

**“The Gift of Hope”**  
**Romans 15:13**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor  
Smoke Rise Baptist Church  
Stone Mountain, Georgia  
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There have been forty-three so far this year. This may be a record. Our country has suffered forty-three natural disasters to date and there is still another month to go in 2005. The naming of hurricanes has exceeded the letters in the English alphabet, so Greek letters are being used. Floods have devastated the northeast and tornadoes are still ripping through the heartland.

The devastation exceeds anything I have witnessed, especially on the Gulf Coast where 275,000 housing units were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, ten times the number caused by Hurricane Andrew. Thirteen weeks after the Gulf Coast was ravaged, officials were still finding bodies in New Orleans, thirty in the last month bringing the death toll in Louisiana to 1053. Do you think the people in the Gulf Coast region need hope?

Last Monday, General Motors announced they were going to close nine plants and lay off thirty thousand people. Over three thousand will lose their jobs in neighboring Doraville. At least that many Delta workers will be laid off locally as Atlanta's largest employer works its way through bankruptcy court. Do you think the employees of General Motors and Delta need hope?

Politicians are shooting each other with words over the war in Iraq while the death toll among soldiers and civilians continues to rise. Do you think the people in war-torn Iraq and our military personnel need hope?

Terrorist attacks occur weekly. We no longer wonder if they will happen but when and where. Do you think frightened people everywhere need hope?

Has there been a time when hope was needed more? Perhaps there has, but that doesn't diminish our need for it now. We need a hope that will rescue us from despair and fear. It is so easy to drift into cynicism and live in terror. We need to rise above both and I believe we can because we have a faith that speaks directly to problems and challenges.

And what does that faith, grounded in the resurrected Lord say? There is no situation, good or bad that God cannot embrace and change for the better. He can help us see beyond what is to what can be and give us the confidence we need to get there.

Listen to how Peter Gomes describes this transforming faith. “The Christian faith is and always has been prophetic, speaking of the time to come, of things that are not yet, of places we have not yet been to, of people we have not yet become. None of us, no place and no time is good enough yet. No past and no present is superior to the future that is yet to be.”

The Apostle Paul would like this and share Gomes' confidence. His writings are also saturated with hope and one that I read frequently as a benediction in our services is my favorite.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” Romans 15:13.

**For the believer, hope is real.** It is not merely mindless optimism that can lead to disappointment, disillusionment and rage. It is an outlook on life that is rooted in God's loving and generous heart, a heart that can be trusted. It is a way of life that is fueled by God's guiding, encouraging, empowering, comforting, strengthening, healing and forgiving Spirit.

Look how Paul began this encouraging verse. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him.” He identified God as the source of hope, which indeed He is,

giving hope to those that open their lives to Him. This is why we sing, “Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Our hope is not based upon our feeble abilities and desires but God’s firm and sure promises. We believe with all our hearts that God will work all things together for our good. We have great confidence in Him and His future, not ours.

Gomes writes about this, too. “The Bible is not a record of human or divine achievement, but a record of divine promises and a constant tale of human folly. Paul was writing to a people who knew the promises but also knew the bitter experience of disappointment, of hope deferred. These people knew the experiences of a world not yet ready for God’s prime time. But they knew that time would come and they eagerly anticipated it.”

I’ll tell you something else the early Christians did. They shared this hope. They searched for people that needed, just like themselves, to be rescued from despair and fear and helped them. They knew why they had an overflow of hope and what to do with it.

I like that word overflow, don’t you? I assure you I know what it means after last Thursday, Thanksgiving Day. I know what it means to have more than enough and in my heart I know what to do with abundance. I need to share it with those that have little or nothing.

Two Thanksgiving articles in the local paper caught my attention. Leanne Manning is a recent recipient of a Habitat for Humanity house. This act of kindness and generosity has changed her life. “I finally realized when all these people showed me such kindness, that if they see something valuable in me, then I need to embrace my abilities and capabilities,” said Manning. Manning wants to help others from her overflow and does by volunteering at the Dream House for Medically Fragile Children. “Not everyone has a story like mine, but everyone needs to hear not to give up,” she said. “I now have an understanding that everyday counts and that everyday I want to do something that helps others.” What a difference the gift of hope has made in Leanne’s life.

The other story focused upon the efforts of Maria Garcia to help local immigrants. When she became aware of the fact that many were being exploited and mistreated, she took action. She founded the Hispanic Community Support Ministry in Duluth where immigrants are taught to speak English, offered medical assistance and helped with finding jobs. This ministry sponsors summer camps for children and a youth program emphasizing community service and leadership. Searching for a spiritual purpose in life, the forty-one year old Garcia says that God led her to the laborers huddled in the cold outside a Buford Highway apartment complex and empowered her to organize them so they could find work and provide for their families. On Thursday, she and her volunteers fed over one thousand people a warm Thanksgiving meal.

There is no shortage of people that need help, especially this year. Natural, economic and personal disasters have taken a heavy toll on people near and far. This morning’s Advent reading from Isaiah 9:2 reminded us that people have been and still are walking in darkness, living in the land of the shadow of death. How can you use your overflow of hope to help them? What difference can you make in their lives? Make this a matter of prayer and follow where God leads, for I believe your response will determine what kind of Christmas you will have along with a lot of others.