

HOPE III
Romans 13:11-14
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 27, 2016 / 1st Sunday of Advent

Today's selection is from Paul's Letter to the Churches in Rome, but the exact date of its writing is unknown, only that it was during a period where the Christians in Rome were constantly in conflict with other groups or being expelled from the city or just being outright persecuted.

At times of hardships, passages like this, speaking of what is to come, are meant to give people hope. For example, the Book of Revelation gave hope to the Early Church as it underwent its darkest period of persecution and repression. Those words gave people in horrible situations hope for the future.

And this part of Paul's Letter is giving assurances that things will be alright in the end, that their deliverance is coming. The Christians in Rome were in a precarious position, their future determined by the whims of the Emperor. But Paul assures them that the night is gone and the day is near. They are to put on the armor of light and keep the faith, and they will be saved. This message from Paul gave them great hope for their future. Paul's words made him an Agent of Hope to the Early Church.

Recently, I read about a remarkable woman who had passed away a couple weeks ago, who was also an Agent of Hope.

Her name was Ruth Gruber. She was the youngest person to earn a Ph.D., was the first foreign correspondent allowed into the Soviet Arctic, was the New York Herald-Tribune's reporter in Nazi Germany, was fluent in several languages, was a prolific non-fiction writer, and had made it a lifelong habit of helping refugees the world over.

Back during World War II, Ruth was working for the Department of the Interior, when the Roosevelt Administration learned about the Holocaust. While Congress refused to act to allow refugees to escape, FDR circumvented them by inviting a thousand "guests" to come visit the United States.

The Army set up a staging area in Naples, then the thousand “guests,” mostly Jewish and still in the striped concentration camp uniform, were selected. Then Ruth Gruber was chosen as the most qualified person to go escort them. She was given the rank of General...and a pair of pants to wear on the boat, and then she flew into the war zone.

When she arrived, she found her charges in the Army Transport Henry Gibbons, along with the wounded soldiers from Anzio. And she was initially mistaken for Eleanor Roosevelt by the refugees. The boat set off in a convoy with many others, but were constantly attacked by the Luftwaffe and U-boats. The word was that the Nazis knew about the Henry Gibbons and were desperate to sink the refugees. The Navy surrounded the refugee ship with the ships carrying German POWs to dissuade the attacks, but they were near constant for two weeks.

These refugees, uprooted by war and persecution, having already endured heartbreaking hardships, and now stuffed aboard a transport, in the hold below deck, hearing the sounds of attacks all around them day after day. And then there was Ruth Gruber. She empathized with them, she gave of herself, she protected them, she listened to their stories, and recorded their experiences, sharing them with the world; bringing in to the light what was happening under the Nazis.

She was their representative and advocate. Their Agent of Hope.

When they docked in New York, the refugees then boarded trains and headed north to Oswego, on the shores of Lake Ontario, to an empty Army base that had been set up to accommodate them.

Now imagine that from their point of view. They just escaped from the Nazis, some from the concentration camps, and now they are put on trains again, and as they arrived, they saw chain-link fences topped with barbed wire and MPs on guard. They feared that the Americans were now going to do the same thing to them that the Nazis did, and reportedly, the whole train started screaming. Was this whole thing just a cruel joke, they wondered.

But it wasn't. Ruth Gruber helped calm them down, and they listened to her, because they trusted her. She brought them hope.

And when the train stopped they found that the townsfolk of Oswego had turned out to welcome them, and brought them food. The camp was well-organized and provided for every need. The schools opened their doors to the children, the adults mingled, and the officials encouraged the government to ease restrictions. And by their side the whole time, calming all fears, was Ruth Gruber, their Agent of Hope.

In this Advent season, we celebrate the coming of four gifts that Jesus will bring us. Hope is the first of these gifts. Jesus gives us Hope. The hope in the assurance that no matter what happens, as long as we follow Him, He will lead us to safety. Or He will send us Agents of Hope, like Paul or Ruth Gruber, or any one of us.

Jesus Calls us to serve one another, and that includes being an Agent of Hope in someone's life, bringing hope, in all the forms it comes in, to someone who needs it; and we may never know the effect of our work, or we may not get any recognition, but that's okay.

And whether the kind of hope that we provide helps with an every day or commonplace need, a major life event, or the darkest place where someone can be; Hope can inspire, hope can save a day, or even save a life. We can be Agents of Hope, providing it to someone who needs it, we must be constantly on the lookout for those in need, and the opportunity to be Agents of Hope, and respond by giving them HOPE.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Loving God, we have once again pulled out the Advent wreath, the Christmas tree, and the poinsettias. We sing favorite hymns of celebration, unsung for a year, and hear the words of Your prophets. We ask that You help awaken us to action and stir us to courage, to become an Agent of Hope, guided by You, bringing the light of Hope to shine through the darkness, responding to the Call of Jesus in our lives, and following His path and example as a light for all Creation. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Gracious God, we give You thanks for the hope you give us through Jesus, and through our loved ones. We pray that they continue to give us hope whenever we need it. As we start the Advent season and prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth, we pray that we remember why we are celebrating, and that no matter what happens, no matter how much we want to panic as the day approaches, that we remain calm and serene.

We ask forgiveness for our lapses. May we find opportunities for reconciliation, and be wise enough to seize them, and we thank You for Your understanding.

We pray for everyone who needs You. We pray for all who are sick and are suffering are healed; and that You guide the hands of their caregivers. We pray for all who are alone or displaced, that we can bring them company. We pray for all who are in distress, that we can bring them comfort. We pray for peace throughout Your creation.

We pray for Your guidance in our own lives, helping us to choose the best paths that we can, following Your light. And we offer ourselves to You, to be Agents of Hope, serving our neighbors and strangers in Your name.

We offer to You the prayers of our hearts, especially...

- The families of the children in Chattanooga
- For reconciliation with Cuba
- For the children of Aleppo

May hope inspire us and lead us out of any despair or discontentments we encounter. And we pray that You move us to bring hope in our hearts wherever we go, and to everyone we meet, in Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Psalm 122

122:1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

122:2 Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

122:3 Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together.

122:4 To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

122:5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

122:6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

122:7 Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."

122:8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

122:9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Advent I – HOPE

Advent is the season when we prepare ourselves to receive God's gift of Jesus. It is a time of "getting ready" for the celebration of Christmas. This is the first Sunday in Advent. Today, we light one purple candle. This is the candle of hope. Advent is a time of waiting and of hoping. We wait for the day when we celebrate again the birth of Jesus.

(Light one purple candle)

When we look at the first candle, we remember God's promise. God promised to send a Savior to the people. God fulfills the promises made to care for people; and is loving and just and brings peace. This gives us hope. We look forward to the time when the world is at peace, and all people are treated justly.