

“Our Eternal Hope”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
June 17, 2012 – Father’s Day

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1  
Psalm 138

Now that the summer season is upon us, one of the things many people look forward to is the blockbuster movies which will hit theaters. So far, there’s been *The Avengers*, *Madagascar 3*, *Prometheus*, *Brave*, and many others. You know which one I’m looking forward to? *Batman*!

We have a bat problem at our house. It all began on May 20. I had come back from my golf trip with Dave Monesmith and Dan Fisher, and my mom and dad had come to visit us for the week. Around 9:30 that evening, I took the dog out for a walk. When I came back, my father said to me, “We have a problem.” I said, “I was only gone five minutes. What kind of problem do we have?” He answered, “There’s a bat in the upstairs bathroom.”

“No there’s not! You’re joking!” So, I walked upstairs, and there on top of the mirror in the girls’ bathroom, was a bat. Our solution for the night was to shut the door, put a chair in front of the door, and wait until morning to decide what to do. The next day, after everyone else was off to school or work, my father decides he will catch it and release it outside. I said, “Go for it,” and he went in with his work gloves and a towel. After a minute, my mom and I heard, “Open the door,” and here came dad with the towel, and inside it a lot of squeaking and chirping. We ran downstairs, opened the front door, and he let the bat fly away.

A week later, on the day of the Indianapolis 500, I came downstairs after having a good night’s sleep, and my father greets me with, “We have a problem again.” The bat was back, but this time, after he saw it flying around when he first got up, it now was nowhere to be seen. Debbie, my mom and the girls went out that morning to do some errands, and that left me and my dad to hunt for the bat. We were repainting our living room, and as I moved a drop cloth, here came the bat. I did not scream, but I ran like a bat out of you know where. “Dad, the bat’s back!” It had flown down to the basement. So, dad went downstairs with his gloves and towel, and I stood at the front door, offering moral support. After a while I heard from the basement, “Got it,” and we released it once again.

Last Monday, I’m sitting in the living room at 10:30 at night, watching the Stanley Cup Finals. Without any warning, I see movement in the dining room, and the bat is back. I ran upstairs, closed the bedroom door where Debbie was reading, and I said, “The bat’s back!” Do you know what the first words were out of my wife’s mouth? “You’d better call your dad. If he starts driving now he can be here by morning (they live in West Virginia).”

I knew that was not realistic, even though that thought had also crossed my mind. I knew I had to do this myself. I went downstairs, saw the bat flying around, ran back upstairs, and it followed me! I shut the girls' bedroom doors and ran back into ours. I peeked out into the hallway, and it had alighted onto an open closet door. I told Debbie, "I'll take the towel and grab it, then you come and open the front door." She reluctantly agreed. I sneaked up on it, praying it would not move. I threw the towel over it, grabbed it, exclaimed, "I've got it!" and we hurriedly ran downstairs and let it out. Needless to say, I am calling an exterminator tomorrow to look at our wildlife inside our home!

Why do bats make us so afraid? Probably because of our preconceptions about them. They don't make any noise when they fly, which is unnerving. And they fly by sonar, not sight, so they come right up on you before they swerve to avoid you. We think they must carry all sorts of diseases, and probably we still think of vampires every time we see a bat!

But the reality is they are quite harmless. They rarely bite people, and they are actually very helpful in eating insects and bugs. And now that I think of it, we've had a lot less spiders in the house than we once did. But as Debbie put it, "Eat the insects outside, not inside the house!"

There are many things we are fearful of, primarily because we have a preconception of how something is going to be and we don't wish to face it. And we're not always aware of how those fears might be triggered within us.

For instance, we may have a fear of crowds, of speaking or standing in front of a large group of people. And we may have been working hard toward all the plans surrounding a particular event. But when we come up to the event, we realize that it will require us to be in front of all sorts of people, something we had conveniently blocked out of our minds up until that point. How will we face that fear? How will we live through that fear? Where will we sense God in the midst of that fear?

Another example centers on grief. Maybe we have gone through a health scare in our past, but we are doing better now. Maybe we have a family member who has always been there for us through good times and bad. Maybe we haven't had to face the significant loss of someone close to us up until now.

And then someone we care about has a similar health scare as we did. Or the family member who's always been there suddenly dies. Or a spouse or child or best friend is diagnosed with a terminal illness, and we are told we only have a limited amount of time together.

Fear sets in, doesn't it? We see our friend going through a health scare, and we see ourselves in that hospital bed, realizing that could be us. We agonize over how someone who has been so influential in our life could now be gone, without any warning or preparation. We panic about doing as much as we can with our loved one before our time together is up.

Our fears over grief are often deep-seated and catch us unawares. Grief is not just about death; at its root is change and transition and loss. It can cause us to react with anger, confusion, and pain. Sometimes we don't always

realize until later how those fears have clouded our judgment or hurt others close to us. But that fear is grounded in our unanswered questions as to how life will continue with this change. How will we face that fear? How will we live through that fear? Where will we sense God in the midst of that fear?

I believe these questions point us to a central message in the text we have read this morning. In many respects, we are searching every day for where God makes contact with us in our lives of faith. Is it within our hearts and minds and souls? Is it among the people who surround us – family, friends, neighbors, strangers? Is it in the created world – nature, wildlife, outside of ourselves? As we struggle with the fears and unknowns of this world, where we search for God and Christ speaks directly to how we live through our fears.

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he reassures them of God's eternal hope in Jesus Christ. "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (4:16). Paul recognizes that these early Christians are struggling, are facing many challenges, and are perhaps fearful of what lies ahead. And he speaks in terms which acknowledge that present reality – "outer nature wasting away" – but then gives them hope that through these trials God is present – "our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

Paul speaks of that inevitable mystery of the Christian faith: "Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (4:18). It's a proclamation of faith in God's almighty power to overcome the earthly ills we know in this life, and to have an eternal hope in what we cannot see now, but which is promised to us through God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. It is a belief in the kingdom which Christ rules. In that kingdom, there are no shootings or violent acts against innocent human beings. There are no diseases or illnesses which cannot be cured. There is no hatred or abuse or famine. The life which Christ rules is one of peace and hope. It is a life which we have been promised in his life, death, and resurrection.

That hope lives inside each of us as Christ's disciples – "our inner nature is renewed day by day." And our faith and trust is in "the one who raised the Lord Jesus (who) will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (4:13). The eternal hope we have in Christ is grounded in our hearts of faith, and is reaffirmed through the witness of the community of faith. When we show compassion and care and concern for one another in the midst of fear and grief, struggle and challenge, then we are bearing witness to the one crucified and risen.

This world in which we live will not last forever. And Paul acknowledges that fact with the last verse of this passage: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (5:1). That is a verse I will often read at the time of a funeral. For me, that sums up our faith in resurrection hope. Our earthly tent – our physical bodies – will not

last for eternity; they are made of the earth, and it is to earth that we will return. But God has built a house for us which is eternal, not made of human hands, which is promised to us as witnesses to Christ's resurrection. It is eternal in the heavens. It is our eternal hope.

This is a day on which we celebrate fathers, a day when we recognize the men in our lives who have been influential and meaningful to us. Whether it is our own biological fathers, or men who have been father-figures to us, today we pause and give thanks to God for their presence in our lives.

I am keenly aware that for many here today, this is not necessarily a joyful day. It is a day which may be full of sadness and grief. For some of us, our fathers or important men in our lives have died – either recently or in the past – and we yearn for their physical presence with us. For others of us, our fathers may not have died, but we may grieve a loss of relationship with them, or a sadness that that relationship did not become as full or complete as we would have wished. It is okay for that grief to be present, and it is okay for that to be interspersed with our feelings of joy and thanksgiving.

That's what we are supposed to do and feel and be as the Body of Christ. We will struggle, and rejoice, and cry, and fight, and laugh, and sometimes, we will just be. For to know the fullness of God's love in Jesus Christ is to acknowledge the depths of emotion God has made possible for us, and to experience and live through those emotions in community with one another.

But what stays before us, as we live through those ups and downs, is the powerful statement of faith which Paul asserts: "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence." We will never be abandoned. We will never be forgotten. We will never, ever be lost from the one who loves us now and forever through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is our eternal hope. As we believe and live into that hope, may we speak it to the world, so that others might know the depth of God's love for them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.