

“For There is Hope”

Job 14: 7-15, 19:23-27

As I sat down to write this sermon, I thought to myself, “This won’t take long! Talking about hope is what we do constantly as people of faith. Probably, each week, hope is the one word I use over and over again in sermons, in prayers, in benedictions. So really how hard can it be to write a sermon on hope?”

Well, that is what I thought at the beginning of the week...that is until I realized that hope truly can be a dangerous thing.

Think about it. Even as people of faith, we seem to talk out of both sides of our mouth. We talk about having hope in the Lord but caution people not to get their hopes up. We talk about hope in new life but we worry about giving people false hope in dire situations. Maybe it really is time for us as people of faith to talk about how hope can truly be a dangerous thing.

This point hit home for me this past week when I was doing sermon preparation. I came across a website titled: ex-Christians.net.

Normally, my cynical side would have made some snarky comment and then moved on to the next google site but I’ll be honest, I was trying to avoid doing my work, so I clicked on the link.

What I expected to find was a bunch of bitter angry people railing against the Church in general but what I found was a lot of people who had been hurt by the Church instead.

Sure there was some bitterness but overall most people on this site expressed disappointment in the Christian faith for filling them with false hope.

One story in particular stood out to me. My heart broke as I read this person's testimony. I could feel her anguish coming through the computer screen and felt absolutely helpless in being able to help heal this person's pain.

This person shared how she recently had been experiencing anxiety and panic attacks and the second she feels hope for her future, a sense of dread overtakes her because she expects things to fall apart on her again. She stated that she was terrified of hope.

This person went on to share more about her background. She explained that she was abused as a child and at one point, truly believed the Bible when it said that she would be healed by his stripes. She also shared that at one point in her life, she had so much confidence in her faith, that she preached a sermon about how hope in God had healed her of her horrifying experiences as a child. At this point in her life, as a Christian, she had placed all her hope in Christ and truly believed that Christ was her all sufficient help and guide in life. And during that time, she

wholeheartedly believed and expected to be healed from all mental and physical illness.

But one day, her world came crashing in on her. She experienced PTSD and her bipolar disorder came back with a vengeance. She stated that she lost almost everything while she still held onto her hope in Christ. Her whole story was devastating and in all honesty, reminded me of Job's situation as well.

But the statement that tore my heart out was this one. "Personally, I think it did my head in by giving me false hope. I was vulnerable and depressed so I grabbed onto that hope with all my might. Discovering Christianity was untrue deeply rocked my world. All that hope came crashing down and I was unprepared for it. I wish I had never leaned on my hope for Christ".

She followed all this up with the question: So can anyone relate to the dangers of false hope Christianity provides?

I would like to say that there were no other comments but unfortunately there were. There were comment after comment from people who had experienced false hope in Christ. Comment after comment from people who have walked away from the Church and no longer believed. Comment after comment from people who have decided that Nietzsche was right when he said: "Hope is the worst of evils, for it prolongs the torments of man"

As a minister, what do I do with that? That was the question I found myself asking but more importantly, there was a bigger question: as people of faith, what do we do with that? How do we respond to that? How do we respond to this woman's and all the other's despair and pain? How do we respond to their hopelessness?

Clearly this person and all the others had been hurt by the false hopes given to them by the Church, false hopes that had been handed out to them like a shallow security blanket in the face of their darkness.

Even as I sat down to write this sermon, I had a moment of pause. Is that what we do as the Church? Do we toss around the word hope like it is some band aid that will cover up the brokenness? Do we use hope as a way to ignore the pain and hurt because in all honesty we aren't even sure we are strong enough to face it? What if the darkness breaks us? What if we do lose our faith?

As the Church, as Christians, as people of faith, is it fair to say that we do rely on hope too much and instead of helping others, we often do more damage than good when we offer our words of hope as an alternative to the darkness they may be facing in their lives, in our own lives?

After reading this woman's comments and all the other comments as well, I could no longer deny that maybe hope really is a dangerous thing. Maybe we as

people of faith don't use enough caution when we throw that word hope around, when we throw it around almost as if it is a panacea for all of this world's hurts.

After reading this woman's story and all the other comments, that easy sermon on hope became one of the hardest things that I have ever done.

What would I say to this woman if she was sitting here in our congregation today? How would I help bring light to her darkness without ignoring her hurts, without ignoring her pain? How would I deal with her hopelessness?

As soon as I asked that question, I realized that this woman may not be sitting in our congregation but there are a whole lot of people just like her who are. People who are struggling with the darkness in their own lives. People who have friends suffering from cancer and don't know the words to say. People who are facing those moments when it really does seem foolish to hope that things will change. People who are holding on to their relationship with God by a thread because with all that's going on in our world, the brokenness, the violence, the hurt and hurt, it really doesn't seem like God cares anymore.

What would I say to those people? What would I say to you?

Okay here it is: Yes I fully admit sometimes the Church goes to the notion of hope too quickly as a remedy for the darkness. Yes I fully admit that sometimes it does feel like the darkness is about to overtake us and it seems foolish and too hard

to hope that we will find the light again. Yes, I fully admit that hope is a dangerous thing.

But I will tell you that as a person of faith, I am not ready to give up on hope just yet. And here's why: the alternative scares me even more.

Let me explain: In our text today, Job is at his lowest point but still he is grasping for hope. And he does what we all do, turn to nature because let's face it, it is in nature where we can see tangible signs of renewal and new life.

It should come as no surprise that the Church, thousands of year ago, purposefully decided to celebrate Easter, our liturgical season of renewal and new life, that the Church purposefully decided to celebrate Easter in the season of Spring, nature's own season of renewal and new life. The early church fathers were not stupid. They knew it would be easier for the people to experience the hope of new life if they were actually able to see it and experience it coming about in the world around them. And guess what, Spring happens every year. Trees that were dead in winter bring forth new buds. Ground that was dormant and lifeless bursts forth into green vegetation. Spirits that are overwhelmed with winter's darkness come to life at the first glimpse of sun and warmth. There's a reason we celebrate Easter in springtime.

Okay, so back to our text. Job is looking at nature, thinking about all the ways it regenerates itself and he settles on the image of a tree. He describes how

the tree will continue to grow even when it is cut. He describes how the roots of a tree will not wither and die if someone cuts the tree down. Job even goes to say that at the first whiff of water, the tree will spring to life. An encounter with water will bring new life for the tree

But Job notices something else. He notices that he is not a tree. He does not have the power of regeneration. If he is cut or even if he dies, that is the end. So Job goes on to say that he is more like a dried up river or lake with no hope of every being filled again.

Well, let's stop a minute. That's not exactly right. Once again, an encounter with water can fill them back up again. Sure it will take a lot of water but still water can bring new life.

Notice a theme?

So what Job finally settles on as he is expressing his anguish, his anger, his fear, his disappointment to God is that he has no hope unless God remembers.

Now, Job is not wanting God to say, Oops, I forget all about Job. Guess I need to check in on him and see how he is holding up under all this stress.

This is more like Job telling God we are in this thing together and it is time God remembered what God promised, what God had promised and covenanted to do as Job's God. God had promised be a God of love, a God of justice, a God of

mercy, a God who is always there and it is about time God starting acting like the God Job knew and expected God to be.

What Job knows is that in God remembering there is a promise. And it is a promise of new life. It is a promise of possibilities.

In our Bible, we are told story after story of how God remembered God's people, like when God remembered Noah and all the living things. After the flood while Noah was floating around, waiting and wondering, probably losing all hope of ever seeing dry land again, we are told God remembered. God remembered Noah and all the living things on that boat. The waters began to recede and new life began.

We are told that God remembered Abraham and Sarah when they were old and beyond child bearing years, probably giving up all hope that they would every have a child. But then God remembered them and Isaac was born to them.

We are told that God remembered Rachel who cried out to her God. Her sister Leah was having child after child while Rachel was barren. We are told that God remembered Rachel and she gave birth to Joseph.

We are told that God remembered the Israelites while they were in slavery. God heard their cries and remembered God's covenant with God's people. God sent Moses to free the Israelites and bring them to the promise land. God remembered and there was new life.

We are told that God remembered Hannah who was bullied by her husband's other wife because she had no child. Hannah worshipped God and God remembered her. And a son, Samuel was born and this son grew up to be one of the greatest prophets for the people of God.

I'm sure you are thinking, Well, preacher these are just Old Testament stories. That doesn't apply to us. Well, it happens in the New Testament as well. Jesus, while dying on the cross, cries out to God, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And God remembers. Yes, Jesus dies but he is brought forth in new life for the people of God through the resurrection.

Paul, sitting in jail, alone and frighten, prays to his God. And God remembers. The Earth shakes and quakes. The bars come down. And Paul is free.

Time and time again, we are told through our stories of faith, that God will remember the people of God. And when God does this, God will act, and bring forth new life.

Now a word of caution, I'm not saying that when God remembers we are going to get exactly what we want or what we hoped would come about in life. What I am saying is that when God remembers God's people, lives become filled with possibilities once more. These possibilities may not look like what we expected or even what we hoped for but they are still possibilities of new life.

And I think the time God remembers us most, and the time we most remember our God is when we emerge from the baptismal waters. I don't think it was just a coincidence that it was an encounter with water in Job's story that brings forth new life, that brings forth hope for Job.

In our baptisms, it is our experience with the water, in the water that brings forth possibilities for us as the people of God. It is in that moment when we emerge from the waters and we hear, You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased that brings forth the most hope for us. In that moment, we heard God saying to each and every one of us: You are mine and I will always, always remember you. You are mine and you will never be alone. I will always always be with you. It is that encounter with the water that brings forth new life for us as the people of God.

As I thought about that ex-Christian's painful story, a few things came to my attention. In her re-telling of her story, she used the word "I" an awful lot. I felt hopeless. I felt out of control. I gave up on God.

It is funny as I was figuring out what to say for this sermon, I realized that one of the things this story in Job teaches us is that there is no "I" in hope. Hope doesn't happen in a vacuum. Hope doesn't happen alone. It takes work and it takes community, fellowship. Hope can only happen when we get a sense of another person's presence.

When I went back and reread this person's story, I realized hope was there; she just wasn't expecting it. And here is why I say that: No I'm not trying to be pie in the sky and make us all feel better. I am just being realistic.

In this person's story, she shared that now her hope was in things like her doctors, her counselor, her medicine, in herself. And that through these things and with these things, she has gotten better.

For me, the question that I want to ask this person is so why do you think God quit on you? Don't you think God could be working through these things to bring you new life? Surely if you are experiencing healing and goodness, no matter what form it comes in, that is of God, right?

The thing we need to realize is that no one, no one can sustain hope in isolation. Hope takes community. Hope takes fellowship. Hope takes presence.

I think if I was going to say something to that person who was hurting and struggling, that person who was surrounded by darkness, who was ready to give up on hope, I think I would say, this:

I know that some things in our world, in our lives are not of God, things like cancer, things like child abuse, things like bipolar disorder, things like violence and war, things like hurt and hate and even if I know that they are not of God, that doesn't make them less real.

But I also know that just because these things exist and they happen does not mean that I should give up on faith, that I should give up on hope. It simply means that I will have to look harder to find the things in my life, in our world that are of God, things like love, friendship, grace, support, peace and mercy.

I think I would say to that person who was surrounded by darkness and ready to give, I think I would say that there is no one way, no right way for hope to enter into our lives but it always does. Somehow, someday, Hope enters in.

I think I would say to that person who is ready to give up on God, I think I would say I would rather have hope than the alternative. I'd rather have the notion of possibilities than expect nothing.

I think I would say to that person if she was here today, I think I would say, Don't give up on hope. Not because I would want to fill her head and heart with false hope or build her up just to watch her fall. No, I would tell her don't give up on hope because I know and I have experienced just how life-giving hope can really be.

With hope, I know love will win even when it appears to be losing. With hope, I know this world does not have the last word even when it seems like darkness is taking over. With hope, I know that God does remember me and somehow, someday new life will come forth. With hope, I know that God's kingdom will come to fruition here on earth one day and that all those things that

are not of God will end. With hope, I know that my redeemer lives and one day I will see God face to face. And in that moment God will say once again to me, to all of us, You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased. God will say to me, to all of us, You are mine and I will always always remember you.

With hope, I know that there will always be possibilities of new life. It may not be what I expected. It may not be what I hoped for to come true. But it will still bring forth new life somehow some way.

With hope, I know that God will always have the last word. You see, that's why I really say hope is a dangerous thing. Hope means possibilities. Hope means that this world does not have the last word. Hope means that love will always always win. And that scares the things not of God the most.

Hope really is a dangerous thing because it reminds that our God will always always remember us.

May we never forget that there is hope. Amen.