

*God With Us in Tension*

First Sunday of Advent

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Text: Romans 13

Sometimes I ask myself if I really believe something or not - I ask that of myself about matters of faith, about my faith in God. Does that sound surprising or disconcerting to you to hear that from me as a MINISTER! – is a minister not supposed to say that? – to wonder if he really believes? – well, I do, and I’m saying it, so there you go! But it’s not really so much wondering about believing in God – faith in God feels for me like something woven into me, a part of me (although sometimes I do talk to God about my doubts in God, which is kind of odd when you think about it). What I more often find my questions of faith to be about, has more to do with when I hear something about faith and think: “hmm, do I really believe that?!” And really it’s not so much that I am wondering if I believe it to be true – it’s that I’m wondering if this truth that is being offered is reflected in my life - if my faith is held and lived out in a way that reflects this claim of faith.

Because that’s perhaps the most important part of “believe” that there is, I think. That word “believe” is used in all sorts of ways – sometimes as a prediction about something (for instance, I really did believe Michigan was going to beat Ohio State in football yesterday – but they didn’t) or sometimes as an opinion about something (I believe the officiating in that football game was terrible!...alright, I will try to move on) – but mostly deeply, theologically, when we say we believe something, it is that it is a truth that shapes how your life is lived. Most simply and profoundly, to say “I believe in God” is a relationship with God that shapes and directs your life.

So – sometimes I ask myself if I really believe something or not: for instance – I am reading Romans 13, and Paul writes: “for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” – hmm – “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers – the night is far gone, the day is near” – hmm? Paul seems to be saying that the fulfillment of God’s

reign is a reality coming closer in time – that the dawn of God’s reign is arriving. But I wonder if I really believe that – which is to say, I wonder if the shape of my life reflects what Paul is writing here? Does yours? But maybe it’s not really clear at all to you what sort of shape that would be - so in order to make more clear why this assertion from Paul catches my attention, my questioning – and could catch yours - I think I have to do a few things:

- I have to tell you what I used to believe
- I have to tell you what I think Paul used to believe
- I have to tell you what I think Paul really believed
- and I have to tell you a new belief I have

And I’m going to do that all in the last 8 minutes of this sermon – you watch - stay with me!

You see it used to be that when I came across something like Romans 13 - “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers – the night is far gone, the day is near” – I believed it right away! And that’s because I had what I would call an evolutionary understanding of faith, which saw life as progressing towards something better. I thought that about myself, personally, that I could, was, getting better. And beyond myself I mixed that evolutionary belief together about the church, and about people, and about the world, and about my country, and about knowledge and technology – everything progressing toward something better...not smoothly – not without disruptions and exceptions – but still inevitably: ‘salvation is nearer – the day is near.’

Then I realized a few years ago: I don’t believe that any more – not about myself (I can tell you more about that), not about the church, or about my country or this world. And that was difficult for me to realize I didn’t believe that, because there wasn’t anything clear for me to put in its place. If the world isn’t getting better, then...what? – it has caused a certain tension in me, you could say.

When Paul wrote Romans, it seems that he believed that the return of Christ was near – was soon, in terms of calendar time. That belief seems to be woven into this passage and its imagery – ‘the time that it is & the day that is near’ echo expectation of Christ’s return to fulfill

God's reign of love and peace. By the time Paul reached the end of his life, I wonder what he believed? Paul and the early church wrestled with what to make of a belief that chronologically had not played out. That can be difficult to realize, because for some perhaps it was hard to see what then to believe. If Christ has not returned, then...what? – it was a crisis of faith that caused a certain tension, no doubt.

So let me tell you what I think Paul really believed. And if that sounds presumptuous of me, what I mean is what I think Paul held most deeply that shaped his life. If you look through this passage, what you find are images that reflect two essential things: baptism and creation. Paul says 'put aside brokenness and put on the Lord Jesus Christ' – that's baptism liturgy language; Paul speaks of darkness and light, of night and day – that is creation language: Christ is the creative revelation of God who brings light out of darkness now as from the beginning. And so what Paul really believed is that a life of faith was to belong to God in baptism and to live in the creative light of God. So I think when Paul's life ended, it was not about Jesus not returning, it was about belonging in life and in death to the community of baptism and creation in Christ.

So let me tell you what I believe now – these are some new beliefs for me, and I'm still trying them on, maybe some new this week, this Advent season even. I do not believe that faith in Christ is about the evolution of my life or progress of this world toward something better. I do not believe that being a Christian is about being optimistic. Now, things can get better; and optimism can be very good; but neither is where my faith, my belief abides. What I believe in is baptism – to live as part of a baptized community: baptism which is by God's grace to put off all in this world that diminishes and denies life and love, and to put on the fullness of God's wisdom, the fullness of God's embrace of human brokenness and the fullness of God's ever-creating power for life – the fullness we receive in Jesus Christ. And what I now believe is that in this baptism community what I am called and empowered and gifted and sent to do is to live in this power of new creation. I do not trust in the evolution of goodness or optimism about the future, but I do trust in the creative presence of God in my life and in this

world, each and every day – the creative Spirit of God that brings light and life into and out of darkness – the creative power of love and grace and forgiveness and justice. In the tension of every encounter of darkness and light – the circumstances in my life which I wrestle with, the circumstances of the church in the world so conflicted, the circumstances of our nation so divided and broken, the circumstances of many people facing things more difficult than I can imagine – I do believe that the creating power and presence of God can and does and has and is and will bring light to this world. And my life is given to be a part of a baptized community that witnesses to and participates in that light of life for God’s world. I believe that – and that belief shapes and opens up in me a way of faithfulness to follow.

I want you to notice something in Romans: Paul says ‘salvation is NEARER’ and ‘the day is NEAR’ – so that sounds like near but not yet here, right? but then Paul turns around and says ‘let us live as in the day’ – and that tension only makes sense when we realize Paul is saying that we carry the day with us: God with us – and so even in darkness that is what allows us to live in light. What Paul believes, what I now believe, what I join with you to believe, is that the life-giving light of God is about new creation each day. And that belief shapes me, you, us, in all circumstances to receive and share God’s light and life in the Lord Jesus Christ – making us a part of God’s reign of life that in God’s time will know completeness.

That I can believe; that I can live.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.