

“Time to Hope”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent I – December 1, 2019

Romans 13: 11-14

As we turn the calendar to the first of December today, our thoughts turn from turkey and football on Thanksgiving, to holiday decorations, presents, and celebrating Christmas later this month. Our worship space has been transformed, as well, and I am grateful to all who came yesterday to participate in Hanging of the Greens, as we prepared our physical space for the season of anticipation and hope.

When we were children, this time of the year was full of anticipation and hope. Many of us probably struggled to wait patiently for December 25. We could not wait for what the future held on Christmas morning. We would look under the tree in the days leading up to Christmas, picking up wrapped gifts, shaking them a bit, and speculating what was inside. It could be very hard to live in the present moment, because we could not wait for what the future held.

That is a natural tension in life, and not just at this time of the year. We near the end of our schooling, and we cannot wait to take that next step to college, other studies, or entering the workforce. But that also means it can be hard to be centered on the present: what’s happening now, what we are responsible for, and what we have energy and passion for in the present. That tension between the future and present is palpable and real.

Or perhaps we have lived in our house for many, many years, and we are comfortable and grateful to have this treasured space we call home. But we are not able to physically keep up with what the house requires, and we chose to ignore that reality and the suggestions of family and friends. Instead, we live solely in the present, rather than anticipating what a new future might look like, all the while living in an alternate reality of the past. There can definitely be tension between what we are experiencing in the present, and what might be a different and new future for our lives.

In a real sense, this tension between the present and the future is at the heart of the Advent Season for us as Christians. We are living in a present reality where we have known and experienced God’s coming in human form in Jesus Christ. We know this through the testimony of scripture and the witnesses of saints who have preceded us. Our present reality also includes the fact that Jesus has ascended back to God after his resurrection. But his ascension came also with a promise for the future. In the Book of Acts, we read, “While Jesus was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood

by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:10-11). It is for this anticipated future that the church has been waiting ever since.

In a way, Advent is our time in the church to wait from the past, and for us to wait for the future. We wait in remembrance of how God sent Jesus into this world in the form of a baby on Christmas Day. And we wait in anticipation for what God will yet do when Jesus returns in glory as he promised. All the while, we must live in a present that can seem to be in tension with both of those waiting experiences.

On this first Sunday of Advent, our passage from Romans speaks to this tension of waiting while living in the present. But Paul also gives us helpful guidance for how to live while waiting, reminding us that God’s hope motivates us to wake from our sleep, lay aside what weighs us down, and live into the light of God’s new day.

This letter of Paul’s is to a church which would have been the object of much persecution. Jewish Christians had been expelled in 49 CE under Emperor Claudius, and upon their return to the capital of the empire, they would have faced much intimidation and pressure because of their faith. It would have also been a church full of both Jews and Gentiles, obviously living as a minority in a majority secular world. The Letter to the Romans intimates these conditions by how Paul implores the believers to “live in harmony with one another” (12:16), to overcome evil with good (12:17, 21), and to be obedient to the governing authorities (13:1-7). By living in harmony with one another, Paul stresses how that will counteract the hostility the believers were experiencing in Roman society (Jin Young Choi, Connections Commentary, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 8).

If you were a Christian in Rome, being intimidated and pressured by a dominant majority, you would want to know that God was coming soon in the form of Jesus Christ. And Paul’s language in this passage indicates that he and others in the early-church believed Christ’s second-coming was to take place very soon. “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers . . .” (13:11). If you heard that as a believer in Rome, that would have given you hope, wouldn’t it? This suffering you have always known might soon be over, “for the night is far gone, the day is near” (13:12).

To prepare for this imminent future time, Paul exhorts the church to lay aside all that weighs them down – “the works of darkness,” as he calls it – and instead to “put on the armor of light.” It’s a dualistic contrast which means to make clear how to continue actively waiting for Christ’s return. Living honorably as in the day is how God wishes the community of faith to bear witness as it awaits expectantly for God’s coming again.

Of course, as John Buchanan notes, there was a problem with Paul's timeline: it was wrong. *The early church lived with a clear and urgent sense that Christ would return in the immediate future. In a threatening environment full of very real danger, the idea that the end times were near was good news, because it meant God was about to make everything right again. The first major adjustment the Christian church had to make was to deal with the reality that Christ had not returned and that, therefore, a strategy for long-term survival was necessary. The challenge for the early church was to retain Paul's urgent sense of imminent fulfillment while at the same time facing the reality of living indefinitely in the real world.*

That challenge is ours as well. We are still living in the in-between time. The kingdom of God came into history in Jesus Christ, but we still wait for its final fulfillment (ibid, 10).

It can be hard to live in in-between time. The doctor's office calls and says you need another test, and the waiting can be excruciating. You submit your application for a new job or for college, and the waiting can be unbearable. You confront a loved one about his or her addiction, and the waiting to see how he or she responds can be nerve-wracking. The in-between time can be some of the most difficult time to live through.

In the church, we have a word that describes this waiting through the in-between time: eschatology. Too often, that word has had negative attributes placed on it, such as weird, cult-like movements that focus solely on the end of the world. That's not the true meaning of eschatology.

Buchanan shares that the theologian, Jürgen Moltmann had a more hopeful view of living in the in-between time as Christians: *"Christianity is eschatology, is hope, is forward looking and forward moving and therefore revolutionary in transforming the present." Scripture promises that God gives newness, fulfillment, and hope. In it we are told that God is always before us, out in front of us, bidding us to a new and hopeful future.*

People who trust the God of the future will never be complacent about the present. As Moltmann states, "faith, when it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart but is itself the unquiet heart in us. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it" (ibid 11).

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychologist, who survived the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. As he reflected on that experience, he came to the following conclusion. *The prisoners who survived were those who somehow did not sink into despair but lived with hope. Hope turned out to be a life-giving source. "Only those who were oriented toward the future, toward a goal in the*

future, toward a meaning to fulfill in the future were likely to survive” (ibid 11).

In our in-between times of life, how are we called to live oriented toward a hopeful future? I will admit that can be easier said than done, especially with the significant challenges and obstacles that we can encounter in our daily walk of faith. And yet, isn't our faith in Jesus Christ – the one who has come and will come again – an expression of our hope for a future defined by God's love? That is what God is calling us to, bidding us to – a new, hopeful future that changes the present to align with the kingdom of God. As we seek to put on the armor of light and our Lord Jesus Christ, how will we encourage others to embrace this time of hope that God has given us?

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” (13:11). May we journey through this Advent Season recognizing the hopeful future which God has promised, stirring us to bear Christ's light and love in our present world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.