

# Getting a Handle on Hope

*A sermon on Romans 15: 4-13 & Matthew 3:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 December 2025*

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## Message

Hope is a courageous and active stance towards life which is nourished in those who attend to the voice of God in Scripture.

## Sermon

At our Advent Retreat last Sunday, Jackie asked me for my one sentence definition of Advent. My answer was that it is the season in which the Church focusses on Christian hope, on our anticipation and expectation of the coming of the Christ and of the beautiful future that God promises.

Hope. It might be a major theme in this season of Advent, and it certainly featured prominently in today's Bible readings, but it is not an easy idea to pin down. Or perhaps I should say it is an easy idea to misunderstand. You see, the word "hope" gets used in various different ways, both inside and outside the Church, and not all the ways it's used are helpful for understanding the hope to which Jesus calls us.

One of the ways it is used will be heard lots at this time of year by those who are getting into the swing of the summer festive season. You'll hear lines like:

"I hope the weather will be fine for our party by the river."

"I hope someone gives me a case of champagne for Christmas."

"I hope there won't be any fights when the family gets together this year."

When we use the word "hope" that way, it is basically the same as saying "I wish." And I'm pretty sure that that is not what the Apostle Paul had in mind when, in the reading we heard earlier, he said that the unchanging and inspiring message of scripture fills us with hope, or when he prayed that we would abound in hope. I don't think he was saying that we should just be a bunch of wishful thinkers or just have a more optimistic outlook on things than everyone else.

It's not entirely unrelated, but it's not the same thing. The hope which Paul is calling us to does involve a measure of optimism and wishful thinking. You could say that our faith in Christ makes us optimistic about the future. You could say that we are wishing for the day when Christ will bring all things together in love and joy. But understood in that way, hope is a fairly passive kind of thing. It remains something that just goes on between your ears and doesn't have much in the way of implications for anything you might do the rest of the time. No matter how fervently I might hope that the weather will be fine on Saturday, it's not going to make much difference to how I live my life between now and then.

And there is a more toxic version of this wishful thinking type hope too. Environmental activist Greta Thunberg captured it in her famous address to the World Economic Forum when she thundered, "I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to

panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day, and then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”

Hope as wishful thinking can be a refusal to face up to the reality of our situation; a refusal to do anything.

There is another common use of the word “hope” though, which would offend Greta less, and which I think may come a bit closer to what Paul was getting at. You may hear people say things like:

“I hope to do well in my exams at the end of the year.”

“I hope to be properly prepared to run a marathon by March.”

“I hope to travel for six months next year.”

When we use the word “hope” in those ways, it means a lot more than “I wish.” It is more like “I intend” or “I am working towards...” or even “I commit myself to...” This kind of hope has very definite implications for the way you live. You will not do well on your exams or get in shape for a marathon simply by wishing for it. It takes more than just an optimistic outlook.

If you hope for such things you have to set about determining strategies to achieve the goals and following through on them. Such a hope is a desire that is expressed in a plan of action. If there was no action, then others would conclude that you don’t really hope to achieve the stated goal, you just vaguely wish you could get there without having to pay the price.

I think the Apostle Paul was talking about a hope that had definite implications for the way we live and the decisions we make, but I think we’d have to conclude that this concept of hope was not quite what he was on about either.

You see, when the word hope is used in this way, it is primarily about things that we can make happen by our own determined effort. We are largely in control of the outcomes ourselves. We hope for something; we apply ourselves to an appropriate strategy; and if all goes to plan we succeed in bringing it about. And while Isaiah and John the Baptist might tell us to prepare the way of the Lord, that’s still a long way from taking control of the Lord’s schedule!

Beyond that concern, there are more toxic uses or abuses of this version of hope too. The powers of evil can use hope to manipulate us into compliance with their ongoing oppressing. Theologian and activist Miguel De La Torre described this well after visiting the site of the Auschwitz Nazi death camp and seeing the large inscription over the entrance which translates as “work sets you free.” Realising that it was intended to inspire a hope of freedom that would keep prisoners willing to work and less likely to resist, he says, “Hope is what is fed to those who are being slaughtered so they won’t fight what is coming.”

Another toxic version connects closely to the situation that the Apostle Paul was speaking to in our reading, and even to some of the words we heard from John the Baptist in our gospel reading. Paul is speaking quite specifically of a hope which gathers both Jews and gentiles into one family, but he is having to defend this view against those who want to continue to portray

the gentiles as an alien threat. Their version of hope is for an ethnically pure nation. You could hear John the Baptist addressing this tonight when he warned the Pharisees and Sadducees not to think that they could rest on their laurels because they were pure-blooded Israelites. “God could produce pure-blooded Israelites from these rocks, if that’s all he wanted,” John thunders.

What we are seeing here is a cheap ethno-nationalist hope that gets sold to the people by power-brokers who are protecting their own interests. Whenever we see persecution of “others” – of women, of queer folk, of immigrants, of people of colour – the hatreds we are seeing are almost always being stirred up by the economically powerful doing their best to divide and conquer in order to preserve and expand their patch.

Bishop Malkhaz in Georgia sent me a link this week to a BBC documentary about the atrocities being perpetrated there by the increasingly authoritarian regime and the wealthy oligarch who backs it, and you can see them employing this same divide and conquer strategy. Facing daily mass protests, they seek to win back support by promoting a new hope in the form of a hyper nationalistic version of “pure” Georgian culture that makes people feel special, and then they begin denouncing groups like the LGBT+ community as a threat to the hope of a true Georgian cultural identity, so as to redirect the population’s anger off themselves and onto a vulnerable minority group.

Hope can be complicated. Not everything that calls itself hope is the real thing.

The Christian hope that Paul is calling us to seems to include components of these common kinds of hope, but still be something bigger than any of them. It does have something to do with optimism or even wishful thinking. We are called to imagine a day when things will be different and much better than they are now. We are called to wish for it, to yearn for it, to hunger for it. We are called to reject the vested interests that tell us that things cannot change very much and that we should resign ourselves to “reality” and not expect or agitate for anything radically different from the present status quo and the way things have always been done. We are called to imagine a new heaven and a new earth where Christ is all in all and Christ’s ways of love and mercy and peace and justice shape the reality which everybody lives in. This could be called wishful thinking because we set ourselves thinking about that which we wish to see fulfilled. It could be called wishful thinking because we express a belief that something which presently looks impossible will in fact come to be.

And this Christian hope that Paul is calling us to does have something to do with committing ourselves to a goal and acting towards its realisation. We are called to “prepare the way of the Lord.” We are called to begin to live by the values of God’s coming reign in the here and now. We are called to be reshaping our lives in light of that which is to come. We are called to do whatever is within our control to make the reign of God a present reality rather than just a vague vision of a utopian future.

But it seems to me that when Paul talks about the hope that abounds by the power of the Holy Spirit and is nourished by the steadfast and encouraging message of the scriptures, there is another essential component that takes hope beyond either or even both of these common meanings. That component is about openness or perhaps surrender. You see, that for which we Christians hope is neither simply a vague future desire, nor something we can in any way control and create. Christian hope is not so much to hope for something, as to put our hope in

something, namely God. And when we put our hope in something, there is a large measure of relinquishing control. When we hope in God and in God's future, we are opening ourselves to something which is radically out of our control. We are putting all our eggs in the one basket when we neither own the basket or have any sort of control over the future of the basket.

Having already pointed out the toxic perversions of the previous forms of hope, I trust it will be obvious that hope as surrender and as entrusting ourselves to another is also a vulnerable truth that will, if we are not alert, be exploited by those who John calls a "brood of vipers" who will claim that surrendering to God means surrendering to them as "God's representatives" and we'll be off down that slippery slope to authoritarianism again.

But don't let the perversions turn you away from pursuing the reality of the hope we have in Christ. And although I describe it as a surrender, that certainly doesn't mean it results in a passivity where you can just sit back and relax. It still has major implications for what we do and how we live, just not in the sense of being able to determine strategies and control outcomes.

Rather we are called to commit ourselves – body, soul and actions – to radical openness and obedience to a God who we cannot comprehend, predict or control. To others it may look like wild trust and reckless courage, or perhaps just naive stupidity. But to those who have experienced the joyous freedom of abandoning one's fate into the loving care of the Spirit of Christ, a Spirit which like the wind blows who knows where, it is the only path to the true freedom of a life worth living.

It is to such a hope that Jesus calls us. And it is such a hope that Paul says is nourished as we listen to the witness of those whose writings have been passed down to us in scripture. For it is the stories of those who have opened themselves to such an incomprehensible and uncontrollable Spirit that will nourish our courage to do likewise. And it is to such a hope that we commit ourselves again in our worship at this time of year, as we immerse ourselves in wild visions and utopian dreamings and pray over and over, "Come, Lord Jesus, Come."