

From Beginning to End and Back Again

Advent focuses especially beginnings of Jesus' story. But that incarnation holds all the story before it and reaches to the end of all that follows. God's life coming among us ends with the creation of resurrection life – human life that can live forever with God.

Ironies are everywhere: Obscure Nazareth/Bethlehem. Unknown Mary. Manger. Shepherds. But the announcements are glorious: Great joy. All People. Savior, Messiah. David's throne, Israel, Gentiles. God's glory. Peace on earth. God's salvation. Light. Revelation.

How does this go out into the world? The long course of church history shows that we love to tell of shepherds and mangers, but trust more the power of Augustus and Herod. The church was seduced by power, Christendom, even in the Reformation. With Europe's imperialism it went forth to conquer. We live in a new period of irony. Faith is weak in the old areas of Christendom, but thriving across the world with the withdrawal of empires.

Paul is writing to Rome, the center of empire, the nations, Gentiles, rule, glory. Our text is the end of the body of the letter. He is bringing the full message of Jesus – Incarnation, Teaching, Ministry, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Holy Spirit – to full impact in the capital of the world. Not surrendering to Rome's understanding of power, but proclaiming God's Anointed King, a greater, eternal story, an inclusive empire of Praise, Peace, and Hope.

Hope in a World of Fatalism

Hope is a word of remarkable power. Hope does not mean uncertainty, as we often use it.

It affirms a yet-to-be-fulfilled future that we are moving toward. Thus it clarifies the present; gives it meaning and purpose. Jesus embodies that hope, in incarnation, beauty and power of life, resurrection – the future breaking in. It is the opposite of cynicism.

Structures of power & manipulation love cynicism: Real-politik. There's no other way to get things done. In empires. In personal relations. In communities. My power has to be against yours. Ours against theirs. The Kingdom of God becomes a sect, party, us.

In fields of knowledge & science today, hope & purpose are excluded. We choose to envision mindless world of strict mechanism, in which our own choices and thinking lose their meaning. Hope is the affirmation of a vaster, open universe, where our choices matter, where the things we value most are not superficial but deep at the heart of all things.

Hope says that the way things are now is not the final word. We have already seen a glimpse of where things are going in Jesus. We are invited into the creative work of living, loving, creating, building, healing, welcoming, transforming for that reality we see in him. Rome has conquered many nations. Hope is for all nations across time. Jesus rules as king by serving, faithfully fulfilling promises, rising from the dead to give hope and praise.

Living Hope in Everyday Relationships

Paul is writing into the center of a hostile empire. But he doesn't conspire to assassinate the emperor. He helps divided people learn to live by a new reality. To welcome one another. To unite across classes and ethnic divides, to share God's promises, to live in a world solid with God's faithfulness, vibrant and colorful with hope, living with direction.

Notice that the last sentence takes us back to the themes struck at Jesus' birth – joy, peace. As we trust the 'God of hope,' Jesus' reality becomes ours. But more. God's life, the Holy Spirit gives our lives power to move abundantly, creatively into a living future.