

Sermon Title: "A Shift in Hope?"

Scripture: Romans 4:13-25

What is hope? Do you have a good idea in your mind of what it is? Or what it isn't? I know I have struggled with defining it for myself, and I suspect you have as well. We often think we know, but then are sometimes surprised by hope in ways that we never could imagine. Modern culture tells us it is a "maybe," a kind of unsure optimism. In this regard, we might think of the now famous words recorded in the gospels, words of a desperate father urgently appealing to Jesus to heal his epileptic child: "I believe, help my unbelief!" Or we might say, "I hope, help my un-hope!" Generally-speaking, in the Scriptures, hope is an indication of certainty. It is an assurance and confidence that all God has promised will be completed soon. Having hope means that we are "on the road" to good things, traveling toward fulfillment, or as the ancient Greeks would say, toward achieving our arete, our best possible self, our best possible community. Outsiders, both past and present, might respond that we are simply moving around without purpose, a search for meaning in Ecclesiastical texts that are designed to be without meaning, as Dr. Lisa Wolfe has suggested in her recent play, entitled "Meaningless" that debuted this month at Oklahoma City University before a sold-out audience, with acclaimed actor Rodney Brazil performing the leading role, a character who even in utterly hopeless moments of his life keeps coming back to read again the text of Ecclesiastes, still expecting to find hope where there is no hope. Others might respond that our 'beloved community,' to use the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is really a "beloved chaos," to use the words of Jamie Zumwalt, a local pastor ministering to the homeless in Valley Brook, just a few miles from here. Hope in such communities does not always appear hopeful.

The imperative and future tenses of the Greek language are exactly alike: The command "Be ye hopeful," also translates to "You shall be hopeful." To lift prayer upon prayer, hope upon hope, is to call into existence the things that do not yet exist, perhaps things that have never existed, or things we never imagined could ever exist. As the angel Gabriel affirms to Mary, "nothing will be impossible with God." Those, like Elizabeth, who have been barren will give birth. The presence of Christ gives life to the dead; it creates a people out of no-people, creates love where there has only been hate, or mercy where there has only been judgment, or forgiveness where there has only been revenge. As Paul suggests, hope is a process, not unlike childbirth, where Christ is formed in you or in me (Gal. 4:19) through the pains of childbirth. But, from where then, does the infamous phrase "hour without hope," come, the backdrop a darkening sky over Jerusalem? Does it come from our suspicion, the darkening night, that we really can never live together in peace? Our fearful selves might drive us into the wilderness or force us to take cover in segregation. Our fear might even lead us to believe the unbelievable, that the dawn will never come again, that sorrow or mourning will never end, or that peace is unattainable. I understand that in some languages, a word for "hope" does not even exist, or is not translatable. So, how do we restore hope? What are we to do with this biblical command: "Be ye hopeful!"

Perhaps, there is a parallel in the Hebrew verb “to hear,” the *shama*, connecting the action of “hearing” to the action of “obeying,” suggesting that, in the ancient language, there is no difference between hearing and obeying, that the one automatically suggests the other. If Jesus were to stand before us and issue a command “to those who have no hope, be ye hopeful!” If you are one who has no courage, be brave; if you are one who has no joy, be joyful; and so on. In fact, Jesus directly quotes a part of his mission from Second Isaiah:

“To those in bonds, Come forth! To those in darkness, Reveal yourselves!” (Isaiah 49:9)

Or as we are thinking today: “To those without hope, receive now the gift of hope!”

Like Job, we might all like to think that “Hope springs eternal!” or, as one television announcer has put it recently: “Hope is still alive.” Hope is not dead yet! Here are the words of Job:

“As there is hope for a tree, though it be cut down, its stump dying in the ground, though its roots be old, yet at the mere scent of water, it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant.” (14:7-9). Continuing with a similar thought, he writes: “But, if mortals die, will they live again? Would that I could write [my story & this hope] with an iron pen engraving it in lead on a rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives, that in my flesh I shall see God one day, after my skin is gone, and God will be on my side.” (19:23-25).

This is what “incarnation” means to Job, an embodiment of grace; this is the way Job might translate the word: “Emmanuel,” an enfleshing of divine hope.

Or like Jeremiah sitting in his grotto, just outside the Damascus Gate, after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar’s army, lamenting the fall of his home, his people, his nation, perhaps rocking back and forth in heavy sadness. The original title of Lamentations is “*Ekhah*” which means “How!?” How could the Lord forsake us? How? How? How? But then, in the middle of this intense wailing and crying and grieving, comes forth this most beautiful, carefully crafted, statement of hope.

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.”

And so, what, then, is this “Hope against Hope” of which our scripture speaks? Of Father Abraham, Paul writes, “In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations.” Literally, “in hope stacked upon hope,” or as heights above heights are seen in the distance from the valley, Abraham demonstrated his belief in God. In this use of this phrase, “hope against hope” or “hope upon hope”, Paul is reflecting the language of Genesis 15:5 and

17:6, where God promises Abraham that his descendants will number as the stars he can count in the night sky, if indeed, Abraham can number them. And where, in Gen 17:6, the Hebrew word “Me’ad” is used twice in succession to mean that God will make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (literally, abundant in abundance or exceedingly exceeding). Paul uses the same pattern in Greek to show the infinite nature of Abraham’s hope as it mounts up over time. “Count the many stars, count the many blessings!” Listing them one by one may well be an infinite task when all is finally considered. At some point during the counting process, critical mass is achieved and our attitude gradually shifts from pessimism to optimism, one by one, it adds to our spirit the grace we need to affirm life is good. Perhaps, this is also the message behind the message at the beginning of the Gospel of John, where the words: “grace upon grace,” are used to express the infinity of grace.

One of the questions some of you posed, during your sessions with the New Beginnings Project, was the question: “Where is hope?” Where can hope be found? How do we begin to grope around us for the hope that sustains us? How do we find hope in all the “re-defining,” amidst all the virtual re-modeling we are called to do. Western Oaks Christian Church has plans for the future, but we still need to sound them out, hear them spoken, **read** them on the written page, ... to understand them better, to make them real, to envision or en flesh where they might lead us.

And hope can be found in the shifting motions of re-creation. At some point, each of us will need to make a shift from ally to accomplice, crossing the line of commitment, to ourselves and others. If we engage in the leadership model of appreciative inquiry, we will not start with what is wrong, but start with what is right. Change will begin, or has begun, when we ask the first question; curiosity becomes a good habit **as** we ask together what is possible and live into the future. Step by step we will shift our hope into a new form of being together. And no one will be left behind or alone. No one need be afraid. We will have each other’s back and we will search for hope together!

As my 1970s Church History Professor, Dr. George Smith, once wrote: “God calls us relentlessly out of the comfortable present into the uncertain future.” We have a promise, not a blueprint, for how the future should be, one full of “faith, hope and lots of surprises,” from a God whose very nature is to create continually and make all things new. An essential part of God’s Spirit is always out in front of us, as well as behind us, under us, and above us. Born in the image of God, we are co-creators of our future with God.

Augustine, a theologian in the early church, records an interesting definition of “belief.” He writes: “To believe is to think with assent!” It is to think with the divine “yes,” rather than the distant “no.” This is the nature of knowing, the nature of becoming fully convinced or fully persuaded, that the Divine will bring forth in full measure what has been promised, what can only partially be seen in the “not-yet,” but face-to-face in the full.

1 John 1:1 “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard and what we

have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ...

This hope that we declare to you is an invitation “to visit the gospel with our eyes,” and to “handle it and touch it,” to man-handle it, to woman-handle it, to verify its power and authenticity, to let it flow into and over us fully. To prove it to ourselves fully, like Thomas, the Twin, wanting to put his fingers into the nail holes of the Master’s hand to prove to himself the substance of hope. Or like the inspiring hope of “Rhoda” (Acts 12) as she slowly made her way to the door in faith that the one knocking was Peter, albeit so impossible, so incredible, that others would not volunteer to answer the door, out of fear. The courage of Rhoda was instilled by the belief that the impossible is possible, that barren women would give birth, that hope is just around the corner knocking at the door.

I leave you this morning with a recent song, published in 1996, that the All-Assembly choir performed at our General Assembly in Louisville this past Summer. Like the over 3,000 members of our denomination who heard it, I hope and trust that you will find it meaningful as you journey ahead: