

Can We Be Truthful and Hopeful?

From the sermon series: Now–But Then

Text: Isaiah 9:2; I Corinthians 13:13; Luke 1:79

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

For just a few moments, for your meditation, think with me about Christian hope and the question whether or not we can be both truthful and hopeful. The Church of England, in a statement entitled, "Christian Believing," wrote this:

Christian life is an adventure, a voyage of discovery, a journey, sustained by faith and hope toward a final and complete communion with love at the heart of all things.

It's really a marvelous statement, obviously taking its cue from the Apostle Paul in the 13th chapter of his first Letter to the Corinthians. The understanding of life as an adventure, a voyage of discovery, a journey. And that voyage, that journey is negotiated by faith and hope with a final destination, the culmination, being the complete communion in love. And so it is by faith and hope that we move toward the fullness of love, which is, according to this statement, at the heart of all things. I do think that is the content of Christian hope. That at the heart of all things, there is love, and that it is by faith, in hope, that we grasp that love in foretaste in the confidence that the love that we experience here and there, now and again, is but a foretaste of a final communion in love, at the heart of all things. That is, I believe, the content of Christian hope.

But that experience is an experience that we only appropriate in the present, but never fully realize. It is the present experience of a future reality. It is the present vision of that which is last week in relationship to faith - you don't derive faith from experience. You *bring* faith to experience. And you don't derive hope from experience, you must bring hope to experience, because experience, sooner or later, will defeat you badly. It is not from the observation of our human experience that we learn to hope. Look at it; think about it for a moment. Human experience is uneven. Human experience is unfair. Human experience is laced with injustice, inequity. The Psalmist knew that long ago. Psalm 73 - he looked about him and he saw the prosperity of the wicked and he was angry about that. It seemed to him that those who were wealthy and doing just fine were reckless and careless, while he had kept his hands and his heart clean and he was angry.

He could see an injustice; he could see in human experience that something was wrong. No, it is not on the basis of our experience that we learn to hope. It is the gift of hope that we bring to our experience that enables us to stand and to go through and to negotiate and to hold on. Hope is that which God gifts us with in order to keep us dreaming, even in the darkness.

It's quite remarkable, I think. It's that which marks our human existence. We're not locked into this present moment. By memory we can go back into the past and taste again joys and sadness. And by our imagination we move into the future and we can see things in another way. And in this present moment, we can find meaning, going backwards and forwards and appropriating that which is not present, except in hope. Someone has said that where there's life there's hope. But, wouldn't it be more correct to say that where there's hope, there's life? And where there is no hope, there is no life? And I think that it is precisely because we have become so acutely aware of the gulf between what is and what might be that much religion is a projecting into the future, the resolution of that conflict of the present.

The biblical frame of reference is that time-line which is the framework in which we live. How else can we human beings think than in the past, in the future, standing in the present moment? And, as that conflict between the present reality and that dream in the human heart became acute, I think there was the tendency to push the resolution off into the future. And so, religion often has become a kind of escape from the present moment. Even the doctrines of heaven and hell and that whole future existence are the construction of those who looked at life and said, "It isn't fair. It isn't right. If anybody is in charge, if God is God, then there must be out there some future resolution." There's always a temptation to escape the present or to deny the present in light of a future where everything will be settled.

But, think about it for a moment - the only way we can think is in a time-line. And so, of course, in Advent season we remember that the one who came is coming again and we are called to contemplate the end. But, is the end out there? Or, is not the end right here? Is it really a matter of moving toward a future resolution of all things or is it being able to find, in this present moment, the resolution that comes by the experience of the presence of God, God with us? Is the coming of Jesus the dawning of an age that will soon end? That's what they thought. Indeed, that's what the prophet thought. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light, a child is given to us, all will be well. But, it wasn't well! And Luke said, in the song of Zacharias, "You, Child, will prepare the way of the Lord in the light according to the tender mercy of God, the light is dawning on the people who walk in darkness." But, it didn't dawn, folks. It's 2000 years later and my point to you this morning is that simply to say out there it will be taken care of is to deny the reality of our present experience and to miss the presence of God here and now. Can we be both truthful and hopeful? Is hope something that enables me to live presently without escape, without cynicism, without despair and

without denial? Can I face the present darkness, believing that it is always true in every moment that that light will dawn upon me in the presence of the Presence of the Lord?

You see, you come to the end of a century, as we are, and the end of a millennium, as we are, and you always find there's that kind of apocalyptic preaching that proclaims the End. And you're going to hear it more in the next few years as we move toward the year 2000. The Lord is coming; the End is coming; the Judgment is coming. I don't believe that, you see. I think that is to miss today. It is to miss this moment. Because it is the year 2000 doesn't mean we're any closer to any kind of consummation. I don't know about that consummation. I know the only way these things can be spoken of is to speak about a future resolution, but my point this morning is, if you're always hanging on that future resolution, you will never come to peace and hope and joy and delight in this present moment.

To know Emmanuel is to know that God is with us, God is with us here and now; God is with us in the darkness; God is with us in our health and God is with us in our dying. God is with us in our loving and our caring. God, here and now! That's the content of Christian hope, the fact that this process that has been underway for billions and billions of years - is it drawing to its close at the year 2000? Will God ring down the curtain of history? That is bad religion! That looks like some kind of escape from the present engagement of life. God is in this process of which we are a part, and embraces it all and goes through it all with us and gives us that amazing capacity in the darkness to live as though the Light is about to dawn. Hope, hope doesn't come from experience. Experience shatters hope! Hope comes from God, and it is hope in God and it is the experience of the presence of God, here in the darkness where we dwell in the land of the shadow of death. Advent calls us to think about the end, but not the year 2000 or 3000 or 10,000. It calls us to speak about the end of life, the purpose of life, the meaning of life, which is God with us. God with us.

Why do we keep on hoping? That, to me, is an amazing thing. After all these years, we keep on hoping. After all of the wars, after all of the death and disease, after all of the brokenness, we keep on hoping. To me, it is the best sign I know that the hope stems from God, Who says to us there is no darkness so dark, there is no coldness so cold, there is no storm so severe, but what I will be with you, I will keep you, I will never let you go. That is Advent hope. It is the present appropriation of a future consummation. Hope teamed with faith keep us moving toward love, which is at the heart of all things. I believe that, and in that, I hope. And in that hope, the darkness is scattered and the Light dawns, because God is with us in the meantime. If we don't feel for something more, we'll fall for something less. If we don't reach for something above us, we'll fall for something below us. It is in the gift of hope that the present is transformed. And I can say in regard to now and then, all is well. All is well.