Sunday, December 11, 1988
THE GIFT OF THE FUTURE — HOPE (No. 2 in a Series: Gifts We Need to Give)
Romans 5:1-5; Luke 1:39-56

"The future's not what it used to be!" goes a country music song. To give the gift of the future is to give the gift of hope. Last Sunday, I spoke to you about giving the gift of the past this Christmas, which is the gift of faith.

Why a sermon on giving the gift of hope, or the gift of the future? Because there is a pervasive agnosticism and even a deep pessimism toward the future in modern culture. There are those who argue that a certain number of people in every age have always had a fear about the future, and no doubt that's true. But in our time, there is a fear about the future that is much deeper than in previous times. Survey after survey shows that most young people today do not have much hope for the future.

This fear has a number of roots. A few examples: I hope many of you read the "Open Letter To The New President — For the Sake of Our Children's Future," by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan in the November 27 issue of Parade magazine.

The writers remind the new President, George Bush, and us that "for too long we have been obsessed with something called national security, but military threats are not the only perils we face." They go on to mention some of the other dangers facing our planet that are unprecedented and to which not enough people, including many of our leaders, are paying attention.

The environment: "We have been treating the environment as if there were no tomorrow — as if there will be no new generations to be sustained by the bounties of the earth." We are not concerned enough about the long-term implications of what we do.

The economy: All of us are aware of our mounting national budget deficit and our negative trade balance. We are passing on enormous debts to those who will follow us. In addition, long-term planning in American industry is at a dangerously low point because of the emphasis on short-term profits and the fear of corporate takeovers. All too frequently, large bonuses and "golden parachutes" are given to top management in ailing corporations while dismissed employees are given uplifting lectures about the risks inherent in the free-enterprise system.

Many children, as well as adults, have no home to sleep in, and many more children go to bed hungry each night. The United States is now 20th in the world in infant mortality — 19 other countries have a stronger commitment to saving the lives of their babies than we do.

But all of this is pale in comparison to the despair that many feel because of the ever-present possibility of nuclear destruction. Albert Camus has written that "the 17th century was the century of mathematics, the 18th century that of the physical sciences, and the 19th that of biology. Our 20th century is the century of fear."

Now it is not my purpose this morning to add to our fear and despair. Rather, it is my purpose through our Christian faith to give you the gift of hope, which is the gift of the future so that we can deal creatively with our despair, and so that you can give the gift of hope to others. But hope cannot come to us unless we first face our despair, rather than attempting to cover it up. We have to tell the truth to each other, and we need leaders who will tell us the truth.

Someone has written that of all the dangers facing us — nuclear holocaust, environmental destruction, economic collapse, human oppression — the greatest danger lies in our denial of them. This denial, evident in our dogged addiction to life as usual, stems not from indifference but from dread. The more we repress this dread, the more it cripples our capacity to respond, and the more it blocks hope.

What are some specific things we can do in order to give the gift of hope this Advent and Christmas season?

First of all, as I have already indicated, we need to tell the truth to each other. In other words, we need to truthfully and honestly face the problems of the present; otherwise, there will be no future to give.

Secondly, we need to recognize and practice our connectedness. Our Christian faith underscores the fact that deep down we are connected with each other and with every facet of creation. Everything in God's creation is interconnected, and all is related to God.

Thus all of our hurts, our fears, our dreads are held in community. When one person suffers, all suffer together.

When we begin to talk with one another, and tell the truth to one another, and care for one another, we act out this connection in a positive way, and then hope begins to grow. Hope is not singular, but grows out of our relationships with one another and with God. So when we begin openly and honestly talking about our fears and our despair with one another, we create the conditions under which hope can grow.

Thirdly, if we are to give the gift of hope to those around us, and to be able to receive the gift of hope, we need to remember that hope has nothing whatsoever to do with optimism.
In fact, the person who said, "I used to be an incurable optimist, but now I'm cured," —that individual is ready for hope. For hope is what's still there when all our worst fears have been realized and faced.

That's what the Apostle Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans. He begins by contradicting our prevalent impression that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. Too often, our hopefulness is like a thermometer — if the circumstances of our life are hopeful, so we are hopeful; if things look bad, so we lose our hope. But for the Apostle Paul, at the very point where things look bad is where he begins the road to hope.

Listen again to part of what he wrote: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given us."

Paul begins with suffering or trouble; from that, we learn endurance; out of that, we build character; and from that, we win hope.

All of us know that we do not learn endurance from facing easy situations, but in adversity. And if we have the endurance to pull through adverse conditions, we build character and become the kind of people who confront even desperate situations with hope. Thus, our Christian faith does not define hope as a mood, caught from the favorable aspect of external affairs, but as a quality of character that becomes a part of us and sustains us when we most need it.

Perhaps there is not much hope today among many people because of a misunderstanding of the nature of hope and its source. Popular moods in our country change like a weather vane, veering with every change in the wind — now over-optimistic, now over-gloomy as far as the future is concerned. “We’re headed for a recession.” “There’s an economic recovery on the way.” Almost daily, people listen to the news and then decide whether to be hopeful or not.

The daily stock market averages show the mood changes dramatically. Any upset or even rumor of an upset in the political scene or a prediction of bad news can cause the market to plunge suddenly or rise suddenly. Christian hope is a much longer-term outlook. It is a long-term perspective on life in God’s creation. Hope does not go up and down in relation to short-term outward circumstances.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah showed the people of Israel what hope is all about. The enemy was at the gate of Jerusalem. The city was about to fall. The people were hungry and sick. Jeremiah himself was in jail. Yet under these conditions, Jeremiah bought a field as a sign of his confidence that this people, this world, had a future under God. Jeremiah took some action. He lived out his hope. Every significant thing that ever has been done on this earth was once a hope, and it was a hope that inspired action.

We can fill our time with despair about the future or with superficial optimism, but neither of these is enough. Despair by itself can ruin us, and superficial optimism collapses. I worry about people who retreat into themselves and say nothing can be done about the problems that face us. I worry equally about those who say not to worry and refuse to deal with such issues as finding new ways to live in peace, new ways to protect the environment, new ways to deal with homelessness and hunger and infant mortality.

There is no better symbol of hope, of giving the gift of the future and of our connectedness, than that of a bridge. Therefore, one of my favorite poems has always been “The Bridge Builder.”

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim —
That sullen stream had no fears for him;
Then he turned, when he reached the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting strength in building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way.
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?”
The builder lifted his old gray head.
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way,
This chasm that has been naught to me

To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

All of this leads to the fourth thing we need to do if we are to give the gift of hope and that is to believe in the ultimate goodness of God.

Jeremiah could take the action of buying a field in what looked like a hopeless future because he believed above all else this is God's creation, and that being so, the future is never hopeless. The Gospel of John puts it plainly, "God so loved the world that God came to be among us in Jesus."

To believe in the ultimate goodness of God is to believe that with God there are infinite possibilities. That's what Mary the mother of Jesus believed. She expressed her deep faith in God's goodness when she was pregnant. Her statement· of faith is called "The Magnificat," because of its opening sentence, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

Mary knew that with God there are infinite possibilities, therefore the future is never hopeless. She went on to proclaim, "God scatters the proud in the imagination of their_ hearts. God puts down the mighty from their thrones, and exalts those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away."

We can give the gift of hope when we know that the glory of God 1 s purpose in the universe is not finally dependent on us. We believe that God wants people willingly to do the divine will, but we also believe even more strongly that over the long stretch of history, God's will, will be done — if not by us, then in spite of us. This is the foundation of all of our hope for the future.

I have suggested four things we need to do if we are to give the gift of the future which is hope:

1. First, seek out and tell the truth about the present problems· which face us.

2. Practice, act out, our connectedness. Face our despair, talk with each other.

3. Remember that hope is much deeper than optimism. Hope is long-term faith in the world.

4. All of this is possible because of our faith in the ultimate goodness and love of God. future.

The coming of Christ among us, which is remembered and celebrated during Advent and Christmas, reminds us that the grace and mercy present then is also here now and will be there in the future. Amen.