

<i>Date Preached</i>	15-Nov-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	03-Nov-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 28 (Tr 2)

" [P]ut on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. "



I find the collect appointed for today exceptionally busy: [**F-1**] God has caused all Scriptures to be written for our learning. [**F-2**] We are to "hear ... read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" them. [**F-3**] We seek to embrace and hold fast the hope of everlasting life ... [**F-4**] such life having been given to us in Christ. All of that in less than 67 words! It's a lot to take in!

The references to Scripture—and especially to *all* Scripture—are overtly historical: the very pointed Reformation idea that the Old Testament has as much to tell us about our relationship with God as the New, and so, we cannot ignore it. And in the string of verbs ending in "inwardly digest," we hear another deeply Reformed precept: *All* Christians—not just those wear collars around their necks—can ... and *should* ... seek to interpret and internalize the lessons found in the Bible.

But what of this curious idea of praying that we may "embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life"? Why would we need to pray about this? Isn't eternal life the very essence of Christian faith? the 'big pay-off' ... if I may put it crassly ... for *being* a Christian? It is our abiding hope and most earnest desire. What help do we need to hang on to it?

In the spirit of our collect's lifting up of *all* Scripture, I'd like us to explore how *each* of today's lessons may lead us to a deeper understanding of the role "the blessed hope of everlasting life" is to play in our lives, for I think they all build upon each other, like the layers of a cake.

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We hear very little from the minor prophet Zephaniah in our three-year lectionary cycle, but, oh my! What we *do* hear is quite a doozy! Today's lesson opens with the confounding image of God consecrating the guests at God's banquet as some sort of sacrifice to be eaten ... and closes with unrelenting, graphic images of God's unleashing God's wrath upon this world, sparing no one. This kind of fire-and-brimstone, blood-and-guts content from the Old Testament puts off many polite Episcopalians, but we miss its message if we take its depiction of the future literally. The Old Testament prophets do not so much foretell an inevitable future that God has already determined ... as they sound a dire, strenuous warning that God's people have gone seriously astray ... and God wants them to return.

Perhaps in parallel with our own culture's relationship with wealth or self-reliance or individual liberty, an unreformed Israel has grown so comfortable ... so slack ... in its relationship with God that it thinks God won't mind their also worshipping *other* gods. And in its self-assured complacency, Israel, as a hedge in case hope-in-God alone isn't enough, has erected walled communities and amassed treasuries of silver and gold. You must, Zephaniah practically bellows at Israel, allow *God* to be the hope of life, for no one and nothing else will sustain you.

In response to Zephaniah's imprecations, Psalm 90 reflects a people's re-established connection to God: God has been with us from generation-to-generation and will be forever. God's

timelessness is an infinity that dwarfs human life and accomplishment. But the psalmist's focus is not the repentance of Zephaniah, for the psalm then makes a reverent profession of humble partnership with Almighty and Omniscient God: "[T]each us," the psalmist prays, "to number our days so that we may apply our hearts to wisdom" ... and "prosper the work of our hands": The goal of wisdom ... of our learning God's ways and embracing God's greatest desires for us ... is not our own perfection ... a personal holiness that risks becoming holier-than-thou-**ness** ... but of doing and creating and repairing *with* and *for* God; of being God's hands in this world. Although we *learn* the ways of God in the temple [*gesture*], our true calling is to *perform* them at the dinner table, in the office and at the IGA.

Now, if making the world more **God-wise** sounds daunting ... and it is: being counter-cultural is never easy! ... do not fear, St Paul assures the Thessalonians. The advent the Thessalonians are awaiting is Christ's *personal* re-appearance on earth, but we, too, participate in the fuller and fuller advent of the Savior in this world: by doing His will and working His ways. Whatever darkness confronts us cannot harm us, for we are people of the Light. We do not need to gin up for ourselves sources of false peace and security ... because we live ... already and forever ... in Christ. And God has fully equipped us for the work of turning a self-obsessed world toward the true and single source of its salvation: We have a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet of the hope of salvation—the Greek word for "hope" connoting not a wish or desire, but an expectation ... assured belief. As Christ's own, we wear a helmet of immortality that counteracts any harm or danger we may encounter as we perform the wise ways of God.

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From the people's dereliction of God in Zephaniah ... to applying ourselves to the wisdom of God in Psalm 90 ... to the armor of faith, hope and love that God lovingly provides us: How does this canvass of Scripture assist us as we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Jesus' parable of the talents? It helps us see that Jesus' warning is about complacency ... about taking our relationship with God for granted, lest we, like the Israelites of Zephaniah's time, come to think we're excused from doing the advent-work of God.

The parable is relatively straightforward: The master entrusts each of three slaves with an enormous sum of money, to prosper the master's business while he is away. The first two slaves invest the money wisely—perhaps even take great risks with it, given the 100% ROI they achieve—and are richly rewarded ... are invited to the master's banquet table. The third slave, on the other hand, plays only defense ... for by merely protecting the master's money from theft by burying it, he squanders its constructive force. And when, with a long explanation, the third slave simply hands back exactly what his master had given him, the master says bluntly that he has utterly failed in what was entrusted to him.

Now, what, exactly, is the *cause* of the third slave's failure? It isn't greed or dishonesty or even incompetence. And it isn't fear. Although he claims to be afraid, the master doesn't buy this. No, the third slave's sins is a lack of diligence ... a failure to bring his personal gifts to the mission the master gives him; a failure to increase the master's reach in this world, because he withholds the very gifts and skills that caused the master to select the slave for this work in the first place.

The third slave mistakes his role: More like a safe deposit box than a mutual fund, he regards himself as a mere preserver of the master's *status quo*, rather than a multiplier of master's realm. The third slave takes off the helmet of hope—the hope of an infinitely-expanding future—

and replaces it with the green eyeshade of calculation—the math of an ultimately inert present. The master's objective is not to preserve, but to grow. He seeks not a defensive hedge against loss, but proactive, risk-taking ... through the deployment of the talent we all are given ... that will bear still more fruit.

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Just maintaining the *status quo*, whether our own or the world's ... not risking anything in faith, lest we get knocked around a bit ... is not applying our hearts to wisdom: to the co-creating, mutually engaging life God calls us to. We are not mere recipients of God's love whose only aim is to preserve it. We are to learn, in Scripture and elsewhere, the wise ways God ... and then act God-wisely. We are to see our hands' creative capabilities... and let God prosper their work to God's purposes. We are to know how securely God has strapped the helmet of hope upon our heads ... and then, with Christ, confront the dark places of this world, in full confidence that whatever risks we may take, God will only ... and copiously ... eternally, even ... reward us.

Thus, this *is* our peri-Advent prayer: to *actively embrace* the hope of eternal life ... to take from its assurance not just solace, but strength (BCP 372). To combine the boundlessness with which God has blessed us ... with the myriad other gifts and talents God has showered upon us—material wherewithal ... particular skills ... a passion for justice, for service or for caring ... a warm heart or comforting hug—and *risk* them: invest them back into the kingdom of God, so that it may grow and bear still more fruit. For this is to truly honor the trust ... the talents ... Our Master has reposed in *us*.



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