

## "Dressing For Success!"

1 Thessalonians 5:1-18  
1 Corinthians 13:13

Romans 4:18-25

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St. James UCC

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Today is the beginning of Advent. Or as our society would say it, there are only 26 more shopping days until Christmas - a thought that I suspect leaves most of us feeling woefully unprepared, unready, feeling like things are moving too quickly.

We start to think of all the things that we have to do to get ready, and the list is a long one. We moan and we groan. We rush around to get everything done, and we look forward to the day when the holidays are finally over - a time when we can relax and our lives can get back to normal. In some ways Christmas has become a holiday to be endured instead of enjoyed, for our lives are already so busy that deep down what we really want is some time to relax, not an additional set of activities and things to be done.

More and more we approach Christmas as a secular holiday instead of a religious celebration. There is the obvious emphasis on shopping and purchases. For retailers this is the make or break season, and so they started pushing Christmas back in October. The key shopping season is now in full force, which is something far different than focusing on what Christmas is really all about.

But even more striking than what the merchants do is what we do. Our focus this time of year is on the decorations, the shopping, the parties, the things that we have to get done. We are busy, but when we list all of the things that we have to do, very few of them have to do with celebrating the birth of Christ, and even fewer have to do with preparing ourselves emotionally and spiritually to really celebrate that birth. We are so busy with all of the preparations and the parties, that we lose sight of what it is that we are celebrating.

That is exactly why the church calendar includes this season called Advent. It was never intended as a warning for last minute shoppers or a signal to let the parties begin. Rather, Advent was established as a time of preparation, a time for us to prepare ourselves to really celebrate the birth of the Christchild.

These next few Sundays that will be the focus of our worship services, but by themselves that won't be enough. To really prepare yourself to celebrate Christ's birth, you will need to take time, time to reflect on the themes of Advent - hope, peace, love, and joy; time to prepare yourself by focusing on what this season of the year is really all about; time to step out of the commercialism and the hecticness; time to step into the faithfulness that we are called to reflect in our lives, and in our way of living.

We begin that process with some words that are familiar. We begin by talking about how we can be "Dressing for Success" this Advent Season. Now you have probably heard those words in a far different context where people are advised to wear clothes

that create a particular image, clothes that will help them to make the right first impression, an impression that will help to land a job or a sale, or to reach some other goal that they have set. We hear about power ties and power suits, how important first impressions are, and how the right clothing can be a key to success.

But this morning we're using "Dressing for Success" in a different way, with far deeper implications. For this morning we aren't talking about what we wear outside on our bodies, we're talking about what we wear inside, in our hearts and our souls. We aren't talking about selling ourselves to others by making the right impression. We're talking about life itself. We're talking about how we live this gift that God has given to us. We're talking about success in the only way that really counts - our relationship with God. You see, our celebration of Christmas this year will be a success if we deepen our relationship with God. Having fine parties, buying lots of gifts, and fancy Christmas decorations have nothing to do with a successful Christmas, except to the extent that they help us to deepen our relationship with God. And to be honest about it, most of the parties and the gift buying and decorations lost their focus on Christ's birth and our relationship with God long ago.

So what is it that Paul would tell us to wear if we would "dress for success" this Advent season. Paul says the same thing in several ways. He says, "We must wear faith and love as a breastplate, and our hope of salvation as a helmet." He says, "Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love." In our text from Romans Paul talks about Abraham as someone who believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping. It was this faith that saved him, for when he was 100 years old God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, that his descendants would be as the stars in the sky, and yet at the age of 100 Abraham still had no children, no way for this promise to be carried out.

As Paul writes, "He was then almost one hundred years old; but his faith did not weaken when he thought of his body which was already practically dead, or of the fact that Sarah could not have children. His faith did not leave him, and he did not doubt God's promise; his faith filled him with power, and he gave praise to God. He was absolutely sure that God would be able to do what he had promised. That is why Abraham, through faith, 'was accepted as righteous by God.'"

And the impossible happened. Sarah become pregnant at the age of 100. She gave birth, and God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled. He became not only the physical ancestor of a new nation, but also the spiritual ancestor, for his faith stood as an example for future generations. He modeled the kind of relationship with God that we too are called to have. Abraham didn't know about celebrating Christmas, because he lived thousands of years before Christ, but Abraham knew how to "dress for success", because even in the most difficult of times, he had learned that the most important thing to wear was his faith. It was that faith that kept alive his hope in God's promise, even when the world around him said, this is hopeless.

This Advent Season we are reminded that God has offered us the gift of faith, and in that faith there is hope, even when things seem to be at their darkest. Reinhold Niebuhr put life in perspective when he wrote, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope." I suspect that for most of us our first impulse is to argue his thesis, to argue that there are things worth doing that we can achieve in far less than a lifetime. We want there to be important things that we can accomplish on our own, without depending on people around us, or on future generations.

Yet Niebuhr is correct in that our lives and our society are built upon the foundations that were laid by previous generations. The international space station was not built because one day, out of the blue, someone came up with the idea, rather it was built on the foundation of all the work that had gone before. It was built on the work of the space program, but also of people such as the Wright Brothers who made the first airplane, and others who made engines and metals and many other components for the first time.

That's true not only of physical inventions, but also of the ways that we relate to each other. Our relationships with other countries are built on a long history, and even our patterns of social relationships have been built on patterns that have been built over many years and several generations. Our culture was not invented yesterday.

When we talk about the really important things, that make a difference in the life of the world - they don't happen overnight or by the efforts of just one person. Now that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to do worthwhile things or to make a difference, for we should. Rather it means that we need the perspective of knowing that our efforts are building upon the foundation that others have laid, just as others will build on the foundations that we help to lay. We need to live in a spirit of hope, hope that the seeds we have planted will grow and prosper.

What does that say to us about Christmas and about "dressing for success"? It says that during this Advent Season one of God's gifts which we need to receive is the gift of hope. We need to find that hope in our own lives, hope that comes from the knowledge that God is with us and even when things seem at their darkest, the light of God's love is shining in our lives. But even finding that wonderful gift isn't enough, for then we need to be bearers of that light, bringing the light of hope into the lives of others as we seek to live and to love faithfully.

If we can do those things, if we can find the hope that comes from the knowledge of God's presence with us, and if we can share that hope with others, then this will be a wonderful Advent Season indeed, for we will have truly prepared ourselves to experience Christ's birth in the most special of ways.

This year may Advent be a time for us to prepare to experience Christ's birth in that special way. Let us take, let us really stop and take time to focus on receiving the gift of hope that God would offer to each of us.

Amen.