

Advent: Hoping and Groaning
Sermon on Romans 8:18-24 and Isaiah 11: 1-9
Advent 2 (Dec 4, 2005)
By: Robert Ross

As I started to write this sermon, I suddenly realized that I have not been groaning much about the world lately. Oh, I know on an intellectual level that things are bad in the world—there was the earthquake in Pakistan, and I remember the hurricane victims that I met in October as a Red Cross volunteer, and I vaguely remember watching the tsunami coverage on television with my family last Christmas. I meet homeless people on the street, and I have read a few books by Jonathan Kozol, and I am dating a social worker who is charged with ensuring the survival of a group of children who no one else really wants. Now my lack of groaning is notable, because I realize that I used to get upset about these things. I spent most of my four years of college and three years of graduate school writing angst-filled papers about these things. But recently, for some reason, I have stopped being upset.

It is not that I blame the poor and the oppressed—I am far too enlightened and far too liberal for that. I just think that there is nothing I or anyone can do about their situation, and it is too painful to think about the problems when I have no hope of ever witnessing a solution, so I don't trouble myself about them. I even have a bible passage that I can comfort myself with—it is even in red letters in some Bibles, because Jesus said it. Many of you may have heard it before: the poor you will always have with you.¹

Now, I don't think of myself as a person without hope. I just hope for things which are likely to happen so that I don't have to feel hurt when my hopes are dashed. I hope to one day have a family. I hope to have a job that I find meaningful and profitable. I hope to make my parents proud. I have hopes. And it seems to me that they are fairly good hopes. I don't hope to kill people or rob banks. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with my hopes, except for this one tiny thing: my hopes are all about me.

I have given up on the whole world becoming a better place, and have settled for hoping that I and the part of the world I inhabit become better. It is true that my hope has not completely vanished. However, my hope has shrunk so much as to cause me to question whether it is Christian hope anymore. Because if there is anything that can absolutely be said about being Christian, it is that your hopes can no longer be just about you.

I have heard Advent sermons preached that ask Christ to come and make a home in each individual member's heart—making that heart a place of peace and hope and love and joy. Now, there is much good in those sermons. However, if we stop there, we have lost just as much. Because Christ is not coming to live in my heart only. Read Revelation. Read the Prophets of the Old Testament. Read Paul. And when you do, this is what you will see: Christ is coming for the world. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.²

¹ Mt. 26:11, Mk 14:7

² Isa 65:17; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1

And everything will be different. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall we learn war any more.³ The very way we relate to each other will be transformed, the very structure of society, the very fabric of reality, will be changed. The Bible calls that event many things—heaven, the second coming, the kingdom of God. I call it the way the world is supposed to be. And it is profound and widespread. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess⁴ and all flesh shall see it together⁵. That is not a private event!

That is why I have a problem as a Christian and that is why I have not been groaning recently. I have not been hoping for that which I should hope. My hope for a little heaven in the form of a meaningful job, loving wife, and 3 children may be good, but pales in comparison to the divine hope that all will be made whole and none shall kill or destroy on my holy mountain⁶.

Now here's a good question, why would I not have hope? If the Bible records God as promising that this future will come about, why am I not filled with hope for it? It seems to me that I don't believe God, or at least I don't believe what the Bible says about God in this instance. A theologian named Jurgen Moltmann argues precisely that—that a lack of faith undermines hope. He writes in his most widely read book, *A Theology of Hope*, "Hope is nothing other than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been...promised by God. Thus, faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the time when this truth shall be manifested."⁷ Moltmann makes sense to me here, and he makes sense to me because I remember another part of advent—hoping for presents. Take a moment and think of the thing you want most of all for Christmas. Now imagine your loved one telling you that he or she is going to get it for you. Now imagine that you are *not* hopeful and excited at this news. Why would you not be excited? It seems to me that the only possible reason could be that you didn't really believe your loved one was going to get it for you. You see my point? My lack of hope is due to a lack of faith.

Which leads me to another, better question: why would I, a kid who grew up in the church, with a mother who is a minister, have a lack of faith? Here is why, because I have been seduced into thinking that the present reality proves that God is who we say God is. I have come to think of Christianity as a science. Like any scientific theory, I thought that if Christianity's ancient theory of God was true, then I could test its statements by studying how well God's character fits with what is happening now, and if it fits well, then those statements can be trusted to predict what will happen in the future. When I did that, I grossly underestimated the newness of the future and collapsed God into this present world. Now that concept is a whole nother sermon in itself. For the moment, let me simply say that I got into trouble when I trusted too much in the current world, because when I did that, I lost the possibility for the radically new action of God. I thought faith was adherence to a set of provable facts. I was wrong. Faith is belief in

³ Isa 2:3; Micah 4:3

⁴ Isa 45:23; Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10-11

⁵ Isa 40:5; Joel 2:28; Lk 3:6; Acts 2:17

⁶ Isa 11:9

⁷ Moltmann, Jurgen. *A Theology of Hope*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967.) p 20.

things unseen.⁸ And hope, because it is rooted in faith, is also for things not yet here.⁹ That is what Paul is reminding me of at the end of our passage. Hope is for things not seen!

In fact, faith and hope are so hard precisely because the things hoped for are so radically different from the present. The things hoped for are not provable in the way we think that they are. That much is true. But, let me tell you something else that is true: faith and hope are powerful only insofar as they believe in and hope for something that is radically different from the present. In fact, faith and hope in something that is not visible is the only kind of faith and hope with any real power to them at all. Who hopes for what is seen?¹⁰

I used to think hope was the easy out. It made resigning oneself to the pain of the world easier. If I will have enough to eat someday, then I don't have to worry about having no food today. Hope for me was the central opiate for the masses. Thus, the courageous path was the path of no hope. But now I think that I was patently wrong. The path of action because of and in light of hope is the difficult path—if you want easy then hopelessness is your way. Hope is what makes you groan in pain—if you want the anesthetic you should take the hopelessness.

Jurgen Moltmann, who I mentioned earlier, wrote about hope's difficult and painful consequences on the believer in, "Theology of Hope." He is worth quoting at length:

Faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in [us]. [and here's the whole thing] Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present. If we had before our eyes only what we see, then we should cheerfully or reluctantly reconcile ourselves with things as they happen to be. That we do not reconcile ourselves, that there is no pleasant harmony between us and reality, is due to our unquenchable hope.¹¹

You see, hoping leads to groaning. It leads to painful, sacrificial, loving action which strives to bring about the new by living as if the future was here now. Believing that the world *can* be better is what causes our discontent with the way things are and believing that the world *will* be better is what fuels our working for the way things are supposed to be and will one day be.

My lack of groaning is not a sign of maturing or of education—it is a sign of giving up, of indoctrination, of believing the lie that this world is all that it can be, that we humans are all that we can be. It is a sign of acquiescing to the powerful who wish the status quo to be enshrined as sacrosanct and eternal. It is not a sign of strength but of weakness.

⁸ Heb 11:1

⁹ Rom 8:24

¹⁰ Rom 8:24

¹¹ Moltmann, Jurgen. *A Theology of Hope*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967.) Pp. 21-22

Not a sign of triumphing over finite human fortitude but a sign of falling victim to finite human fortitude.

My decreased angst at the pain of the world is not a necessary part of my growing up. No, rather my decreased angst is a sign that I have forgotten the promise, and lost touch with the God who promised it and my fellow Christians who groan for it now. I have failed to see the profound truth because I have been brainwashed by the mundane and the everyday. I have lost hope in the future and I have lost faith in the God that Advent and Christmas point to.

You see—people groan because they know something is wrong. I had forgotten that something was wrong in this world—that a lot of things are wrong in this world. And my friends, many things are wrong, and the sooner we remember that, the better.

But realizing something is wrong still falls short of the Christian message. After all, despair is born out of the belief that something is wrong too. Disabling despair is the foil of hope. The difference is that hope believes that things are wrong but can be different. Despair believes that things are wrong and cannot be different. At the beginning of our passage from Romans, Paul is choosing the path of hope. That is what Paul is talking about when he tells them and us: ‘I am convinced that the present suffering will pale in comparison to the future glory.’¹² It is true that those who are at home with God will never be at home in the world as it is—they will always be sojourners in a strange land.¹³ We are homeless. And we groan for our home. But, the homeless will not remain that way—for there will come a day when everyone has a home.¹⁴

I had forgotten these truths, and had drunk for the anesthetic of hopelessness. But no more. There are three things I want to remind us all today: 1) the world is not right. Don’t get lulled into thinking that things are okay. 2) the world will be right. Don’t get brainwashed into thinking that things are as good as they can be. 3) we are called to do something about it, and we need to set as our top priority the question, what are we called to do about it and how are we going to do it.

We at Fairlington have a chance to live out our faith and live into hope. We have a chance as individual disciples and as a body of believers to ask, what do we really believe about God and the future that God promises, and how will that affect how we act in the world today. We have a chance to act on those beliefs and to live according to the future that is coming. That we may do that...that is my prayer for us as we move through this advent. That we may remember not only the waiting done by others so many years ago but the waiting done by us today. Not only Christ’s humble appearance in Bethlehem, but Christ’s glorious return in the clouds. And that we may live into that future which is coming. May God grant us the vision and the courage. Amen.

¹² Rom 8:16

¹³ Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 1 Pet 1:17; 1 Pet 2:11

¹⁴ 2 Cor 5:1-5