

July 9, 2017

"Hope"*

Jeremiah 29:11

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(* with a special 'bonus' prayer exercise!)

'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'

The strength with which one handles adversity and copes with losses is born out of a nurtured faith. It does not come to those who look for it only when they need it. It does not come to those who disregard the disciplines that open our lives to the kind of faith God wants us all to have. None of us can pull faith out of a vacuum. Faith and hope must come from somewhere. They must be planted, nurtured, tried, tested and given a chance to grow. There is a real sense in which we find hope in the midst of adversity because we trust that God will see us through it all.

Today's sermon is about hope. "Where there's life, there's hope", the saying goes, yet sometimes life itself can seem hopeless.

The Bible is a witness; against all odds and obstacles, to life over against death, to hope over against all hopelessness. For all the difficulties in reading the Bible, the destruction and death, the unpronounceable names and obscure plot twists, the underlying, undeniable truth about this holy collection of readings is that they are rooted in the creative, loving, hope-filled presence of the Creator of all things, the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not yet exist. In God hopelessness meets its match.

I am not sure what motivated someone to choose this particular passage of scripture from Jeremiah and the matching New Testament passage from Romans for our Sizzlin' Summer Sermon Series, but they are well chosen, indeed.

It's not hard to find reasons for hopelessness, if you want to be looking for them, for this or any other era.

On a macro level, surging suicide rates, the opioid epidemic, our government at an impasse over healthcare changes, or not - climate change, the threat of nuclear capabilities from North Korea and more - all quickly add up to reasons for uncertainty or even despair.

On a micro, individual level there can be lots of reasons to see life as at least half empty rather than halfway full. When a death is sudden and unexpected, when a dream expires, when life savings are depleted, when there is no further treatment for an illness, words can strike like the blows of an axe; “it’s unrecoverable, it’s inoperable, it’s hopeless.” Words can seize you and stop you in your tracks.

In the fourth chapter of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, he retells the story of Abraham and Sarah, whose situation was hopeless from any human point of view. God had promised Abraham that he would have an heir, and through this child Abraham’s descendants would be a blessing to all of humanity. Yet decades passed and nothing happened.

Abraham was 100 years old, his wife Sarah nearly the same and she had never been able to bear a child her entire life. There is no heir. It is a hopeless situation. Yet, seen through the Apostle Paul’s eyes, and later attested to by Abraham and Sarah alike, “Abraham believed in hope against hope.” People still use that phrase today- ‘hoping against hope.’

It’s an interesting phrase, as if the only key to unlocking the hope-filled mysteries of God is through the same gift of hope freely given us; like a bird on a wing, “Hope” is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all” – (Emily Dickinson)

In an entry in his famous collection of definitions, titled “Wishful Thinking”, the author Frederick Buechner wrote this, in reference to the word ‘hope’. “Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept.

Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking.

Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on.

Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.”

There is a ‘already but not yet’ quality about hope, intangible but real, present but ineffable, persistent, stubborn.

It is common to say that Abraham’s *faith* is what kept him going, but actually, that isn’t quite right. In ‘church language’ we often say that people are saved by faith, or saved by prayer, but faith and prayer are not anchored in anything without the power of God who gives them. So it’s not Abraham’s *faith* that counts, but Abraham’s God. And this is our God, too.... of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Abraham’s God, our God is the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” This is generally not how we speak of God, is it? We speak of God- or think about God, as just, loving, forgiving, merciful, inclusive, embracing, but that doesn’t convey the unique, generative power of a Creator who can call things into being when they do not even yet exist.

I have been by the side of those who have taken their last breath in this life. There is all the difference in the world between a breath and no breath.

We take it all so for granted, unthinking, natural, instinctive, automatic. Yes.

When there is suddenly no breath, you become aware that there is no life anymore. Not life that we can see, anyway. You can say ‘no!’, or ‘don’t go!’, or ‘come back’ all you want, but it’s hopeless. There is nothing anyone can do. Life has simply vanished beyond what we recognize as living.

Into this void, apostles and prophets share their words of hope against human hope, hope in the “God who raises the dead and calls into being things that have no being.”

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God in a similar way. Jeremiah lived a life that was hopeless by any human standard, the devastation he experienced could be paralleled by those who have lived through the bombings and destruction of the city of Aleppo, Syria, in that nation’s continuing civil war. Jeremiah’s entire existence was given over to his call to warn the people of Judah to repent of their ways and return to God before it was too late. But- and this is the terrible part- he knew they wouldn’t do it.

He knew that his words would not be taken to heart. He knew that the Babylonian invasion was going to happen and sweep everything away. He knew it was hopeless, that the enemy would roll in and destruction would come.

The well-known Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says this crisis – the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple– is the dominant, shaping event of the Hebrew people. Jeremiah lived before, during and after the worst catastrophe in the entire history of God’s people: the holy city is reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar and the people barely survive a forced march into exile, sure that God abandoned them forever.

So this chosen verse for today comes at a time and in a context of extreme hopelessness. “...surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

The key that unlocks the hope beyond hope is the knowledge of God, of the One who was already there before we ever began searching, before human imagination existed– the One who is, and who was, and who is to come. (Rev. 1:8)

The faith of Jeremiah, like the faith of Abraham, was not conjured up in human consciousness, but was called into being by the Word of the Lord. God said to Jeremiah: “Call to me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and hidden things which you have not known...” (Jer.33.3)

As we seek to grasp this hope which is beyond hope, what we learn in the doing is that we begin to loosen our grip on our own hopes. Part of the journey with God is to continually know and acknowledge one’s place, as a seeker and as a child of God; to remember that God loves us not because we are good, but because God is good; that, in the words of the Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr: “*God is always the initiator, always good, always ready to give, and the giving is always free.*”

And in the words of another noted religious authority, John Calvin: “Though the Scripture teaches that the kingdom of God is full of light, joy, felicity and glory, nevertheless everything that is said about it is far above our intelligence and wrapped in imagery until the

day shall come when the Savior will explain himself to us face to face.“ (John Calvin. Institute of the Christian Religion 3.25.10)

Our idea of what to hope for is most always limited by our human horizons. We think we know what is best, what we want, what will make us happy, what we really need.

Most dangerous of all, we think we know just how God should deliver the goods to us as well. One of my clergy buddies has shared the story of how, early in her ministry, she was taken under the wing of a fairly well to do lady, who admired her extravagantly, as she put it. The woman was a jet-setter, as they used to say- and traveled widely. She also asked for prayers for safe travel every time the prayer request time came in church. Once, on her way back from the airport, she was in a bad fender-bender and injured her neck. As my friend went to visit her in the hospital, the woman would not speak to her; she refused her visit because God had failed her, or so she said.

When we pray- or however it is we turn to God, we can always use a larger view of God than the way we have; for God’s thought are not our thoughts, and God’s ways are not our ways (citing Isaiah 55:8).

At the end of worship services in the Episcopal tradition, words are often shared from the letter to the Ephesians: “Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.” That’s the idea...

We are not sure what the future holds, but nothing can separate us from God’s love. God’s love, promises and plans exceed all the things that can happen to us. This awareness can shape our lives, give us courage and inspire how we live.

And here is something else about this verse. “Surely I know the plans I have for you...” The “You” in this verse is plural. (Take it as Y’all, y’uns. or youse guys.) The hope and future God intends is for – not just one person, not Jeremiah alone– but for a crowd! The word was for the community; for the people.

God called Jeremiah to speak a word of promise and hope to the people in the most devastating time in ancient Jewish history. This wasn’t about just me and my life as separate

from the whole, but for the body of believers who lived in faith (at least as much faith as they could muster at the time.)

This plural “you” is a blessing to more than just the one who heard God’s word.

What God was doing, and is always doing, is trying to have each of our lives caught up with the community, the people through whom God is always working to redeem the world.

The people of God are never forgotten or wiped out in exile; God brings them back. They are never without hope, even without a land or a king or a temple. God brings them back and keeps supporting them and nurturing them as a community, a people together.

God will not let his people go- ever. God gives a future and a hope— always. To have faith is to remember and to wait, and to wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true in us through our hoping.

And what does that mean about our future? What do we have to hope for, you and I? We all hope for the same thing.... Humanly speaking, we have only the best to hope for: that we will live out our days in peace and with the ones we love with us; that if our best dreams never come true, neither will our worst fears; that what we find to do with our lives will make a difference for good somewhere; and that when our lives end we will be remembered for the good we did. That is our human hope.

And then we turn it all over to God—who has resources far, far beyond us.

We then place our lives in God’s hands, the One who is powerful to call into existence the things that do not exist is also powerful enough to create hope where there is no hope, faith where there is no faith and life where there is no breath.

Amen.



For our prayer this morning—I’ll offer you this:

our bulletin cover image is one way to depict hope, stylistically- but it is not the only way- by any means.

a flower fighting through a crack in the sidewalk is a good image, but it might not speak to you about hope in a way that goes down deep...

there is likely another symbol (Like an empty cross), or a word spoken to you, a time when someone, a parent, a friend, a spouse, said something to encourage you- and you've never forgotten it. Before we begin our prayer, I'd like us to take a minute of silence to reflect, remember, gather up in our minds & hearts a time, a word or an image that we remember what hope looked like, felt like, sounded like... Take some time to recall, and then, if you like- jot down that word, or sketch out that image somewhere in your bulletin...

we will get back to it in the prayer, and you well want to refer to it sometime in this week to come in your living....

Let us go into prayerful silence...

**"I hope that I will always be for each person
what he or she needs me to be.
I hope that each person's death will diminish me,
but that fear of my own will never diminish my joy of life.
I hope that my love for those whom I like will never lessen
my love for those whom I do not.
I hope that another person's love for me will never
be a measure of my love for him or her.
I hope that everybody will accept me as I am,
and that I, with God's grace will too.
I hope that I will always ask for forgiveness from others,
but will never need to be asked for my own . . .
I hope that I will always recognize my limitations,
but that I will construct none.
I hope that loving will always be my goal,
but that love will never be my idol.
I hope that everyone will always have hope." -Henri Nouwen**