

How long does it take to crochet, or knit, or even sew a baby blanket? For me, it would take months, if not well over a year, as I'd have to learn to crochet, and in the midst of getting going on it, I'm sure I'd have to unravel it a dozen times because I'd missed a step, or I'd done a part of it too tight so it's wonky. So I don't quite have a grasp on the gravity of such a gift, but when we were gifted more than a handful of homemade, hand-crafted blankets, I was astounded at the time and energy and love that were handed to us for our little one. One lady at church, who made one of those ragged-tied-edges blankets told us that as she was putting it together, she was praying for us and for our then-unborn child. All of these lovely sisters in Christ literally gave a piece of themselves to care for Herschel and us.

But as I was thinking about it, even those who gave a store-bought toy, or even hand-me-down clothes or toys, or even those who gave cash or simply a card, they too gave us a part of themselves. They gave of their time, their hard-earned money buying what they thought would be blessing to us as a new family. Each of them, in making the effort to demonstrate their care, they were giving us not just something, but to some extent, themselves.

Paul writes, in our text from Romans, "for, whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Which is all well and good, but then he continues "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Jesus Christ."

Hope is what we need, for without it we will forsake our faith, we will enter into despair in our days, and we would cease to have reason to live each day, quite honestly. And to receive and share and maintain hope, he commends endurance through all trials and encouragement through the Scriptures that are written, that in fact spell out our hope for us. But, God be praised, Paul doesn't leave these as tasks we must master, as if we can muster up enough endurance to persevere through temptation and trial, or as if

we have enough wisdom to interpret the Scriptures to sustain our hope. No, rather than leaving the ball in our court, Paul assures us that God gives what we need, or more so, God gives us Himself—He is the God of endurance and encouragement—He is the One who perseveres; He is the promise.

And that we may have this God who gives Himself to us, He sent Christ.

This Christ is the One whom John was preparing the way for in the wilderness of Judea, in the wilderness of a sinful and corrupt world. John, the last of the Old Testament prophets falling at the beginning of the Gospels, he preaches to God's people calling them to turn from their ways. They have not been faithful in their living; they have not been faithful even in their hoping. Rather than bearing fruit of righteousness, as their ancestors had been called to produce and to teach to the next generations, they lived mixed lives (sound familiar?), lives of love and selfishness, lives of trusting in God and trusting in self, lives of hope and of apathy or despair. As John called to the general masses, he was calling to God's people, most of whom would have heard the word, and been, at least, as we know it today, believers in name, and he was stirring up the urgency to turn from their lukewarm ways and believe once again.

And John is a more convicting preacher than most. The masses flocked to the Jordan to repent. The one in the wilderness was evening out the playing field as the pride, the self-righteousness of the people is dashed and they all stand in one lowly level before God, pleading for mercy and forgiveness as the kingdom of God approaches.

And this is the fruit of repentance. It is quick and easy to think that the fruits of repentance John called for is the opposite of all their sins. If you were a cheat, be honest in your dealings; if you were impatient, learn to slow down and have grace for those that force you to wait; if you were unloving towards your parents, go out of your way to honour and appreciate them; where you sin, do righteousness instead.

But such repentance works for only so long. It either turns you into one among the brood of vipers, as you become confident in your own works and ways, and you

don't think there's any need to repent any more, or you despair because you assess your energy and ability honestly and see no way to keep up the façade of good works. If this is what God requires, just throw in the towel.

But John, in calling them to repentance, is not simply giving them a fresh start, a do-over so they can get it right after they've been dunked. No, he is proclaiming a reason to hope beyond themselves. Repent of your sins, turn away from what you bring to the table, and let go of any pretense that you are helping your cause, and trust in God.

For the One about to walk into their midst to be baptised as well is the same One from Isaiah, on Whom the Spirit of God rested, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding and counsel and might, of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. This One is the King bringing His Kingdom.

He is the One Who bears perfect fruits, the tree in fact by which all will live. And just as this descendant of Jesse will bear God's Spirit, He will also baptize with that Spirit as well. He will live and exist delighting in the fear of the Lord to do His will perfectly, and this will is, as we saw earlier, to give Himself to us for our good and for our salvation. God sent Him into our midst, giving Him to us to be baptized as we deserve to be baptized—with the raging fires of His wrath for our disobedience. Even here, as John is preparing the masses to trust in Christ instead of themselves, He is preparing them to cling to the Lamb of God who will shed His blood in their place, giving His life that they may have His life. He is preparing the way for One to come who will steal away all unfruitfulness, all pride and anger and idolatry, and in our sins' place, give to us Himself.

So repent, turn from sin, not just the sins that you do, but the sin that corrupts your entire being from the day of your conception. So turn not just from your tarnished thoughts, words, and deeds, but turn from yourself and trust in Him.

This repentance, prolonged over the days of our faith, is the endurance that we need. For our sin is always hounding us, trying to get us to forsake Christ and His promises, to abandon His gifts of righteousness and hope.

Certainly we must fight to endure against the sins that would bring harm here and now. We should push back against our greed, we should train ourselves to praise God for what He has provided rather than sit and stew in our desire to have what our neighbour has. We should make it a habit to honour our parents and to cherish our spouses. As believers, we ought to turn from our sinful ways and seek God's help in fulfilling His holy law in our day to day lives.

But as we struggle through all these sins, seemingly winning some of the battles and losing others, we must continue to tear our eyes off of ourselves and place them upon Christ and Himself gifted to us again. For every other sin would love for us to throw in the towel and jump from Christ's hands, and in every trying situation the evil one wants us to forsake the One who died for us. So that we may endure and receive His encouragement our whole life through, He comes to us not once but time and time again. As we reflect in Advent and then see Christ in the manger and on the cross. As we remember our baptism, as we hear the absolution, and as we receive His body and blood in the Supper, He gives us to Himself over and over, that we may be held fast until His last arrival in the end. So we endure by remembering that we bring nothing to the table, not on the day of our salvation, not today, not ever, and instead we have a God who has given us Himself, that even in the midst of our most rotten-fruit days, in the most dreadful suffering way may endure, Christ alone is our life and our righteousness, He is our hope today and for eternity.