

*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

### **ADVENT THEME: HOPE**

I read recently that in the region of France known as Burgundy, where some of the best and most expensive wines are produced, the local authorities restrict the use of irrigation systems. And this is a recent concession too. For, in times past, the use of irrigation systems at all was strictly forbidden. Vineyards in this region, then, are completely dependent on the natural cycle of rainfall. Seeing how families who make a living at viticulture rely heavily on the yield of good quality grapes, this restriction seemed a bit obsessive. So I did a little research on my own. It turns out, this regulation on irrigation systems is actually beneficial for the vines. It's a process known as "stressing" the vine. Too much water causes the vine to grow lazy and it doesn't work as hard to cultivate deep roots. Instead, it becomes complacent putting all its energy into the more superfluous tasks like an abundance of leaves and longer shoots. But when the vine is stressed it has to fight for its survival. It can't waste energy on unnecessary tasks, but must work toward the singular task of producing grapes, which contain seeds, which in turn ensures its propagation. This is good for the grapevine. It's also good for the quality of wine. Roots are sent deeper into the ground in search of water and nutrients thus incorporating each layer of the earth into the final taste of the vintage. Now what I find fascinating about all of this is that built into God's good creation is a positive aspect of suffering. Give the grapevine everything it wants without making it work for it, pamper it, coddle it, protect it from all forms of hardships, and what you end up with is not a healthy, robust vine, but a spoiled batch of grapes which lack flavor and character. But stress the vine, add an aspect of suffering to the life cycle, and the grapevine narrows its objective to what is absolutely necessary, and pares away the excess.

What is true of how God cultivates His gardens is also true of how He cultivates us. On one level this is just common sense. Give a person everything he/she wants, pamper, coddle and protect that person

from all hardship and what you end up with is not a healthy, well-rounded individual but a spoiled rotten brat. So on a certain level deprivation and stress are good. For the stresses of this life force us to organize our priorities, concentrate on what's important and focus our energy on the things that really matter. Like the dependency on the rainfall for the grapevine, the stresses of life create inside each of us an urgency, a deep sense of dependency on God. The bigger the stress the more we find ourselves searching for answers. When health fails us, when violence threatens us, when peace eludes us, when death is upon us, these seismic shifts of life shake the very ground we stand upon, the very ground we once thought stable. Such stresses disorient us, push us off balance. And in this state of spiritual vertigo we turn outside of ourselves for help, and in so doing we stumble into the Christian concept of hope. For what is hope, but a yearning for survival, a desire for a more secure future, a promise of perpetual continuation? Hope, in its fullest sense, is a desire for permanence, a desire never to depart, never to perish, never to pass out of existence. Yes, we hope for little things- like good weather, good families, good jobs, good health, but every hope amounts to the one big hope that every person longs for: the hope for a peaceful, stable, eternal life. But this one big hope cannot be satisfied from below. Such a hope can never be fulfilled by earthly accommodations. It is like a hunger that can't be satisfied, like a thirst that can never be slaked. And we will go on hungering and thirsting to death if we don't find the true source of nourishment.

Therefore, God "stresses us". This is the positive aspect of suffering God imparts upon us. Not as a punishment, but as a grace. God stresses us out of love. This is God's version of tough love. These everyday-stresses cause us to send our own roots deeper in search of real nourishment. In response to the stress, our souls go in search for lasting nourishment. This quest takes us away from the perishable things of life that rust and decay and revert back to dust and ash. Such things lack the permanence we search for so we must look elsewhere for our vitality and means of existence. And we find what we are looking for hidden deep within the soil of God's Word. We take hold of God's teaching. We draw sustenance from God's

revelation. We derive life from God's life. Our search is not in vain for what we searched for had been there all along. Had God shown Himself to us at the beginning it would have all been too easy. We would have rejected it for He would have given us the answer before we ever knew we had a question. We needed the stress so that we might confess the bankruptcy of our own thought, and really mean it. The quest shaped us. It created needed contours in our character. And so as we look back over our lives we see how God used every stressful moment to draw us deeper into Him. The past give hope for the future. Our history convinces of the truth of God's abiding presence. We see Him at work in everything. Never abandoning us, but standing with us in life's darkest moments. And with this certainty, we dare to hope. We hope for a future in which God will be fully revealed, in which our lives will be fully incorporated into His life, and our existence will be permanent as we enjoy the fruits of the resurrection and the life of the world to come. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Mills