, it is a part of us and will not simply go away easy, but will have to

be confronted, dealt with in one way or another. Some of the messiness is such that many of us may rather run away and try to escape it. One way or another, it lingers. It becomes a part of the world's life and its history.

The story of Israel is the story of the human mess. That is why they did not leave anything out; Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's cowardice before Pharaoh, Jacob's scheming, David's adultery and murder; there was incest, rape, slavery, polygamy, and more besides, but there doesn't seem to be any length to which the God's mercy doesn't go; to heal and restore, and to empower people to find the goodness that lies within each of us, because we have been created in the image of God.

So Paul proclaims that in Christ we have been accepted by God and insists that we extend that acceptance to others, and to each other, and remember that every person is savable, and every circumstance, even the ugliest and most frightening is not beyond the reach of God's help, which is the basis of our acceptance of each other, and others.

While that does not mean we live as though every situation is redeemed nor problem solved, every pathology healed, we are to be driven by the hope that it can be redeemed instead of the fear of perpetual failure and disappointment.

Thus, endurance, patient waiting, and encouragement, which are themes that run throughout the biblical

narrative . . . and hope. These are part of the answers we stumble upon when we take the time and energy to ask after the profound significance of Christ's birth.

Come to think of it, repentance is hopeful, for who would repent if there was no hope of pardon. Obedience is hopeful, because it rests on the conviction that the God who demands also empowers. Acceptance itself is hopeful because to accept is to live the faith that there can be reconciliation. Birth is hopeful. I have known a few people that did not want to bring children into the world because they were not confident of a future worth living.

Birth is hopeful in the sense that it anticipates the redemption of all things and invests in it, no matter presently, the outward appearance of things.

At its heart, that is the Christian hope and faith that we are driven to when we search for deeper meaning. Sometimes it flies in the face of the evidence, that is why we use the language of faith and hope.

Prayer