

Hope

Romans 8:18-25

August 28, 2022

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Today is the second sermon in a series on faith, hope, and love. Today is for hope. Let's hear one of the great passages about hope from the letter to the Romans:

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.... ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For by hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Hope is one way of orienting life toward the future. Hope looks forward toward what is yet to be.

Hope looks forward, but not as a prognosticator would. Hope is not knowledge about the future or a wager based on good odds. In fact, hope appears inversely related to the odds—that is, as the odds of something happening get longer, hope often gets stronger.

Hope is yearning. Hope is longing. Hope is less like a wish, more like a bodily hunger that aches toward the future.

And for what do we hope? We hope that what we know to be *good*, what we know to be precious and sweet and lovely... we hope that goodness will be.

You hope for goodness to come. Maybe your hope is for future you... But we don't reserve hope for ourselves. Hope is often unselfish. We hope for goodness to come to others... to people who will be here when we are gone... we hope on behalf of our children, our children's children, even by strangers whom we will never know. Hope can be a profound social bond.

As meaningful as hope is, it may not be something you draw upon every day—at least not in obvious ways. I don't hope there will coffee in the morning. I know it will be in the can. I didn't hope I will have a job this morning—it seemed likely. I don't hope I will have a family who cares about me. I don't hope the car will start or hope the roof won't cave in. I don't hope I'll have a place to sleep when the day is done—although some here may.

In the course of day to day life, hope doesn't matter ... *until nothing matters more*. Hope matter when what you love and need is threatened. Hope enters your life when the menacing world encroaches on you. When your child or your beloved is diagnosed with illness. When you're tracking every last dollar in your bank account. Hope doesn't matter until what you need and

what you love become precarious, and a future without your love becomes a real possibility. When people with power intend to harm you, you need hope. When the conditions for life on this planet deteriorate and people in power don't care, you need hope.

It is not until you face the absence of what you love that you know the role of hope in life.

It's not a guarantee that any one of us will look toward the future and have hope. Plenty of people have dealt with future uncertainty without hope.

Some have even said we'd be better off without hope. 2000 years ago, Greek Cynic philosophers said that nothing should be expected from life. The only way to be free is to get rid of every desire, every comfort, every expectation, and every hope. Only then can you accept life for what it is. Cynicism has not gone away.

Renouncing hope is not ancient philosophy. Nietzsche called hope "the worst of all evils" because it prolongs our torment, it prevents us from accepting the truth. Some Buddhist teachers, too, discourage hope because hope is an emotional attachment to the future. One of our most clear-eyed writers on race in America, Ta Nehesi Coates, says the struggle for black life in America leaves no legitimate place for hope. He says:

The god of history is an atheist, and nothing about this world is meant to be. You must wake up every morning knowing that no promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.¹

Many of us have taken hope as a given, and found solace in the idea that "the moral arc of the universe is long and it bends toward righteousness." There must be a God, Divine Force moving us all toward a better future. But the best critics of hope have warned us that misplaced hope can demoralize us; hope can be a pacifier that lulls us into believing that the future we long for is held in hands other than your own.

And yet...

In the story that we share in this place, the story that is in these stones and this wood, the story that is in your bones—the story of God and human beings, our story, there are, scattered throughout the text, moments in which hope is warranted. Moments when hoping against the odds proved a good bet. In the Hebrew Bible, hope is grounded in the Exodus. In that story, the people of God—we—are slaves under the most powerful king in the world. There was no realistic hope of a life beyond brick-making, seeing your children killed, and suffering until you, too, were dead. It is then that God meets Moses in a blazing fire and sets in motion the sequence of events that brings frogs and locusts, and hardens the pharaoh's heart, and smears blood on the doorposts so death will pass over, and leads the people in a desperate race across the desert through a divided sea, ending only when God's people stood on the far shore,

¹ Ta-Nehesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 70-71.

dancing in their newfound freedom. God had done it. There was—there would always be—reason for hope.

Hope was tested again in the Exile, when the Temple was destroyed and God's people were scattered and humiliated, taken prisoner. For three generations, we sat by the water of Babylon and wept. Until, Isaiah said,

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Hope, our story says—hope in God—is warranted. And then there's Paul, who speaks in Romans about the hope of the whole creation, everything in creation can, should, must put its hope in God. Even when the Empire holds creation in its grip, we still hope in the future. For we remember that the light of the world was extinguished on Good Friday, and yet on Easter morning the stone was rolled back and the tomb was empty and a mysterious, yet familiar figure greeted sister Mary and said “my peace is now yours.” We follow the resurrected One and we are implicated in a story that says God's love stops at nothing to bring us a future with hope.

The future into which you lean, for which you hunger and yearn, the future for which you hope is the one that Jesus shows you: the last shall be the first, the poor shall be blessed, the captives shall be released and the debts forgiven, and all God's children shall be gathered around a table, eating and drinking and laughing at how foolish people said we sounded when we hoped for just such a banquet feast.

I don't know whether, on a day-to-day basis, you find yourself drawing much on hope. As you can probably tell, I have deep respect for people who have said “no” to hope.

But I have said “yes.” Mostly because I trust what Martin Luther—not King—the old school Luther said about hope. “Hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for.” Hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for. That is true.

So hope that every person will have their own home. Hope that every one of us will have good food to eat. Hope that you can be reconciled with the person whom you're struggling to understand and relate to right now. Hope that we can be patient and kind. Hope that truth will prevail over lies. Hope that your children will have all they need to thrive and my children, too. Hope that you or your loved one will find a way to persevere through depression. Hope that

you and I will live gently on the earth. Hope that people will put down their weapons and solve problems with our words. Hope that beauty will bloom around you. Hope in a way out of no way. Hope in resurrection.

Hope in God, we know, is warranted.

Hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for. Or maybe you like the way Paul puts it in Romans: "by hope we are saved."