

Romans 15:4-13

Hope, Peace, and Joy Together

I don't have a story to tell as I begin this time of reflection, but I have many names, faces, situations, and experiences that I recall as the words of scripture float in my head. This year has been a particular year of loss for the churches I work with. My circle of close friends who are struggling and grieving also breaks my heart. Many times the grief and loss that others are experiencing rekindles the grief that I have experienced and the losses I have felt, particularly that of my mother.

The numbers of people grieving the death of a loved one that are in my circle of knowledge alone are many. Then there are those who are yet facing death through illness, or even a long road of recovery from physical or mental illness, addiction, or broken relationships.

Grief it seems abounds.

Then there is the turmoil of our world. How often have you heard me speak about the injustices that people face, the wars, natural disasters, financial inequities, social stigmas, gender and cultural violence? Life is not sunshine and roses for pretty much anyone. You could sit down with a friend, family member, or stranger and learn of the cares, concerns, and sorrows they carry.

And then the Advent Season shows up as we prepare for Christmas with the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. How are we to claim any of this when things are not hopeful, peaceful, or joyful and love is limited to those who we appreciate, can relate to, and happen to love us back?

This is the paradox of Christmas.

On Friday morning an acquaintance and former professor of mine at Knox College posted her own story of grief. Rev. Dr. Sarah Travis wrote an article entitled, *The Other Side of Christmas...* that was posted on the website of the [Center for the Study of Bible and Violence](#). In the article she speaks about her own grief at Christmas time. Listen to her story,

My three-year-old son died on Thanksgiving Sunday in 2007. A few short weeks later, we encountered the Christmas season. A time of bustling merriment, hope and joy. I was not in the mood. It was so painful to sing the songs of Advent, including "Hope is a Star", which we sang at my son's funeral. It was painful to watch the children dressing as angels and shepherds, giggling and proud in their

temporary new identities. There is a great deal of pressure at Christmastime to be joyful and merry, neither of which was possible for me. Worship was a time of silent torture, trying not to cry in public, churning with pain and unable to hear words of hope. What does joyful expectation look like when we are grieving? Can we find room within the nativity story for grief and trauma to find full expression? From the songs we sing at Christmas, we might draw the conclusion that the biblical story of Jesus' birth was entirely joyful and peaceful. In reality, the whole story is suffused with trauma.¹

Advent and Christmas come to us with a young unmarried mother, a baby born in the messiness of a stable and without support of other women around. There is confusion and uncertainty for both Mary and Joseph. Then sometime later a jealous, fearful, and vengeance King Herod orders the slaughter of baby boys so that any possibly of his position being threatened down the road by some so called King can be put to rest.

Christmas of all times tells the story of fear, instability, loss, grief, and hopelessness. The Christmas story is one of trauma. Still, we sit here with the theme of hope, peace, and joy that have been the first three Sundays of Advent.

The scripture from Romans is one that speaks into all that is this time of year, from the merry and hope filled carols to the despair and says, that throughout the history of God's people there has been promise. Promise that God has always been with God's people, and in and through Christ, God has come close to humanity by being born, living the life of Jesus whose example was one of peace and hope, even joy. This incarnate God, come to us in Jesus as God with us, Emmanuel, this is where our hope comes from. It is where we find our peace. And where hope and peace are, there is trust. This trust comes from the promises of God born out in the lived experience of people witnessed and written about in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament and in the lives of those whose faithful witness and teaching have been an example to us in our own time.

Celebrating the Advent themes of hope, peace, and joy does not negate the effects and challenges that comes with the struggles of life, what it gives is a promise that God is present in it all. Peace lives in tension with longing and fear. Hope lives in tension with hopelessness and pain. Joy lives in tension with injustice and grief. Faith grounds us in the promise that God is with us and so we can live all of this together. We do it in relationship with one another and with God.

In a world that is overflowing with pain, hardship, misunderstanding, the tug of the powerful, the prestigious, the rich and promise of riches, we are given the words, "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." (v13)

¹ Travis, Sarah. [The other side of Christmas... – CSBV \(csbvbristol.org.uk\)](https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk). Accessed December 9, 2022.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, he was writing to a collection of house churches comprised of people who didn't see eye to eye. They had many differences and human reasons to judge one another. They were Jews and Gentiles. They were different and yet in Christ they had come together. Paul is writing about transformed relationships, human reconciliation, communities where people come to a place of hope, peace, joy, and love because of Christ's living and dying, Christ's resurrection and ascension.

The stories of Christmas and Easter are not two different stories, they are about one life lived to bring all things together in unity under God. Our God being one of restored relationships, reconciled lives and communities, a transformed world.

To be sure, we will not see the fullness of this in our time or in our lives, but the hope, peace, and joy of Advent point to the word that this is what we are called to. We are people called to reflect God's hope, peace, and joy into the world. This is done as we ourselves find healing and wholeness, as we work for the restoration and reconciliation of family, friends, and communities.

Let me share with you Sarah's words as she ends her article,

Christmas is a space in between sorrow and joy. There is room for profound grief, profound longing for a more just and abundant communal life. We are permitted to sit with our grief as long as we need. If we can't sing the songs, that is ok. Perhaps it is easier to sing when we see that the lyrics are loaded with grief. After all, we sing about hope because we are in an untenable situation. We sing about joy because we are longing for it. We sing about peace because there is no peace. We sing about love because we are afraid that we are not loved enough. Joy and pain intermingle in our celebration of Christmas. We are reminded that even in the darkest, most dreadful night, there is the hope of dawn. We are guided not by sun or moon but by a star, a pinprick of light that reminds us that even in the darkness, God shines.²

Hope, peace, and joy are together just as are fear, hopelessness, and grief. Through it all may Paul's words echo in our thoughts, responses, words, and feelings, and may you know joy because of God's Spirit at work in your life.

"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.

² Ibid.