

## What is Hope? Romans 4:16-21

We are into one of the busiest seasons of the year.

As we get ready for the coming of Christmas, we do so with our decorating, party-planning, and shopping. But for many people, this is one of the darkest seasons of the year. This season can be one of loneliness, of hurt, a season of despair.

For we who know the story of Christmas, we know that the stage upon which the story of Christmas is cast is full of darkness at the opening. It is against this darkness that the story begins to unfold, and as does, we come alive at the possibility that this season of darkness has now become a season of hope.

Through this Advent season we will have the time to read the Nativity stories, exploring the theme of hope. Today we look at the book of Romans. Hope is a main theme for St. Paul, the basis on which confidence is built, and the beginning of hope brings us to restoration.

The apostle Paul tells us the story of the patriarch Abraham. St Paul, a Jew himself, shares this fascinating account of an old man who is called by God from his home to a land filled with good things. This is God's promise. A promise God will make again and again.

The only problem is that Abraham is an old man. In addition, his wife was barren when she was young and now that she has past through menopause, children are a hopeless cause. Still, Abraham agrees and accepts God's promise. St. Paul's says in verse 18: "*Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations.'*" Abraham grows strong in his faith and fully convinced that God will keep the promise. It is outrageous that an old couple who were unable to conceive children, should become parents and have direct descendants who would become an entire nation. Hope is sometimes an absurd notion.

When we look at the darkness that surrounds us-when we consider all the violence and wars and hatred and disease and poverty and, well, hopelessness that is the canvas upon which God intends to paint-then hope itself seems ludicrous. We are easily swayed that God simply can't cover that much darkness.

But Darkness will not always triumph over the light. This was Abraham's belief. He looked at life's harsh realities and hoped against hope that God would keep the promise. St. Paul writes that this is what faith is ... believing the unbelievable, the insane idea that God can fulfill promises when human logic says otherwise.

As you may know, at one time I came to lose hope. I became convinced that I would never be in ministry again. But then I spoke with one of my peers and he offered this: *"Always remember that hope never dies. If God has given you a call it still remains. What you need Wayne, is a renewal of hope."* While I sat there believing I wouldn't pastor again, my friend said, *"It's a good thing God understands resurrection."* And here I am preaching.

Hope has the power of resurrection. As believers we celebrate year round with the foundation of the Resurrection. During Advent, when we ponder the birth of Jesus, we do so with the knowledge that he is the One who came to defeat the darkness, to drive back the evil powers, and to bring victory over death.

In Advent and Christmas we rejoice that in the middle of this dark world an infant was born as a symbol of hope. He is an undefeatable hope. The way to become a part of this hope is what St. Paul calls faith. Faith is simply believing the unbelievable.

Christmas is a victory celebration that in the middle of all the darkness this world had to offer, a small child was born as a symbol of hope. It is a hope that will not be defeated. The way to participate in that hope is with what St. Paul calls faith. Faith is as simple as believing that the impossible can happen, that babies are born to ancient people, and a Savior born in a stable, are not so preposterous after all. Alleluia. Amen.