Second Sunday in Advent
Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Some faith communities name the four candles of Advent peace, joy, love, and hope. The order of the candles may differ from one group to another, but these four themes seem to be constant. We might wonder why. There is no theological or liturgical meaning in these candles, other than that they serve as a countdown to Christmas. There is a sense that the four designations come from the scripture readings, but even that might be a stretch. The only sure thing is that most people who use an Advent wreath in their traditions use these four themes. The author of our book uses the order of peace, hope, love, and joy. You will need to read the book to understand why he chooses this order. However, using hope for the second candle, and thus, the second week of Advent works with our readings today, especially Paul's Letter to the Romans.

What is hope? We often hear people say, "I hope I win the lottery", or "I hope I pass this test." In this context, hope is mostly a fantasy, or as Webster puts it, "belief that something good will happen." Perhaps these expressions would be better using the terms "luck" or "fate". That is not how Paul, or any of the other writers of scripture use the term. When Paul states, "by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope", he is not looking for something which might happen or what we do after all our planning is done. Each of these definitions places us at the center – it is all about us and, hopefully, God will bail us out.

For Paul, another word for hope might be "trust". Hope is grounded in God. And God is the God of steadfastness and encouragement. When our hope is grounded in God, God becomes the One who guarantees whatever is promised. We can fully trust in that hope. There was a popular saying years ago that went something like this, "If God said it, I believe it." That is the basis of the hope Paul is proclaiming.

Why does Paul focus on this type of hope? In our reading, he continues to discuss what is going on in the church at that time. One might say he was also discussing what is going on in the church today, and in the church throughout history. There were groups within the church that did not welcome each other as brothers and sisters. It has been said that we have many denominations in this country because we don't welcome everyone into our churches. We differ theologically, socially, and politically. Therefore, we NEED different churches. But, is the Body of Christ divided?

Paul's hope was bases on the belief that ALL should be welcomed into the Body of Christ in ALL its variations. Paul spent his entire ministry trying to get the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians to worship together. Thus, the struggle is not new.

In the ecumenical movement today, it has been said that the Episcopal Church is at the forefront because we are the most welcoming. However, even we have our lines in the sand, which

become obstacles to true union. What we are doing here in Ozark is a great step forward as we worship with our brothers and sisters of OPC, especially during the holiday season. Perhaps, we are giving legs to Paul's dream – to his hope.

Paul ends this passage with one of my favorite benedictions. It appears in both Morning and Evening Prayer. However, in the liturgy, we cut it short. It is so fitting for this Advent season – "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." That should be our prayer daily.