

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent: Romans 15:4-13

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Advent! And Happy Sabbath!

We're a few weeks into our Sabbath Year now, and I'm curious. I know we're still tying up some busy-making loose ends, but is anyone else surprised by just how much there's still left to do? I mean, Sabbath is a big deal, sure, but I mean wow. No wonder we've all been so tired for so long. We were doing all this work with a whole lot of other stuff stacked on top. That said, this Sabbath thing's really helping to clear out some brain cobwebs and maybe some soul cobwebs, too. There really is a lot to do, especially as December whimpers in and Christmas waits on the horizon. Surely things will calm down on the other side of the New Year. Ha.

We talked a couple of weeks ago about St. Thomas' being a cozy place, a warm place to worry. And I love that, in case you hadn't heard it enough already, I'm gonna keep coming back to that line, a warm place to worry. There's just so much packed into it. At the very least, it is so dang real. This space can be just that, maybe the only quiet place, maybe even the only warm place, we can come to and sit and stay out of harm's way long enough to worry about all those things that haunt us or hound us or hold us captive. Or all those things that do exactly the same to the ones we love or the ones we've never met or the ones who aren't even here yet. God knows, we've got a lot to worry about.

There's another side to that, though. Any old warm place to worry can become a place to dwell on what ails us, a toasty electric blanket that holds us lovingly but keeps us from getting back up. What I love about this place being our warm place to worry is that it's different. It's a place set apart. There are plenty of cozy spaces, plenty of warm places outside the church. Maybe they're harder to come by, maybe they're less accessible, but they're out there. What sets this place apart is the sacredness you feel as soon as you walk in. That's no accident. We have UpJohn the old architect to thank for that, but we also have nearly two hundreds years of prayers soaked into these beams and plaster. The wood itself seasoned by generations of worry and love and faith. What sets this place apart is that it's where we encounter God. You can do that elsewhere, too, don't get me wrong, but encountering God is this place's purpose. And with all that, no wonder it's such a comfortable place to come to when the world get to be too much. No wonder it's such a reliably warm place to worry. Thousands of kind souls hold us across time as we weep or wail or worry.

But I think what makes all of this work so beautifully is the flipside of the worry coin. Sitting in this place with all that nips at your heels, it's like the building itself turns the worrying coin over in our hearts, and on the other side from worry, we find hope. I think worry is where we learn to go after we've seen, one too many times, hopes held high crashing down. We long to hope, but our experience of the world gives us a million reasons not to. And when hope is gone, we're left with worry and despair and a dwindling stack of reasons to keep going.

I want to tell a story on myself that I'm sort of not proud of. When I first got to St. Thomas', I made it a regular habit to come in this room first thing every day and say Morning Prayer on my own. What better way for a priest to start the day, right? I debated with myself back and forth over whether or not to say it outloud. It always felt awkward being in here all by my lonesome and saying the responses to myself. Nevermind that I thought I was alone in here. That's another sermon for another day. But I'd come in here and sit and say my prayers, and then I'd finish, and then I couldn't make myself get up. I was stuck to the pew by some sort of unseen sacred bubblegum on the seat of my pants. Glued to those pews, I sat in silence. Sometimes I'd look around, sometimes I'd close my eyes, most of the time I'd zone out with nothing in focus. But I couldn't get up. And I felt the worries rise to the surface as the hopes sank, or so it seemed. I think if I'd ridden that exchange to its conclusion, I think where that was headed was a sacred thing, but it freaked me out. I think, if I'd stayed

glued to that place, I think the worries would've welled on up, all the way to the top, and then poured out my eyes and down my cheeks. I think if I'd stayed with that sacred bubblegum glue, I think I'd have weeped the worries on out, and then hope would've filled me all the way back up.

I think. But I don't know, because it freaked me out so much that I'd break my focus and shake it off and go next door to do some quote-unquote real work. I never gave the worries the chance to weep their way out. And I never gave hope the chance to fill me back up. So I was left with all these worries floating around on top and hope sunk so down deep to where I wasn't even sure it was there anymore. I'm not super proud of that. I should've stayed in that place where it was damn hard to stay and let the holiness of this room work on me. But that holiness was scary, and I sure didn't want to weep to start my day. But what an incredibly healing thing I robbed myself of out of the fear of, well, I don't even know what it was I was afraid of, just some nebulous fear, nebulous but immensely powerful. And you know what, there's another layer I'm not super proud of. Of a morning, I stopped coming in here to say my prayers. I'd say 'em somewhere else, somewhere safer, less threatening. I'd say 'em at my desk or in my living room or even out on a walk. I'd say 'em where I could just say the prayers and not have to worry about the rest. I'd say 'em where, once I was finished, I could shift quickly to checking email or brewing the next pot of coffee.

Now, I just said "I'd say my prayers somewhere that seemed safer," and I hope y'all caught the irony in that. Because there is no safer place than a dang church building. But something in me was so resistant to the tears that were sure to come here, that I misread the room. It wasn't the threat of this place that brought those tears to the surface. It was the safety of it. This warm place to worry isn't meanness. It's the embrace of a mother letting you know you're safe, finally, and here you can let it all out. Sacred. Safe. And on the other side, filled with relief, with healing, and with hope. That's what this place is, a house of God, the same God of Hope who fills us with all joy and peace. And through that God, instead of slumping along in worry, if we let this place do its thing, finally, finally we abound in hope.