

HOPE IN THE TOUGH TIMES
Philippians 1:3-11

4th Sunday In Advent
December 21, 2014
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It is true that there are many people who struggle with depression, loneliness and feelings of failure at this time of the year. With this season often portrayed as an extra happy and joyful time many individuals do not experience those things at all. In fact, all the festivities of this season often actually heighten and make this depression and loneliness even stronger.

In other words, if a person is feeling down or like a failure, seeing other people and families filled with joy can actually make them feel even worse. Watching news reports and commercials that feature husbands and wives, kids and parents, friends and neighbors, giving loving and thoughtful gifts to each other can easily cause certain people to be sad because the love in their own home or relationships may be strained.

There are people who often feel like a total failure because their home life is filled with lots of tension; with an absence of love and respect. Others feel a sense of emptiness because the giving of gifts is mostly a superficial enterprise; it just does not have the depth of care and support they would like. Sadly some others are forgotten about and even neglected by family and friends in the busyness of this season; this of course causes them to feel even more alone.

Something that is easily hidden behind the superficial masks we all wear is that we may smile and say everything is great when it is not. More people than you can ever imagine run to parties, food and alcohol in order to try to avoid the pain and emptiness in their hearts. Lots of people try to be as super busy as they can be (even though they love to complain about it) because they are actually afraid and paranoid to be all alone by themselves.

There have definitely been times in my own life when I have built up my expectations of people or of an event; have built up my anticipation to such a high level only to feel disappointed and let down when the people, gathering, event wasn't anything like I had hoped. Times like that can lead to frustration and to deep sadness; it can cause us to question if life is even worth living.

The Apostle Paul in our Bible lesson from the Book of Philippians is reminding us of a very important truth that can help us when we are filled with feelings of hurt and struggle; as well as when we may be filled with joy. Paul says these words, *"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."*

Paul reminds us that God is working in your life and mine; that he wants to help and lead you through whatever life throws at you; he wants to bring you his will and purpose. God wants us to know that even though our journey through life may be filled with ups and downs; with feelings of sadness and failure; God's Spirit is alive and active in us, wanting to bring forth his love, healing and good things.

This truth is also the message of Advent and Christmas. Our God is Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God is with us in the challenging times just as much as he is in the good times. In fact, we may feel he is even more real in the painful times because we need him so desperately. God is there wanting to bring to completion his love and purpose in you.

My friends, this is also the truth and good news of Christmas. I heard a respected theologian say one time that he believes there should really not be a Christ the King Sunday designated on the church year calendar. Rather he said it should be a Christ the Servant Sunday; the truth being that nothing in the Christmas story is really about success and kingship.

In fact being born in a manger, in a barn, was a sign of failure. Growing up in a carpenter’s house was not a position of honor. Having disciples who ran away and betrayed their friend was a sign of rejection. Dying on a cross was the ultimate disgrace and failure. Jesus however endured all this as a servant, to bring life and hope to all who are lost and troubled.

This wonderful message is that Jesus knows and understands what it is like to have people break their promises to us; he knows what it is like to be alone, he knows what pain, suffering, rejection and sadness is all about. Yet not only does he know these feelings, he knows how to bring hope and new life out of these depths. He is our servant Lord who went through the depths of failure so that we might also make it through whatever challenges we face.

Some years ago I attended a day-long seminar led by John Maxwell, who is a best selling author and Christian speaker on the subject of leadership. As part of his presentation, John Maxwell talked about the book he had just written entitled, *“Failing Forward.”* In this book (which I have in my library) he talks about how the failures and struggles in us can actually help us to grow forward.

He talks about how *“the question (in life) is not if you will have problems, but how you are going to deal with your problems.”* John Maxwell shares many stories of people who have faced all kinds of failures and roadblocks, yet they persevered on to great things. The key, according to Maxwell, is that *“in the face of adversity, rejection, and failings, they continue (to believe) in themselves and refuse to consider themselves as failures.”*

My friends, this is the message and truth of Jesus. Jesus knows better than anyone that life will be rocky and rough; he knows we will all fail and make mistakes. Yet it is of utmost importance to remember that even though we fail, Jesus doesn’t see any of us as failures. He wants us to use our struggles to help us grow forward our faith and love.

You may be interested to know that there have been multiple times in my life and ministry when I have felt like a complete failure. Being a youngest child who wants to make people happy all the time, I have often been sad and discouraged when people have been upset with me; when they have been angry with the church. Sometime I have felt bummed out and depressed when an idea or dream hasn’t gone the way I planned. I have sometimes even worried about whether people will actually find out that I really do fail and make lots, and lots, of mistakes.

Some other things about me are that I am a person who easily jumps to conclusions; I can easily read the wrong intentions into people's words and actions. I also often take things way too personally; I also am often tempted to want to run away from and try to avoid conflict and uncomfortable situations; all because I sometimes perceive discontent as failure. I mean, I should be able to keep everyone happy all the time, shouldn't I?

You can see, of course, how important it is for me to have some close mentors and confidants to help keep me accountable; to help me focus on the strengths in my life rather than all the failures. It has also been important for me to read books and attend conferences where other church leaders talk about their own struggles and the ways they have dealt with their challenges and have been able to grow through them. I firmly believe that each one of us need people and resources who are able to help us through these times.

This is the reason why one of my favorite and most encouraging passages from the Bible is this one from Paul's words to the Philippians. I definitely need to be reminded over and over again that it is God who began a good work in me through his love and promises; he chose me in my baptism and in my new birth in his Spirit; he has promised to be with me each and everyday. God is the one who is constantly working to bring to completion the good things in me.

I need to be reminded over and over again that Jesus loves me even when I fail; that his Spirit lives in me. I need to be reminded, as Romans 8 says, *"that all things work together for good for those who love Jesus."* Jesus wants to bring growth; new life; hope; healing out of whatever circumstances we face in life.

My friends, if this Advent and Christmas is a tough time for you. If you are feeling down and depressed; if you don't feel like there is any hope; if you are feeling lonely, sad and disappointed with life; like a failure. No matter how you may be feeling today, please remember that God loves you with an understanding and gracious love.

Remember that there is no sin or failure too great that Jesus is not able to forgive or help you with. Remember that Jesus is able to help you grow and become stronger, to be a better person, as you go through these tough and challenging times. And please, please, please—always remember that even though you will certainly have times when you will fail and make mistakes, God does not see any of you as failures.

My friends, God has a plan and purpose for you. As he began a good work in you through his love and grace he wants to bring your life and existence to a wonderful and fulfilling completion. He wants to mold your life as his servant, so your love, faith and joy might overflow more and more in whatever you do.

May Emmanuel, God with us, be with you each day and hour throughout this blessed, and sometimes challenging, season of Advent and Christmas.