

Once upon a time, as the story goes, there was an English clergyman famous for his pastoral prayers. He seemed always to find a way to thank God, even in the worst of circumstances. On a particularly bleak Sunday morning, when everything was going extremely badly in the village, in the lives of many of his parishioners – and even in his own life – the organ prelude ended and the pastor rose. Stepping into the pulpit to pray, one church member noticed tears welling in the pastor’s eyes and the parishioner thought to himself, “Surely the preacher will have **nothing** to thank God for on as wretched a morning as this one.” With his voice breaking, the pastor began to pray: “We are thankful God that it is **not always** like this.”

Perhaps, as you think about the news over the past few weeks, that prayer seems timely! “We are thankful God, that it is not always like this.”

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This morning we begin a 4-week Advent series called: “A Life-Giving Christmas.” We’ll spend the four Sundays mornings leading up to Christmas Eve preparing ourselves to **receive** and **share** a life-giving Christmas. Our theme and focus today, is **hope**.

The prayer, “Thank you God that it is not always like this” is a great place to begin. It is a prayer which embodies the contours of biblical hope, because biblical hope requires that we acknowledge, rather than ignore, the harsh realities of our present circumstances. Listen to this paraphrase of vv. 4-6 of Psalm 80: “O God, how long will you be angry with us, feeding us on tears, making us a laughing stock even to our enemies.” Psalm 80, indeed many of the Psalms, reveal to us how a biblically rooted people refuse to ignore the difficulties they face, but rather go to God with rigorous honesty in times of distress.

At the same time, the prayer, “Thank you God that it is not always like this” reminds us not to get so wrapped up in present concerns and difficulties that we forget what God has done for us in the past and to remember, really remember, that things **have not** always been like this! And finally, the prayer “Thank you God that it is not always like this” invites us, as a people of courageous faith, to **look forward** and to **lean**

**into** the gracious future of God. Biblically speaking, people of faith and hope, don’t wait **passively** for things to turn around on their own.

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In Romans 13:11-14, Paul encourages members of the fledgling Christian community to be rooted in that kind of hope; a hope that **looks forward** and **leans into** God’s gracious future. Paul sees Christ as the turning point of all history; that while the past might not be completely finished and gone, a new future has truly begun. And, it is a future we need to live into, because neither the past nor the present can possibly compare to the amazing future God has in mind for us!

You see, Paul really believed that in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all the biblical promises about **life and wholeness** prevailing over brokenness and death have come true. And since this is true, Paul writes in Romans: “wake up and embrace what God in Christ is doing in your life.”

Written 2000 years ago, Paul’s words address the contemporary challenges of living with hope, especially in the days that lead to Christmas. Let me read a modern translation of Romans 13:11-14, “*But make sure that you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can’t afford to waste a minute, [we] must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around, in dissipation, in bickering and grabbing [after] everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don’t loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!*”

[Remember now, Paul’s words were written to people who didn’t have ‘Black Friday’ and ‘Cyber Monday’ sales to deal with!]

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Here, at that beginning of this Advent season, we begin to think about all of the entertaining, shopping, and decorating duties that have come to define a ‘perfect Christmas.’ It can be so

absorbing, so exhausting, that we'll be oblivious to what God is doing. Should we not *hope* that things might be different this year, more life-giving? Paul, in the words he wrote to the Christians in Rome, urges them [and us] to embrace a more life-giving, hope-fueled, way of living, even when things seem bleak.

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A few years ago, I was at a clergy gathering with the Rev. Mike Slaughter. 39 years ago Slaughter went to serve a small town UMC in Ginghamburg, Ohio. On his first Sunday he told the congregation, "I am 29 years old, I don't have a lot of time left. I might die tomorrow. I don't have time to play church."

That first year, the Ginghamburg church dwindled from 90 to 60 members. But over the last 37 years, the church grew to over 4000. Leading up to his retirement just this year, Slaughter would frequently remind his congregation, "I don't have a lot of time left, I might die tomorrow. I don't have time to play church."

His point, like the apostle Paul's, is that it is urgent, absolutely urgent -- for us and for the world God loves -- that we embrace our vocation to be disciples who live and love as courageously as Jesus calls us to! We need to see that our discipleship is more *urgent* than getting a great Black Friday deal on an 80 bizzillion inch flat screen HDTV...

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Many people in our nation profess faith in God, but embody the values of our dominant culture. Professing faith in Jesus, what many of us really *trust* is the materialistic and narcissistic values of our secular culture. Rather than embracing the worldview of Jesus, we embrace a 'soft-secular' worldview.

But in Romans Paul says that those who embrace Christianity cannot at the same time pursue the values of the dominant culture -- engaging in escapist patterns of behavior. Paul is telling us that instead of desiring what the culture tells us is valuable, Christians need to desire what Jesus desires.

So, to be hope-fueled and hope-filled disciples, it is not only our priorities that change, *our desires* need change; our desires need to be transformed. Let me say that another way: Christ does not come to fulfill *our* dreams and desires, but to obliterate our dreams and desires because it is only by letting go of *our* desires that we can begin to desire what God desires. (Or, do you think your dreams for your life are bigger and better than God's dreams for your life?)

In the book, *The Next Christians*, Gabe Lyons writes, the next Christians believe that Christ did not come to save people *from* something. Rather, they believe that "God wants to save Christians *to* something. God longs to restore [the divine] image in them, and let them loose, freeing them to pursue God's original dreams for the entire world." I think that's beautiful. In Christ, we are not only set free, but let loose to pursue God's dreams and desires for the world instead of our own. What a calling! What an honor!

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This is our hope of the Advent Season, the hope that when Christmas comes; that God will restore our lives, and that we will be willing to share in God's work of restoring the world to what God originally intended. And when that happens our prayer will no longer be: We are thankful God that it is *not always* like this." Our words of prayerful thanksgiving will be: "Thank you God that *never again* will things be as they have been."