

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:1-7, 13
Advent 2/Communion/Service of Hope and Remembrance

Romans 15:1-7, 13 (selected)

¹We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God...

¹³May 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.

Introduction to the OT Reading

The Hebrew word יָרָא (*yirah*) is almost always translated “fear,” which is a perfectly correct translation, but our sense of the meaning of the word “fear” in any given context can be incomplete or misleading.

Sometimes it indicates real fear as we understand the word—unadulterated, abject terror.

But a lot of times when the same word, or a form of it, is used in conjunction with God, it's about a similarly powerful sense, but of something perhaps related to, but very much other than, pure terror—something more like absolute reverence, awe, and ultimately, love. In the words of the New Oxford Annotated Bible, it's a “recognition of the limits of human understanding and power before God.”ⁱ

All of these attitudes are at play when the Bible talks about the fear of the LORD.

One prophet who uses that term is Isaiah, a prophet in Jerusalem, three centuries after Israel's golden age under the eternally beloved King David, whose father was Jesse.

Between David's time and Isaiah's, there were almost 300 years of decay, and people had long since come to doubt that that royal line could possibly have any promise left in it.

Israel had split into two distinct kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah in the South; the Northern kingdom had fallen to much more powerful enemies who surrounded it, and Judah, the southern kingdom, was holding on by a thread.

Now more than ever, if there was any good news for the people of God and their future, they needed to hear it. They couldn't wait any longer to hear it.

This was the prophecy that God gave to Isaiah.

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge
and ofⁱⁱ the fear of the LORD.

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him,

and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Prayer

O God, we are grateful for rainbows.

According to the word you have given us in Genesis,
 you put a bow in the clouds as a sign of a covenant that you made:
 that never again would you wipe the earth clean and start over,
 saving only the one righteous family that was left,
 and just enough from the rest of the world
 to reactivate the goodness you had begun in creation.

You said that when you brought clouds over the earth and the bow was
 seen in the clouds, you would remember the covenant between you and
 every living creature.

We are grateful, Creator God, for the good news of that covenant.

O God, maybe there is an Advent dawning in your creation.

Something is happening in your cosmos, O God;
 you and your Spirit and your Son are everywhere,
 and something is always being born from your truth and beauty.

On the fragile planet we inhabit,
 from the outermost layers of the atmosphere
 through air and water and earth and below,
 even as massive human-made pollution and extraction
 “threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care,”ⁱⁱⁱ

Your presence is breathing new life
 into primordial and prehistoric places;
 a wind from God still sweeps over the endless, deep waters;
 your Spirit is disturbing and animating the world
 and re-announcing it as your own.

O God, maybe there is an Advent dawning in humankind.

Maybe in times of division and mistrust,
 and wars waged with words and technology and firepower,
 Maybe when it feels like darkness and fog
 have settled onto the world of human interaction,
 affecting everything from the course of nations
 to the interactions of neighbors, friends, families,

Maybe at this very moment you are bringing a new life to term
 in all humanity.

O God, maybe there is an Advent dawning in me.

Let it be so now, for all of us, O God.

As Ann Weems said,

“In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
 a place where we must ultimately answer
 whether there is room or not.”^{iv}

Maybe in the sadnesses, the hidden turmoil,
 the losses of things we thought would last forever,
 the wistful looks back, and the pain which you know:
 the cry of absence,^v the ache of the empty chair,

Even and especially there, O God,

we can hear and feel and almost start to see:

“By the tender mercy of our God,
 the dawn from on high will break upon us,
 to give light to those who sit in darkness,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace.”^{vi}

In the name of the Christ

who is and who was and who is to come, Amen.

The Sermon

Somewhere along the line, we learn
that “peace” doesn’t mean that there is nothing that disturbs you—
which, on the plus side, means that
you don’t have to wait until everything is hunky dory to find peace.

Somewhere along the line, we learn
that abiding *joy* is an entirely different question
from whether you are feeling *happy* at the moment,
which means that even on days when nothing’s working right,
and you’re disappointed, or frustrated, or achy, or just not happy,
there can still be an animating core deep within you
where you can mine, and access,
and feel and sense and know the joy of being who you are,
knowing you are known and valued and loved
by the Creator who put you here—
knowing that the maker of the whole universe
took the time, and purposely created you,
specifically to be you.

Somewhere along the line, we learn
that love lives in the midst of anger and fear and resentment and pain;
it lives in the face of unfairness and injustice
and the sense that not everyone is acting or thinking or speaking
with integrity.

Somewhere along the line, we learn
that hope isn’t some vague, unrealistic, unmerited optimism
that when you call heads or tails,
the coin’s going to land that way just because you called it;
but hope thrives and magnifies and illuminates the *truth*,
especially when the darkness makes it hardest to see the truth.

Hope is the low beam that cuts through the fog at night;
 it's the lighthouse beam that guides ships safely past the shoals;
 it's the candle that illuminates the prayer room,
 and the Spirit that illuminates the Word.

It is the light that shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness did not overcome it.^{vii}

We come to God in every season, on each Sunday, every morning and evening, carrying the threadbare materials of our lives and the broken shards of our peace, hope, joy and love,

and God asks us to let God's Son put us back together,
 make us whole, and remind us
 that neither we nor our lives have to be perfect
 before we can be loved and accepted by God.

So many of the popular songs of Christmastime—not the carols or the medieval chants or the sacred church music, but the songs that are more about the season than the content—so many of those songs have a deep melancholy: “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas;” “I’ll Be Home for Christmas;” “Blue Christmas.”

There's a longing and a sentimental ache there that resonates with so many people, generation after generation. Christians are no exception and are not expected to be.

God invites us to let God's Son put us back together and make us whole, and remind us that neither we nor our lives have to be perfect before we can be loved and accepted by God.

He, the root of Jesse, stands—as Isaiah said—as a signal to all the peoples.

He is saying: The pain you feel that nobody knows, God knows.

He is saying that the love, the longing, the wistfulness you carry with you like an invisible bag slung over your shoulder, God knows.

He is saying that the soldiering-on smile that you wear, God recognizes, and knows how hard you are working to maintain it. You don't have to. But God knows you feel like you need to try.

What are the crucial Christmastime pictures in your mind that illustrate what you look for to bring light when the year ends and the days grow shorter and the nights get colder?

The first time you were aware of the enchantment of Christmastime—what do those memories look and feel and sound like, and smell and taste like?

What have been the most wonderful Christmases you have ever had?

Was there ever a Christmastime that, seen out of context, wouldn't be your idea of a favorite, but under the circumstances helped you find what you most needed that year, that winter, that Christmas Eve?

Thomas Merton wrote:

“Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited...

“With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.”^{viii}

And as the German theologian Jörg Zink said,

“This man from Nazareth comes to us and invites us to mirror God's image, and shows us how. He says: you too can become light, as God is light. What is all around you is not hell, but a world waiting to be filled

with hope and faith. This world is your home as surely as the God who created and wrought it is love.

“You may not believe it, but you can love this world. It is a place of God. It has a purpose. Its beauty is not a delusion. You can lead a meaningful life in it.”^{ix}

And as Paul wrote to the Church in Rome,
and to you and me and the whole Church for all time:

“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.”^x

Prayers of Hope and Remembrance

By the tender mercy of our God,
The dawn from on high will break upon us.

O God,
You know already that we sometimes find ourselves
lonely in the midst of a crowd,
melancholy in the midst of celebrations,
anxious in the face of challenges
and sometimes hiding tears behind a smile.

Help us to believe your eternal promise:
that by the tender mercy of our God,
The dawn from on high will break upon us.

Help us, O God,
Not to feel like we have to disguise our pain, but to reach out for joy,
Not to feel like we have to live in denial, but to live in hope,
Not to feel like we have to forget or blur our memories,
but to hold sacred the people, places and things
that you have made sacred to us.

By the tender mercy of our God,
The dawn from on high will break upon us.

Hear us now as, in hope and remembrance, we lift up
 those who are suffering...
 those who mourn the absence of loved ones,
 particularly now, during the holidays...
 those who are weary with anger and frustration...
 those with unresolved family or relationship issues...
 those whom Christmas Eve will find alone...
 those who cannot afford to “do Christmas” the way they long to...
 those whose grief is acute...
 those particular people whose pains are known only to us...
 and, finally, ourselves, and the pains known only to you...
 We believe that by the tender mercy of our God,
The dawn from on high will break upon us.

Keith Grogg
 Montreat Presbyterian Church
 Montreat, NC
 December 8, 2019

ⁱ Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 79 (Luke 1:65 note in *The New Testament*)

ⁱⁱ This little word is not in the NRSV translation, but it is literally correct and makes a difference to the meaning.

ⁱⁱⁱ From *A Brief Statement of Faith in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions*

^{iv} Ann Weems, “In Search of Our Kneeling Places,” in *Weems, Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 19

^v See Martin Marty’s book *A Cry of Absence* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1983).

^{vi} Luke 1:78-79 (“The Song of Zechariah,” NRSV)

^{vii} John 1:5 (NRSV)

^{viii} Thomas Merton, “The Time of No Room.” Collected in *Watch for the Light* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 278. Originally published in *Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable* (New Directions Publishing Corp., 1966).

^{ix} Translated from Jörg Zink, *Türen zum Fest*. Verlag am Eschbach, 2010.

(<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/christmas-readings/doors-to-the-feast-3>)

^x Romans 15:13 (NRSV)