

Grace be to you and peace from the One who is, who was and is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

*For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."*

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Dear Congregation!

To start off with, an Advent story. It was Advent, 1980. In the south of Italy, known for its earthquakes, the last of the survivors of a recent earthquake are rescued. An eight-year-old boy was laying 2m underneath the rubble for about 43 hours. For 43 hours he was swaying between hope (are those voices I hear above me?) and despair (No! I was mistaken. It's quiet again!). How long one single minute can drag on... Then, the sound of muffled voices again. But this time they are getting louder and louder, closer and closer. Now the little boy can also hear a dog barking insistently, then the unmistakable sound of voices of young men... and that of his mother. Slowly some of the rubble is lifted off from

above him. Now the boy knows for sure: they have found me! Soon he will be free. Although he is still laying jammed underneath the rubble, the time of waiting for rescue now becomes easier to bear. He now has a steadfast hope which gives him the patience he needs to wait...

For Paul patience is not a virtue that we can learn by saying to ourselves: Now, pull yourself together! It is rather a strength from within that we can receive. And we receive this patience through a steadfast hope.

The time of Advent is a time where we are made more aware of the One who can and wants to give us this patience through a steadfast hope. In him, God has come very near to us and became one of us. This was and is God's salvation plan. And He made this salvation plan of His known to us and those who have gone before us. The prophets of the Old Testament already witnessed to the root of Jesse that would come; He would be born, live, die and rise again to rule over both Jews and Gentiles. God's salvation plan happened exactly like it was foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament and was fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. It is therefore this salvation plan of God and his past faithfulness to this plan and His promises that bring us the hope of God's faithfulness and fulfillment of his promises in the present and future. Just as it was like for the boy buried under the rubble after an earthquake. God gives us something to hold on to. His Word! This is the source of our hope! God has done it through Jesus Christ! And God will do it! Again and again.

The Scriptures, the Bible upon which Jesus relied, are a primary source for Christian perseverance, direction and resilience (v.4). The Old Testament, Paul says, was written, ultimately, so that "we might have hope" (v.4). The whole Bible is a message of hope, not, in the first instance, of demand. In Christ God gives us a steadfast hope, also today.

Our steadfast hope began His life in diapers, just like us. From the beginning of His life, he was acquainted with hardship; He felt what it

was like to be without a roof over your head or a decent bed to sleep in. And later, when sinners went down to the Jordan to be baptized, he went down with them. They did not know who He was at the time; they just saw: he is one of us. And so, He began His ministry and service. From that moment on those who were suffering got a special place in His daily diary. And he was seeking the company of the sinners and outcasts, went into their homes and ate with them. Because what He wanted to say to them, one could only say when seated at the same dinner table: "God's Love and Salvation has come near to you!" Once they brought a woman to Him who was caught in adultery, but He refused to make a stone out of the truth about her to throw back at her. The woman who came to him with an alabaster jar of scented oil, who could but only cry, He understood fully even without one word being spoken. And when He made His way to Jerusalem it became clear that He did not hold our enmity and contempt of Him against us. So great His love is for us, that He was willing to suffer us rejecting His love.

This, His love story, His life, suffering and rising again for us, is what gives us a steadfast hope, dear congregation. The God who came this close to us and loved us unconditionally and accepted us without reservation, He will also help and rescue us from underneath all our dirt and rubble. This is a God who is devoted to us and our salvation like no other! This is what can make us patiently hopeful, what can give us the strength to hope for God's saving help and patiently wait for His time...

This steadfast hope that God creates in us is what makes us more calm and gives us the patience to endure: all of us, whether we are strong or weak. This is what unites us more than anything that can threaten to divide us. The differences are still there. No attempt to cover up or suppress our differences is going to make them go away. It can get on our nerves and even make us feel weary at times. But what are these differences really, in the face of the same hope from which we all live?

Let Christ be the center of our unity! Like-mindedness among Christians, according to Christ Jesus, is a gift of God; and a precious gift it is, for which we can earnestly seek in prayer. God is the One who opens our understanding, softens our heart, sweetens our affections, and gives us the grace of love, and the Spirit as a Spirit of love, to those that ask him. We should have the glory of God in our eye in every prayer; therefore, our first petition, as the foundation of all the rest, must be, Hallowed be thy name. Like-mindedness among Christians is in order to glorify God!

Hope and patience create the space in us, in which we can accept and welcome one another, just as Christ has accepted and welcomed us, to the glory of God. For Paul, it is not about conflict resolving strategies that can make congregational life more bearable. It is about the glory of the One, who in Jesus Christ has sought us out, accepted us and wants to be close to us. We honor God by living out the love and acceptance we have seen, heard and experienced for ourselves, the same love and acceptance from which we all live and hope. Because we are loved and accepted, we can let go of insisting on the validity of our own opinions and feelings.

As long as the weak only accept the weak and the strong only accept the strong, we show that we have the need to stay only with what we know and seek confirmation of our own egos. The principle of 'birds of a feather, flock together' is also an expression of in actual fact seeking oneself in the other, again merely boosting our own egos. But when we experience the unconditional love and acceptance of Christ for ourselves we don't need to bow down to this principle anymore. The wish to glorify the One who has sent Jesus Christ opens up new possibilities and horizons for us. Nothing can glorify God more than when we love and accept the other as exactly that, the other. Receive one another; for sometimes the prejudices of the weak Christian make him shy of the strong, as much as the pride of the strong Christian makes him shy of the weak, neither of which ought to be. Let there be a

mutual embracing among us! Has Christ been so kind to us, shall we then be so unkind to those that are his?

When we make our own convictions absolute we give glory to ourselves and our own knowledge, but not to God, who is the Savior and Giver of hope and salvation to us all. The joy of attention and care for one another is more than just tolerating each other. It is the warm glow of God's love coming to us in Jesus Christ which we remember more consciously in the time of Advent. God coming close to us and us coming closer to one another by accepting and welcoming one another is what makes this text an Advent text.

God is the God of hope. He is the foundation on which our hope is built, and he is the builder that himself raises it: he is both the object of our hope, and the author of it. The same almighty power that works grace creates and strengthens this hope in us. Our own power will never reach it; and therefore, where this hope is, and is abounding, God only must have all the glory.

And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.