

We are nearing the end of a 5-week series: *Hope Unfettered*. What we've been doing is surveying the theme of hope in 5 different sections of the Bible. In week 1 we looked at hope in the OT Writings (or Wisdom Literature), particularly in the collection of songs known as Psalms. In week 2 we looked at hope in the OT Prophets, particularly Jeremiah. Last week we moved to the NT, exploring the theme of hope in the Gospels; how Jesus is the embodiment of hope. (Many of you said the rope illustration was impactful, so if you haven't viewed last week's message, you may want to take a look!)

Today we're exploring the theme of hope in early church. That means looking at the book of Acts and also the writings of Paul. Next week we'll look at the Bible's final book: Revelation. If all goes as planned next week will include some teaching by the Rev. Dr. Kara Lyons-Pardue, professor of NT at Pt. Loma Nazarene University. We had slated her to lead a class on Revelation, but obviously we had to postpone. Next Sunday will be an opportunity for us to get to know her and to discover the hope that is found in Revelation. (I interviewed yesterday and just, wow.) Hopefully (pardon the pun), we'll also have her lead a class on Revelation sometime in the 12 months.

Again today, we have lots of ground to cover, so let's listen as Tom and Susan Mitchell read our main scripture passage: [Acts 9:1-20]

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As far as background, I want to point out that Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, written by the same author. Some people miss this because John falls between Luke's 2-part testimony in the NT order. I've even heard Acts referred to as the 5th Gospel: The Gospel of the Holy Spirit! Luke's 2-part testimony were written about 50-60 years after Jesus lived (80-90_{AD}). Acts focuses on the missionary endeavors of the apostles following the ascension of Jesus. As Matthew 28:19-20 tells us, Jesus initiated this enterprise, telling his apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

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So what about this guy, Saul, [Saul = Paul] in our reading from Acts 9? That's a great question because he was not an original disciple of Jesus, and therefore he was not present when Jesus commissioned the apostles to go and spread the gospel. Indeed, Saul was actually someone who, early on, did everything he could to stop the spread of the early Christian church.

The first mention of Saul is in Acts 7:58 and, as Acts 8:1 indicates, he 'approved' the stoning of Stephen, the

first Christian martyr. Later he becomes known as Paul, but at this point he's still referred to by his given name, Saul. Acts 8 goes on to tell us that as the persecution of the church began, Saul was a primary antagonist. As Acts 8:3 reports "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, putting them in prison."

A couple more items about Saul. He was born in Tarsus, which is modern day Turkey. Though the family was Jewish, they were somehow able to become Roman citizens, which was fairly unusual. They probably had to pay a great sum of money to become citizens of the Roman empire, which would suggest they were a well-off family.

From Acts 22:3, we see that Saul's family eventually moved to Jerusalem where Saul could be educated and, as he reports about himself, he was part of the sect that found Jesus' ministry problematic; the Pharisees. This group was zealously committed to Torah observance, and Paul admits in a later letter that he was among the *most zealous*. As we know, the Pharisees took an active role in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion; which they thought would put end the upstart movement of this unorthodox Rabbi, Jesus. And so, Paul clearly felt a need to defend the faith by imprisoning disciples of Jesus.

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Now, one of the major points I mentioned last week, is how hope comes in relationship. But unlike the examples I highlighted last week, in our reading from Acts 9, the relationship of hope is formed much differently! In fact, Acts 9 reveals that both Saul and Ananias had good reasons for not seeking a connection with each other! Saul, for scripturally based reasons, hated the movement of which Ananias was a part. And Ananias, because he was committed to Christ Jesus, had good reasons to be very afraid of Saul. Indeed, Saul's hatred of the Damascus followers of Jesus (who were Jewish!), and Ananias' reasonable fear of Saul, reflect an orientation of hopelessness toward each other, with NO chance of relationship, right? ... But for God!

So nothing less than a divine intervention was required to disrupt their orientation towards each other; and though we see it more emphatically in Saul's case, the reality is that both Saul and Ananias have to enter a period of disorientation before they can overcome their hatred and fear of each other! Both of them have to set aside their prejudices in order to see each other rightly. I'm going to repeat that: Saul and Ananias both had to set aside their prejudices in order to see each other rightly! (In today's terms, Saul is the conservative, Ananias is the progressive. And they hated and feared each other. There is truly nothing we're dealing with today that's 'new under the sun!')

The reason I'm framing it in these terms is to remind you how the biblical testimony reveals, as we learned in week 1, that hope emerges in 3-fold cycle of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. And, biblically speaking, it is in periods of disorientation where radical transformation is most likely to occur... IF our desire for reorientation moves us forward into God's preferred future (what we call 'The Kingdom of God'), rather than backwards, in nostalgic longing. (This is why people in our faith tradition can embrace this period of pandemic and social disruption hopefully, because it is in times like these where God invites us to radically reorient our lifestyles, our values, and our relationships with those who are as different from us as Saul and Ananias were from each other!)

Now, that'd be a good place to say 'Amen' and invite you to meditate on the message with the invitation for you to consider the different types of people you now need to build relationships with! But I think it would be helpful to look at how this experience totally reoriented the Saul's life, as he lays down the rope he'd been holding and picked up the rope Jesus threw out to him.

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So firstly, in 1 Corinthians 15:5-9, Paul makes it clear that, just like the other apostles had, he had met the risen Christ, even though Acts 9 is well after Jesus' resurrection. Though many call what Act 9 describes 'Paul's conversion', it might be better for us to see how this encounter leads Paul into a significant period of disorientation; where he has to let go of everything he thought he knew. And what he does is instructive for us. In Galatians 1:17, we learn that Paul traveled to Arabia, spending 3 years learning about Jesus, most likely from the very people he'd gone to arrest in Damascus! And remember, there's no NT for Paul to study! Paul's letters are actually written before any of the gospels.

These 3 years are a time of reorientation as Paul becomes prepared to be a missionary to the Gentiles; which will become the central orientation of his life. What I find interesting is this: Paul moves from his orientation as a religiously motivated persecutor of the early church, to a religiously motivated propagator, who is willing to suffer for the sake of Christ whose followers he once persecuted!

Paul describes his suffering 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, *"Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in*

toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked."

Can you imagine? I can't read this in the midst of our pandemic without zipping my lip about the 'sufferings' I've have had to endure: Wearing a mask in the grocery store! Picking-up food curbside! Sitting on the couch to binge watch Netflix! (Don't you think Paul would tell us to get a grip?)

What becomes evident however, is that Paul embraces the adversity he encounters as opportunity; an opportunity to both grow in faith and to spread the good news of the grace of Christ Jesus! Paul articulates this in Romans 5:1-5: *"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, 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."*

These words could shape us as we move through this trying time, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and our hope will not disappoint us!

This leads me to conclude with one of the most hope-filled passages in all of scripture, these words of Paul in Romans 8: *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardships, or distress or persecution, or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No! For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Do you know why Paul can write those words? Because even when he was a zealous religious persecutor, bent on ravaging the followers of Jesus, Jesus knocked him on his rear end and ravaged his heart with love and grace he did not deserve! My hope today is that some of us listening will get knocked on our rear ends and come to know more deeply than ever, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is good news that can change everything about our lives.

Amen.