

Blameless

Do they still send kids to the principal's office?

You know what I mean, right, that experience of the teacher saying, 'Billy, you may go to Mr. Bruinooge's office...right now!?' I think that there was at least one time when I visited the principal's office because my friends got me in trouble. OK, well, maybe I got them in trouble. I can't be sure. I could describe what we did, but I am afraid there are children listening and I don't want to give them any good, er, I mean bad ideas.

The fact that I don't remember more is a sign to me that either my long-term memory is quite selective, or that I got off pretty easy. I probably wasn't blameless, but perhaps I was treated as if I was. Maybe he didn't get the whole story. Or maybe, just maybe, Mr. Bruinooge was modeling grace and peace.

After all, that is the model for discipline that Paul shows us when he writes to the church in Corinth. Any message, especially one that is going to contain a dose of discipline, begins with offering to your audience grace and peace. And this is not just any grace and peace, it is that which comes from God. (I Corinthians 1:3)

We gather here together this first Sunday in Advent to celebrate grace, the grace which allows us to hope, to start over, to believe that we have a better future.



We gather here in peace, God's shalom, the all-encompassing peace which allows us to know that we are right with God, that we can be right with our neighbors, that we can live at peace with ourselves because God of that grace which God extends to us.

So today, on this Advent day one, I come to you with a message from God, by the power of the Holy Spirit; a message of hope that comes from the truth I know about you: God has given grace to you in Jesus Christ. (v. 4). Just as Paul thanks God for his congregation in Corinth, so I thank God for you, for the grace I see in your lives, the grace that is the evidence that you live in Christ.

What Paul sees as evidence of grace is the riches of the Spirit evident in the lives of the people in the church. In the same way, then, I thank God for the signs of life that spring up before our eyes as we begin another year of our lives together. I see the signs of hope evident in the Advent boxes being delivered to our families with children. Betsy and Amanda generated this idea and made it

real. And now parents and children will use this to teach their children about the hope, peace, joy and love which are ours through the life of Christ.

And I thank God for the promise of new life for our church which comes to us in the profession of faith of Luke and Liz today, and in the baptism of Maxine. These acts of faith are like the sun peaking over the horizon, the dawn which promises that the light is rising to fill this place. These are signs of the riches that God has placed in your lives which are the evidence that God is working in this community of hope. I look forward to seeing how God will bless us through your many gifts.

Is there hope for Hope Church in this Advent 2020, this season unlike any other we have seen? God sends us Luke and Liz and Maxine, God sends us Amanda and Betsy and the parents and children of Hope, God sends us people working on Potter's House, God sends us people who will make your Christmas gift, God sends us Jane stepping out in faith to offer care, and on and on. So, today, I offer thanks to God for the riches that are overflowing through each of you. These are signs of hope, evidence of God's grace and peace in your lives and for our future hope in Christ.

So, in this new year we want our focus to be first on the salvation we profess together, that we are saved in Christ alone. But more than that we recognize that the call to salvation has another aspect, the call to discipleship. We want to be a congregation who, as one writer puts it, ‘aches not simply to be forgiven, but to be empowered for the adventure of discipleship.’

The ability to engage in the adventure of transforming discipleship comes not from our faithfulness, but from God’s faithfulness to us. (v. 8) It is this hope, that because God took on our human form on Christmas, and that this Christ is coming again to take us all home together, it is this hope that serves as the glue which holds us together.

It is the hope that we will be ‘blameless’ on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. On Judgement Day we will stand before the Throne of God not in fear but in absolute confidence that we are blameless. Hope rises within us not because of who we are and what we have done on our own, but because of who we are in Christ, because of what Christ has done for us.

This is the meaning of the baptism we witnessed today. Maxine, cute as a bug, is not in her human condition, a perfect child, no matter what her grandparents might say. But, today, as the baptismal waters dropped on her

precious head, we received the sign from God that she is innocent, faultless, without guilt, perfect, blameless because she is a child of God, a member of Christ and Christ's Church.

We are also to 'hope well of all who have entered on the right way of salvation, and are still persevering in that course, notwithstanding that they are at the same time still beset with many distempers."

"Every one of us...from the time of (our) being illuminated by the Spirit of God in the knowledge of Christ, ought to conclude with certainty...that (they have) been adopted by the Lord to an inheritance of eternal life."

"...(H)aving been called into the fellowship of Christ, (we) ought, in so far as assurance of salvation is concerned, to think of (ourselves)...as member(s) of Christ, so as to reckon all Christ's benefits (our) own. Thus (we) will obtain an unwavering hope of final perseverance..., if we reckon (ourselves) as (members) of (Christ) who is beyond all hazard of falling away."

That is, we all can agree, I think, that Christ is beyond all hazard of falling away from the path of salvation, because he is the pathway to God. Therefore, if we are a member of his body, then the greatest of all gifts of grace is that which allows us to hope well, to possess an unwavering faith that we too are beyond all

hazard of falling away. This is true for you who profess your faith, and it is a sure sign and seal for those who have been baptized into Christ's body as well.

What is the source of our hope, of our confidence as we approach this new year in our lives together as church? Not our faithfulness, but God's faithfulness to us. (v. 9). God's faithfulness which is evident in the signs we see of God calling a new family into fellowship with the Pilgrim Community of Hope. God's faithfulness which is evident that we as a church are engaged in active waiting through new and on-going discipleship.

How long can we wait for a vaccine that will finally bring this pandemic under control? Can we wait until January, until Easter, until Pentecost, and still be the church? If I think about that question without God in the equation, I am prone to worry. But if I think about that question with a view of God's faithfulness, then I have no doubt we will survive and then thrive. God has been faithful to this church for nearly 130 years. We have survived and thrived through other pandemics and world wars. God is faithful. This is the source of our Advent Hope in 2020 as much as it was in 1891.

I can with confidence preach to you another year of grace and peace in Christ because I know that we, Luke, Liz, Maxine, and those of you who hearing

my voice who know Jesus as Lord, 'we may appear pure and unapproachable in the presence of Christ.' This, John Calvin teaches, is the truth which allows us to 'hope well' about our future.

Advent is waiting in expectant hope to be called before Jesus, the Judge. As Frederick Buechner writes so beautifully, "the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully."

Too often we think of God as the principal, Mr. Bruinooge in the sky. Or even worse, Judge Judy, the judge famous for taking no guff and calling it like it is.

We could not be more wrong. Not because we did nothing wrong. It's just that we know we are judged, not in ourselves, but in ourselves *in* Christ Jesus.

God says, "Let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." (Rev. 22:17) If you have never received that gift, then I invite you to join Maxine and all of us who have received the gift of the water of life, the grace and peace, which allows us to be presented on the final day when we, like Maxine, will stand before God in Christ and we will be blameless.