

Christ Church *Sermons*

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 11, 2007

The Reverend Dr. Winston B. Charles

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5,18-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Hope Against Hope

How can we hope when there seems no reason to hope?

Last week Nancy initiated our preaching series on God's great gift of hope to those who believe. Over the next few weeks we shall explore many dimensions of hope for our lives. We ask you to think about hope on your own during these weeks. A card in your bulletins poses the question to begin your consideration: What do you hope for? Please, fill these out and give them to the ushers or place them in the offering plate. The accumulated answers will be used in the final sermon on December 9.

Today, we consider how we hope during those challenging times when there seems so little reason to hope. How well we know that familiar passage about love, I Corinthians 13: "Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love..."! This wonderful discourse on the love of deep friendship ends with "Faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love." True enough, but we must not forget faith and hope, which are so central to our lives. I suggested calling this preaching series, "The greatest of these is love, but hope ain't so bad."

Just consider in your own life those times when your spirit was buoyed with hope, the future looked bright and the present was exciting and joyful, compared with those times when hope burned dim, the future loomed dark, and the present was a painful walk over broken glass. Hope is the updraft of life, lifting us toward a fullness of life and joy that God desires for us all.

The hope that abides with faith and love is, of course, not just any type of hope. It is hope that stands firmly on the initiating action of God and reaches toward the fullness of life that God has intended for each and every one of us.

I remember as a child listening on the radio to Reverend Ike, who preached a gospel of prosperity and encouraged listeners to pray and hope for almost anything, especially material wealth of all kinds. Even

as a child, I knew this was really not what God was about, although perhaps most of us flirt with this kind of material hope as we buy our lottery tickets or check the Dow Jones report.

The hope that abides is so much more valuable than a winning lottery ticket. We have chosen hymn 665 as sort of our theme song of this preaching series. It is one of the beautiful, new hymns in our hymnal. The tune is gorgeous, but the words are the reason we chose it.

All my hope on God is founded;
 he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth,
 only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
 calls my heart to be his own.

The hope that abides stands not on chance or luck or fortune, but on God, who calls our heart, our soul, our spirit, to be his own.

Many people have said to me that one of their favorite passages is this one from the fifth chapter of Romans:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith...we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only this, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

You can just hear Paul so authentically speaking through his own experience of a life of suffering in which the love of God has sustained him and the hope from God has not disappointed him. In the end, this is the hope that we want most deeply and that God lays in the center of our souls. This is hope that truly is hope against hope. It comes not from some external lucky event or fortunate circumstance or wishful thinking, but rather from deep within the heart where God's Spirit resonates with our own unique, personal spirit to give life that abides.

How do we hope when a storm of grief or despair churns the water around us until we are afraid of drowning? How do we hope when our bad decisions confront us with shame and failure? How do we hope when our courageous decisions bring us harm and hurt? How do we hope when illness is not healed or when death comes close or tragedy overcomes us? How do hope when those nagging problems of life do

not go away but continue to drain us day by day? These are the times when we need hope the most, the hope that does not disappoint.

Once I was speaking to a man who was struggling with lung cancer. Several rounds of treatment had initially produced hope, but in the end had rendered sharp disappointment for him and for his family. He asked me, how do I continue to pray when it seems that nothing is happening? My response, which admittedly is not an easy one, was that we continue to pray for his healing, specifically asking God that health and wholeness be restored, and at the same time we seek to release ourselves into a presence of God that is deeper than any particular answer to this prayer, good or bad. We seek quietness of soul and rest in the presence of God deep within that sustains us no matter what the answer to the prayer might be.

This is not to deny any feelings we have of fear or anger or disappointment or even joy, but rather to acknowledge and be embraced by a quiet, steady, Godly presence that lies below the turbulent surface of our lives. This is, I believe, what Paul is reaching for when he says that he rejoices even in his suffering, for suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character hope, and hope – that is, the hope founded on God – does not disappoint us.

When a man is drowning, he flails around in panic gasping for breath and for anything that might give him hope. The one thing he truly needs is to stop his frantic panic and calmly tread water.

When the difficult challenges of life confront us or, for that matter, when all seems to be going well, we need to turn toward the stillness within in order to know the still, small voice of God that sustains us no matter what. Here is where the hope that abides resides, for here is where God resides deep in our souls.

In order to prepare for challenging times and also to enrich lives beyond imagination, we must know what our life-lines are, what arteries bring us the life-blood of God's sustaining presence. And, we need to exercise these lifelines regularly, even habitually, so that they are healthy and strong when we truly need them. Here are a few lifelines:

Prayer: the type of prayer that brings us quietly into God's holy presence, so that we know God's power and mercy and steadfast love, not asking for anything, but receiving everything.

Friends: friends with whom we can share deeply, talk freely, cry and laugh together, perhaps even pray with.

Purpose: know what the purpose for our life is, that life that truly is life and no cheap substitute; form our lives to accomplish the true purpose of our being.

Church: intentionally shape our lives so that every week we worship with a community of people who truly believe in the power and love of God and seek to live faithfully and joyfully.

Eucharist: receive the body and blood of Christ each and every week so that the risen Christ can renew our souls and spirits and strengthen the hope that is within us.

As we strengthen these lifelines, we become better able to face life's challenges of life and also to help others walk through them as well. Here is where we really hit the jackpot, for we shall also come to know the depth and joy of life in a way we never could have imagined.

Here is found the hope that does not disappoint. Even when we come to face with death, as all of us will, we shall know something deeper than this final transition of life. With God in our hearts, we can face death with, as our Prayer Book so beautifully says, "the sure and certain hope of everlasting life."

Hear God's promise in the final verse of Hymn 665:

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ, his Son.
Christ doth call one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall

Here is God's gift and promise of hope.