

The Hope That Heals the Human Hurt

From a series on the Wisdom Literature

Scripture Text: See below

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
September 4, 1994

Transcription of the spoken sermon

"But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Lamentations 3:21-23

". . . 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." Romans 5:4-5

"For in hope we were saved . . . if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Romans 8:24-25

As we conclude this summer series of messages on the Wisdom Literature, let me just remind you of the way we have come. The Wisdom Literature is not an area that I have spent much time in in my ministry, as I have told you, but I have found it this summer a rich mine of teaching and instruction. I hope that it has been helpful to you as well.

The struggle of Job, the mystery of suffering, that call to maturity in the Way of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, and that candid observance of human experience in Ecclesiastes: I have found the Wisdom Literature to be enriching, indeed. I like it because, although it may not have all of the comfort, all of the rich promises of some other parts of the scripture, it is a very honest, a very candid review of human experience. It is a careful observation of human experience, and it holds up to us a mirror of the way life really is. I like that because, as you probably have picked up from me on occasion, what I don't like about religion, what I don't like about preachers, what I don't like about too much devotional literature is the fact that I don't always think it is honest. I think there is much religion, and much purveying of religion, that is too confident, that knows too much and gives too many promises that crash on the rocks of human reality. And for that reason I value the Wisdom Literature. It doesn't have everything, but there are so many times in our human experience when there is some word there to which we cannot but say, "Yes, that's really the way it is."

And yet, within the limits of what we can observe in human experience, and within the limits of what our human mind can think through, there remains a veil that is impenetrable. There is a mystery that lies beyond and we cannot get hold of it by deep thinking or profound reflection. It simply remains hidden to us. I think the writer of Ecclesiastes understood that. He said God has put eternity in their hearts, but not such that they are able to determine the past or the future, as to what God is up to. I think the writer of Ecclesiastes, who gave us that portrait of life as tragic, was aware there was something more, but he couldn't get hold of it, and, as far as he could observe, it was beyond the grip of human possibility.

That's where I left you last week as we had been looking at the drama of Ecclesiastes with that choice, that decision before which one stands. I believe in hard thinking, serious thinking, careful thought, the application of mind to experience. But finally when we hit the limit, we'll have to make a choice. The biologist that I cited last week, Jacques Monod, said we are aliens on the edge of a universe, which is indifferent to our music, to our hopes, to our suffering, to our crime. No one out there—nothing more. Hans Küng agreed that our human existence is ambivalent and impenetrable. Yet Hans Küng, the Christian believer, says, "I believe the day is coming when I will understand, when I will be free to be all that I am, and all will become clear." That finally is the choice, isn't it? How will you live? In trust or in mis-trust? That is not something that your mind will be able, finally, to determine. It will be the set of the soul. It will be the posture of the heart. So we face the ambiguity, the impenetrable nature of our experience. Which way will we go? What will we do?

The great English scholar H. A. L. Fischer, in his *History of Europe*, said that there is one intellectual excitement that has passed him by. It is to find any pattern or any rhythm in the movement of history. He says, as a historian, he has only one safe rule—that he should recognize in the development of human destinies, the play of the contingent and the unforeseen. I say, "That is the way it is, isn't it?" The contingent and the unforeseen. Who knows what today or tomorrow will bring? How does one find pattern and rhythm? It seems that the word of this historian is all one can say. . . but then how do you explain the continuing presence of hope in the human heart? How does one explain the presence of hope in one's own heart, in the light of the contingent and the unforeseen in a world full of tragedy, in a violent world, in the ups and downs of the human situation? How is it that hope continues to survive?

In 586-587 CE, Jerusalem was absolutely decimated. The great Babylonian power came in, removed the cream of Jewish society to Babylon, threw down the walls and burned the temple and desecrated every holy symbol, and shattered every dream, every promise that this people held onto as being a special people of God. I read some selected verses from Lamentations—five poems of bitterness. I don't know if there is any more bitter outpouring in any literature than that that flows from the pen of the poet as he reviews the destruction of all his hopes and dreams. Then in the middle of the middle chapter, right after the wormwood and

the gall, his teeth grinding on gravel, he remembers God. And he says, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness."

How do you explain that? Where did it come from? In the midst of the darkness, the darkest day in his life, surveying nothing but the ashes of all of his dreams, and then in the middle of it, hope is reborn. God's love is not exhausted, and that marvelous image . . . God's mercies are new every morning. I love that image. I live by that image. I wouldn't want to imply this morning that I am a morning person. (Laughter) I much prefer to see the sun set than to see the sun rise. But I have at least one crisis each week, and it's Sunday morning. So I get up very early when I see the eastern sky begin to illumine. And then sometimes, like this morning, when I see that golden glow rising spontaneously, permeating every cell of my being, is that wonderful image of the poet—God's mercy, new every morning. "Great is Thy faithfulness." Where does it come from? How does it continue to arise? Hope seems ever to be reborn in the human heart, in the human experience, so faithfully reflected by the writer of Ecclesiastes. Hope, mercy, conviction of the steadfast love of the Lord. You don't get it by thinking. You don't find it at the end of a logical argument. It is finally, a gift.

There is a bumper sticker that could summarize the book of Ecclesiastes and the poet's view of human existence better than anything I know. Unfortunately I can't say it (laughter), but it starts with a four letter word and the second word is "Happens." (Laughter) Dear God, that's honest! It does happen. Doesn't it happen? It happens everywhere all the time. But let me suggest an even finer bumper sticker. We should publish it perhaps. It's another four letter word—because Hope Happens. Hope Happens. It is not something I achieve. It is not something I merit. It is not something I finally struggle through to. Hope Happens. Thank God, Hope Happens! It is a miracle of grace. It is a gift of God. It is the dawning of light in the midst of darkness. Hope Happens!

I am not into alliteration, generally, but I have a bunch of H's for you: Hope happens and, paradoxically, hurt is hope's home. We go kind of drifting through life not thinking too seriously, not having to struggle too much, not wrestling with ultimate questions. Thank God for that! We need a lot of time and a lot of space when we can just sort of go through the motions of life. But then, hurt happens, and paradoxically hurt becomes hope's home. It is precisely in those limit situations of life, when a darkness envelops us and it seems that all is lost. It is in hurt's home that hope is born again, isn't it? Isn't it amazing? Isn't it surprising? Isn't it baffling? It is in the depths of the hurt that the hope suddenly arises.

Well, if you can stand a couple more H's—Hope Heals. Hope Heals. We know it. It is documented all over the place. Hope Heals. There is something about hope that releases all of the healing power, all of the recuperative powers of the human body. We can fool one another with our emotional and spiritual state some of the time, most of the time. But we can't fool our bodies. Our bodies will register, our

bodies are the Richter scale of our psychological and emotional and spiritual health. It's all registered in the body, and hope heals the body.

In his early best selling book that continues to be on the list forever, Scott Peck, marvels about the fact that healing happens, that there is a kind of orderliness and ongoing rhythm to the cosmos, and that there is healing at all. He speaks of the grace from beyond, an intimation that there is a positive force of life or one invested in life. Hope Heals. Hope rolls back the Z's. Hope is the best therapy in all the world. The possibility of healing lies with the grasping onto the promise, not to the exclusion of fear, not to the ridding of anxiety, yet still, it is able to break through. It heals.

Paul says, "Justified by faith," that is, ceasing from all human performance. Ceasing from every human effort and achievement. Stopping every process to make myself somebody. That is, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, an access into this grace wherein we stand. We rejoice for a hope that lies before us, hope of the glory of God, hope of that final consummation. And he says, even in the meantime, we are able in our suffering to boast, for suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Hope leaves us not disappointed because God's Holy Spirit is poured into us; the love of God begins to roll over us.

In the middle of the darkness of decimated Jerusalem, the writer of Lamentations said, "The steadfast love of the Lord is not exhausted." And hope sprang to life anew. Paul says that hope is at the end of the process of suffering and endurance, and character and endurance in the end is the presence of God. Steeped in the love of God. So he says, we are saved by hope. Saved now, healed now. But there's more. For he says the whole created order and our old bodies with it are, as it were, in labor pains waiting to be reborn, renewed. There's something afoot, says Paul. There is a whole cosmic process afoot, and it's going to come to full flower and fruition one day, and we don't see it yet. Obviously what we hope for we don't see, but if we hope for it, we patiently wait for it. "Hope Heals Human Hurt."

My friend, Arie Brower, died a little over a year ago and in some typewritten copies of his journal I shared with you some of this, but now it is published: *"Overcoming the Threat of Death: A Journal of One Christian's Encounter with Cancer."* He tells about how he was about to edit his favorite sermon on his favorite text – a favorite of mine as well – a sermon called "Faith in Spite of Everything," based on those wonderful words from Habakkuk, "Though there be no grapes on the vine and no cattle in the stall, and all will be lost, nonetheless I will exalt in God my Saviour." Arie says that up and down the land he preached that sermon on that text "Faith In Spite of Everything," and then, in his encounter with cancer, he began to see that there was something even beyond faith for him. Growth in grace was represented by an experience of hope. He says, "These days I hold out little hope for my cancer to be cured. I haven't given up, but the statistics steadily weigh ever more heavily against it. In spite of that I find

my feelings of hope undiminished. How do I explain this even within the household of faith, to say nothing of a skeptical world? How do I keep people from feeling as they read this that I am clutching at a straw, deceiving myself, using hope as a form of escapism from the harsh reality of terminal illness and death? How do I communicate that in truth we do not sorrow as those who do not have hope? What is this hope that abides in spite of everything? What form does it take? To me this experience of "Hope In Spite of Everything" is even more important than the experience of faith, in spite of everything."

I don't know how to explain that. Arie Brower was a thoughtful enough Christian to know that there was no way in the world he could prove to anyone that his hope was not simply illusion. But he witnessed to an indomitable hope so that, as he says in another place, "I hope you understand that I've been healed of cancer," even though cancer took his life.

Would that I could throw a switch and fill your hearts with hope. Would that I could give you a formula, a prayer to recite. I can't do that. But I point you to the poet of Lamentations. I point you to St. Paul. I point you to the confirmation of their claim and the experience of a friend. And I remind you that, as the poet of Lamentations sat in the midst of the smoldering ashes of Jerusalem, John on the Isle of Patmos, and the Spirit on the Lord's Day had the vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God as a bride adorned for her bridegroom. And he heard a voice from the throne saying, "Behold the dwelling of God is with humankind. God will dwell with them and they shall be God's people. And God will wipe every tear away from their eyes and there shall be an end of death and pain and crying. For the former things have passed away. Behold, I make all things new." I believe that. It fills me with hope, enabling me to live now such that, if this is all there is, it is enough, but promising that there is even more—even more.

Thanks be to God.