

"Hope"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to be filled with your Advent Hope. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

One afternoon, a spectator approached a little league baseball game and asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "We're behind 18 to nothing." "Wow," said the spectator, "You must be discouraged." "Why should we be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!" That's little league hope!

A man sentenced to death obtained a reprieve by assuring the king he would teach his majesty's horse to fly within a year - on the condition that if he didn't succeed, he would be put to death at the end of the year. "Within a year," the man explained later, "the king may die, or I may die, or the horse may die. Furthermore, in a year, who knows? Maybe the horse will learn to fly." There's always hope!

Hope implies uncertainty and waiting. Waiting for your turn up to bat, waiting for the events of the next year to unfold, waiting for Christmas, waiting for divine revelations in our lives, and waiting for the second coming of Jesus at the Parousia. In our gospel reading today, Mark tells us a bit about the Parousia, similar to what we read in Matthew last week. In the gloom and desolation of "those days," we "will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." It's a hope that has persisted since long before Jesus. But Jesus inaugurated new hopefulness for the in-between time; the time that's between the coming of Jesus and his coming again. In this in-between time, we have a foretaste of the Kingdom of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit and the in-breaking power of God through our prayers and through the miracles we experience. And so, in faith, we wait during this in-

between time with hope. But we don't wait idly; we're called to follow Jesus and to help bring hope to the world.

On January 16, 1995, Rachel Barton of Winnetka, Illinois, commuted home on the train. Slung over her shoulder was her 400 year-old Amati violin, worth about five hundred thousand dollars, on loan from a benefactor. Rachel is a violin prodigy who debuted with the Chicago Symphony at age ten.

The train stopped at the Elm Street station, and as Rachel exited, she somehow got caught in the door and the train started moving again. Rachel was dragged beneath the train for several hundred feet before a bystander heard her screams and notified a railroad official to stop the train. The huge wheels severed her left leg below the knee and seriously damaged her right leg. Rescue workers and two passengers who used their belts as tourniquets saved Rachel's life.

Two months and eight surgeries later, Rachel Barton held a press conference. Sitting in a wheel chair, beaming a beautiful smile, and wearing a glowing red dress, she talked of her plans to walk again, and to perform with the violin in the fall. She was already practicing on her violin several hours a day.

"In the years to come," she said, "I hope to be known for my music, not my injuries." After a two-year hiatus, Rachel resumed her career and has become well known for her music. When we face traumatic pain and loss, we have a choice. We can focus on our past or on our future, on our injuries or on our gifts. Hope is about our future and using our gifts.

Joyce Hollyday, an American pastor, author and activist, wrote about a schoolteacher assigned to visit children in a large city hospital who received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child. She took the boy's name and room number and was told by the teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's room that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. She felt that she couldn't just turn around

and walk out, so she awkwardly stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

The boy was in such pain he barely responded. She stumbled through his English lesson, ashamed at putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?"

Before she could finish a profusion of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment – it's as though he's decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw that teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, he expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

Sometimes we need a little help to hope.

Jesus concludes his discussion about the Parousia by telling his disciples, "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." In the difficulties of life, Jesus wants us to keep awake for his coming. The second coming, yes, but also to the in-breaking wonder of God who comes to us, cares for us and loves us through the Holy Spirit during the in-between time.

When John Todd, a nineteenth century clergyman, was six years old, both his parents died. A kind-hearted aunt raised him until he left home to study for the ministry. Later, his aunt became seriously ill, and in distress, she wrote John a letter. She asked whether death would mean the end of everything, or could she hope for something beyond? Condensed from *The Autobiography of John Todd*, is the letter he sent in reply:

It is now 35 years since I, as a boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I have never forgotten the day I made the long journey to your house. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your servant, Caesar, to fetch me.

I remember my tears and anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home. Night fell before we finished the journey, and I became lonely and afraid. "Do you think she'll go to bed before we get there?" I asked Caesar. "Oh no!" he said reassuringly, "She'll stay up for you. When we get out o' these here woods, you'll see her candle shinin' in the window."

Presently, we did ride out into the clearing, and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms close about me – a tired and bewildered little boy. You had a fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting on the stove. After supper you took me to my new room, heard me say my prayers, and then sat beside me till I fell asleep.

Some day soon God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don't fear the summons, the strange journey, or the messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome awaiting, and you will be safe in God's care.

Even when we are behind 18 to nothing; even when we face daunting odds, even when we experience a catastrophic accident, even in the depths of our human despair; and even when we are facing death: we are loved and there is hope. Jesus tells us to "Keep awake:" keep awake to opportunities to bring the kingdom of God into our midst and to touch hearts with God's love and hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.