

“Who Gives You Hope?”

Edward F. Markquart reported, “There is a book by Victor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist, from the last generation. His book is entitled, FROM DEATHCAMP TO EXISTENTIALISM, and he tells of his life in the death camps and concentration camps of Germany during World War II. For those prisoners in those death camps, it was awful. Rats, freezing weather and freezing rain, and freezing fingers and freezing toes, freezing warehouses and freezing outhouses, and beatings from the guards. The only hope for the prisoners, according to Victor Frankl, was for the Allied forces to come and set them free. And for some unknown reason, that hope became connected with Christmas. The prisoners in one particular camp started to believe that freedom was going to come on Christmas. And so these prisoners clung to life. They struggled with their freezing feet and freezing toes and freezing hands. They struggled with their frost bitten bodies. Why? Because they had hope. They had hope. They were waiting for Christmas. They were waiting for freedom. They were waiting for release. And finally, Christmas Day came. And. Went again. There were no Allies. There was no release. There was no freedom. And there was no hope fulfilled. Immediately, on the days afterwards, before the New Year came around, slowly, one at a time, there was first one suicide. Then two suicides. Then three suicides. Pretty soon, people were sleeping through meals and sleeping through exercises and many people were slipping into their deaths. And by New Year’s Eve, many from this camp had died. Six months later, when the Allied forces finally did come to bring freedom to this concentration camp, half of the prisoners had died. Most of them died during that Christmas season, after Christmas Day. Many of them had died because ... of the loss of hope. They had given up ... too soon.” (As told in “Abounding in Hope” by Edward F. Markquart posted on www.sermonsfromseattle.com)

The subject of “Hope” is very central to Today’s Lectionary Epistle Reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. At the beginning of the Scripture, the Apostle Paul wrote in **verse 4**, *“Everything written in the Scriptures was written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the Scriptures give us.”* The purpose for the writing of the sacred Texts, according to the Apostle, was “to teach us, in order that we might have hope.” Assuming that to be the case, “hope” is of very high importance!

But Paul did not end his references to “hope” in verse 4. After quoting three Old Testament texts, he also went on to quote a fourth one in **verse 12**,

“And again, Isaiah says,

‘A descendant of Jesse will appear;

he will come to rule the Gentiles,

and they will put their hope in him.’” The non-Jews – the Gentiles “will put their hope in” the Messiah – the Christ!

The third and fourth crucial mentions of the subject of “Hope” in today’s Scripture is found in **verse 13**, *“May God, the Source of Hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in Him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* God is “the source of hope” and our “hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Yes, “Hope” is central to the purpose and message of our Reading. Further, hope is important to the mental health of human beings and, without it, lives and relationships are prematurely diminished or ended. The people held in the death camps were encouraged when they had hope but when the basis for that hope was exposed as false or unfulfilled, despair and death took a heavy toll upon them.

Whenever human beings put their hope in the promises or vision of another person, we are

inevitably disappointed. The luring propaganda of wealth, power, violence, and self-centered self-indulgence is empowering and comforting for only a brief period. Eventually, only that which belongs with agape – selfless and sacrificial love and its source in our Divine Parent endures – endures beyond this earthly life and throughout the eternal life of those, who have experienced God’s Agape Love and Forgiveness, Healing, Radical Hospitality, Invitation, and Welcome into the New Faith Relationship with our Creator. Hope is the power of God’s Agape Love for us, which enables us to live out our faith or trust in the Almighty’s promise of the true, complete, and final victory over evil, the powers of brokenness, and of death. **God’s Faithfulness, Trustworthiness, and Agape Love are ultimately the only lasting and true sources of real joy and happiness!**

This may sound a bit strange or self-fulfilling but we are only able to completely experience the full power of Hope and our New Faith Relationship with God when we live our daily lives following the example of God’s Agape Love shown in Jesus Christ with Hope and Faith. Notice Paul alluded to this in **verses 5 and 7**, **“And may God, the Source of Patience and Encouragement, enable you to have the same point of view among yourselves by following the example of Christ Jesus”.** **“Accept one another, then, for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you.”** We are to follow the example of Jesus – accepting one another “as Christ has accepted” us. That is one way of saying the core message of the United Church of Christ’s God Is Still Speaking Program – **“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!”** So, it is putting our faith and hope in Jesus Christ – the Son of God and his example of agape love, which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit keeps our hope and faith alive during difficult and discouraging times.

The Apostle Paul reaffirmed that this path of Living the New Life in Christ brings us hope as he wrote in **verses 8 and 9**, **“For I tell you that Christ’s life of service was on behalf of the Jews, to show that God is faithful, to make His promises to their ancestors come true, and to enable even the Gentiles to praise God for His mercy.”** Paul’s reference to “Christ’s life of service” points to Jesus’ manifesting of God’s Agape Love for all people and its result of sharing God’s Grace or “mercy” even with the Gentiles – the non-Jews. That returns us to what the Apostle Paul quoted in **verse 12**, **“And again, Isaiah says, ‘A descendant of Jesse will appear; he will come to rule the Gentiles, and they will put their hope in him.’”**

I anticipate some of us recognize the reference to the coming of “A descendant of Jesse” to be a prophecy, which was fulfilled in the Birth of Jesus Christ, a descendant of King David, the son of Jesse.

So, as we prepare for our Christmas Celebration of the First Coming of “A descendant of Jesse”, let us redouble our efforts to strengthen our Hope and Faith by following the example of Jesus Christ by following his way of agape love and service. Committing ourselves to being bold agents of the Still Speaking God’s Radical and Extravagant Hospitality and following of the example of Jesus Christ, let us read, again, and fervently join together with the Apostle Paul and his prayer reported in **verse 13**, **“May God, the Source of Hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in Him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.**