

## “ UP! Regrets, Extinguished Hopes and A Whole Lot of Balloons”

Isaiah 65: 16-18

This week's film is the movie Up! This is probably one of the more difficult films for us to watch in this series. Sure it has its funny moments but it also brings us face to face with stuff, with emotions that we would rather not deal with or talk about in our lives. UP is possibly the most adult oriented of all the Pixar films. It has themes of love and life, of grief and loss. This film speaks to the very real yet very difficult task we all sometimes face in our lives...the task of learning to live and love again after our lives have been touched by great sadness.

In preparing for this sermon, it struck me how wrong we sometimes get this task. Meaning that too often, we get it into our heads that it is better or healthier for us to avoid talking about the difficulties we may be facing in our lives, that we are somewhat less than others simply because we find ourselves struggling with finding the light at any given moment. Too often we get it into our heads that if we are having hard times then we must have done something wrong and God is punishing us because of it.

Let me just stop right there and say...God is not punishing anyone with hard times or purposefully putting obstacles in people's way just for the fun of it. God

doesn't work that way and if you take nothing else from this sermon, please hear that. Please know that God is always at work in this world bringing healing and wholeness to God's children. Believe me when I say that God never ever intentionally causes God's children pain and suffering. Take it from someone who knows....God is right there with us, during those times of heartbreak and loss, God is right there, holding us, loving us, comforting us, and more importantly helping us find our way back to the light.

Yes, I know what it says in the Old Testament about God smiting God's people; and yes I know what the wider culture says about those who prosper and those who don't. But believe me, the God I know and have experienced does not do any of that. The God I know, the God that I have experienced in my life is a God of love, a God of grace and more importantly a God of mercy.

If you know me at all, do you think I would willingly go to work for a being that likes to make people suffer? If I had wanted to do that, I would have gone into the singing business because Lord knows I am not blessed with that talent. Glass breaks and dogs run whenever I put on Pandora radio and begin to sing along.

So believe me when I say, our God does not intentionally or purposefully or even accidentally ever cause God's people pain or suffering.

Okay, now that we have covered that....back to our film. I don't want to give too much away but I'm going to ask for a little pastor's privilege. There really is no good way to share the essence of this film in a short amount of time. The story of Ellie and Carl takes a while to develop. So without further ado...the beginning of UP!

A friend of mine shared a story with me about a man in her previous congregation. Every Sunday, in the sanctuary, Bill sat 3/4 of the way back on right side...on the end of the pew. If a visitor came in before Bill and sat in his seat...he became very upset. My friend shared that at first she thought Bill was a little odd. She noticed that Bill didn't really talk to anybody. He would just come in, worship and leave...but she never saw his wife... Evelyn.

But every week, there was her name on the attendance rolls, next to Bill's name...Bill and Evelyn. My friend asked a few church members what was Bill's story. They shared that Evelyn had died over 5 years earlier. Yet, every week, Bill came to church, sat in their pew and signed for both of them. He would worship and then leave. He had continued to do things exactly as they had done them together.

My friend said that in watching Bill, she finally could see how overwhelmed with sadness Bill really was, feeling the loss of his beloved wife, and that he was

trying to do everything in his power to keep his life the same. My friend said it finally hit her just exactly how lost Bill was and that he just didn't know how to live without her.

Fast forward a few years to the time when my friend found herself in charge of the church rummage sale one year. She shared that she was surprised when out of the blue, Bill came into her office. My friend wasn't sure exactly what to expect but then Bill said, "I've noticed the youth mission trips...sounds like a good thing. I also understand that the money from the rummage sale is going to support the youth mission trip. To which my friend replied yes it is. Bill is there something you would like to donate?"

Bill responded..."You all take women's clothing right? Well, I would like to donate my wife's clothes so that the youth can make some money for their trip. I think Evelyn would approve of this."

My friend said it took her a few minutes to figure out what was going on. She was still reeling from the generous gift Bill was sharing with the youth group only to be surprised again by presence of God when Bill asked her this question. He asked "Pastor, Do you believe in life after death?" My friend said she tried to give her best pastoral answer, talking about the promise of the resurrection given to all, reminding Bill of the new life offered to all of us when God's love enters our hearts.

To which Bill responded... “Pastor, that is all well and good but I’m asking about me. Do you think I can ever learn to live again after Evelyn’s death?”

In a very real way...that is what the movie up is all about...the want, the need to learn how to live and love again. It is about our dreams, and our life’s disappointments. It is about finding hope again through unexpected people and place. Sounds a lot like our faith story, doesn’t it? From Genesis to Revelation, we are told the story of the people of God. It is filled with ups and downs. It is filled with celebrations and disappointments. But more importantly, it is filled with experiences of God’s love working in the lives of God’s people, rekindling the flame of hope, which burns in their hearts.

Or let me say it this way...The theologian, Fredrick Beuchner was once asked to sum up the overarching theme of the Bible. He said “What I see over and over and over again is the sense that the worst things are never the last things. That the worst things are never the last things.

As humans, and yes as people of faith, “We all have pain. We all have regrets. We all have grief. We all have things we wish were different. We all have things that hold us back. But what we come to realize is that by grounding ourselves in hope, the life transforming power of God’s love continues to pull us UP. We are pulled up into a new day, into a new tomorrow, into a new reality.

What Carl learns is that there is still life to live, people to love and adventures to be had. And that holds true for us today. We know the tomb was not the end of the story. We also know this world does not have the last word. Sometimes the greatest lesson that we as people of faith can learn or at least need to be reminded of again and again is that our hope is not imaginary. It is imaginative. Hope draws us out of our present world, draws us out of our present reality to see something possible. This is not done in naivety or in ignorance. This is not done as a way to avoid life's troubles. Hope for us as people of faith is God-directed. We know that everything will be okay. We might not know how or when. It might not be what we expected the outcome to be. But we do know that everything will be okay all because we have the promise of the resurrection which tells us life and love will always overcome darkness. Our hope as the people of God is grounded in our knowledge, in our experience of God constantly at work in this world, bringing healing and wholeness, transforming the circumstances on this earth, fulfilling God's promise of God's Kingdom to come. (credit to Beth Thomason)

So today, let's ask ourselves as we look around at our world, wondering if we have the strength and the courage to be the people of hope this world needs us to be, wondering how we will ever learn to live and love again, today and all days,

let us ask ourselves a different question. Instead, let's ask ourselves, "what do we have to lose? We know that the worst things are never the last things.

Adventure is out there, just waiting for us, waiting for us to find the strength and the courage to take the first step. May it be so. Amen.