

Hope

Scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-17; Romans 8:18-31; 35-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Hope is the certainty that God will make good the promise of life. Hope is an acorn dreaming its future. Hope is the inexplicable longing and expectation that resides in the depths of the human soul.

Where there is life, there is hope.

So goes the familiar proverb. But, one could turn that around, as well: *Where there is hope, there is life.* And one could add, *Where hope is gone, life soon will be gone, as well.*

Yet, as someone has said, Hope and History never meet. That is, what our hope longs for always outruns the reality we live. The same preacher said, "Why do I go to church? It is longing - longing to see myself, you, this community and nation and world fulfilled ... My most insistent feeling is, 'There must be something more.'"

That is a true reflection of our human situation - the disparity between the longing of our hearts and the reality of our lives. Yet, hope is not quenched; it is an inextinguishable quality of the human being and it is imperative to human wellbeing that hope be fostered and nurtured. On what basis can we genuinely hope? Certainly not on the basis of human ingenuity, cleverness or dependability.

Let me remind you of something I said last week when we considered "confidence" or "trust." I pointed to the fact that we trust not on the basis of experience, but in spite of experience, for our experience undercuts trust as often as it confirms it. Trust is brought to experience, not derived from it.

So with hope: facing life with a positive, hopeful attitude full of expectation is what we bring to experience, not what we achieve on the basis of experience. When you think about it, it is quite remarkable that the human creature is marked by an indomitable hope. There certainly is enough evidence about that would seem to snuff it out. This is especially true in a society saturated with more media coverage than is helpful or healthy.

The Pope makes an historic visit to Cuba and gets second billing to the feeding frenzy at the White House. The news media create a circus of all that devalues around the lowest exploits of public personalities, playing to and pimping for public prurience. And I am aware that what the public wants, the public gets, but I'm not ready to grant that that fulfills the public trust of those who mirror the happenings of our world. But, as long as money and profit is the sole aim of the media, that is what we will get.

My point is that it is impossible to base the hope of the human soul on human experience. Human performance in its worst aspects is focused on and magnified incessantly and is cause for despair, not hope. Still, granting the presence of despair and even cynicism, not without good cause, we continue to be people marked by hope - and what a saving grace that is!

What, then, is its ground? You will not be startled that I claim that hope is grounded in God.

Grounded in God.

It is easy enough to make that claim, but what does that mean? Certainly you know me well enough to know that I am making no naive claim that God simply fixes everything, that God will straighten what is crooked and right what is wrong. Finding hope in God does not mean a denial of the darkness, a refusal to acknowledge the hurt and pain of the human story, nor is it to see God as pulling the strings of human events making it all turn out right. Multitudes have left the church because their own experience put the lie to such Pollyanna thinking.

Yet, is not that deep longing in our hearts reflective of some profound intuition that there is something more and we, with the whole cosmic drama, are in process, on the way? And is it not precisely the constant rebirth of hope that urges us on and calls us to work at world transformation? The French priest-scientist, Teilhard de Chardin, said, "The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope."

Hope issues in desire, longing, the conviction that there is something more. And, I want to say - something more here and now! We have tended in Christianity to put off that something more to another age, another order. We have too often given up on this world, spiritualized the promises of God's words, internalized the peace promised and abdicated our responsibility for Creation in all its fullness and history in all its potential.

But that is not biblical hope. Let me tell you the story of Jeremiah as recorded in the morning lesson. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet. His was a difficult task. He lived in the last days of Judah. He saw the decay of national life, the doom on the horizon for a society that was unjust and lacking in compassion. He saw, as well, mighty Babylon on the horizon and the inevitability of the coming

conflict. He was called a traitor, one who undercut the morale of the people with his dire predictions of imminent doom.

But, here is the irony: while he spoke boldly of Judah's imminent defeat, he was nonetheless a prophet of hope because he could see beyond the present tragedy that there was yet a future for this people because God would keep God's promises. And this was not just wishful thinking. Chapter 32 tells of a relative coming to Jeremiah telling him as next of kin that he should buy a piece of land that had been part of the family heritage.

Were Jeremiah a cynic, one without hope, he might well have said, "No way." Why should he pay good money for a piece of land that was part of a nation that would soon be overtaken by the enemy? What good would it be to hold title to land when chaos was around the corner?

But, Jeremiah had hope for the eventual restoration of Judah. He bought the land, had the deed witnessed to publicly and instructed that the deed be buried in an earthen jar to be preserved for the future when he or his family could claim their inheritance.

This was a parable - a concrete transaction involving economic reality as a sign of hope. Why Jeremiah? Because nothing bad will happen? Because maybe tragedy will be averted? No. Jeremiah believed in the future because he believed in God, he believed God intended a future for this people - in his words, because God was the creator of the earth,

"Nothing is impossible for thee."

That is hope.

I've provided a paragraph in your liturgy from the theologian Paul Tillich:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible ground of history is *God*. That is what the word means, and it is that to which the words 'Kingdom of God' and 'Divine Providence' point. And if these words do not have much meaning for you, translate them, and speak of the depth of history, of the ground and aim of our social life, and of what you take seriously without reservation in your moral and political activities. Perhaps you should call this depth 'hope,' simply hope. For if you find hope in the ground of history, you are united with the great prophets who were able to look into the depth of their times, who tried to escape it, because they could not stand the horror of their vision, and who yet had the strength to look to an even deeper level and there to discover hope.

As John A. T. Robinson, who quotes Tillich, remarks,

Hope is so near to the heart of the meaning of God that, like love, it can stand for it.

I find this same sense of hope as God's presence with and life-sustaining intention operative in the whole creation in St. Paul. Paul says we are saved by hope. From the context, I think Paul means our humanity is saved, rescued, preserved by the hope that is rooted in the conviction that God is engaged in life-creating action in the whole cosmos.

Paul operates with the biblical paradigm of Creation-Fall-Redemption. Thus, he sees Creation, the so-called natural realm, as under a curse due to human sin. Frankly, I've always wondered about that. Did weeds spring up in Eve's garden because she ate the apple in disobedience to the divine command? Do animals and we ourselves die because of sin? I don't really think so.

But, what if we find another paradigm or model with which to understand the cosmic drama and the human story? What if for Creation-Fall, we think of emergent evolution? What if we translate Paul's hope into such an understanding of cosmic reality as it appears in the best science of our day? Then is it not possible to see God as the source, creative energy, enlivening Presence in the whole scheme of things?

A second reference in your liturgy is from the writer Nikos Kazantzakis from his *Report to Greco*. Here is the poet with creative imagination portraying the cosmic scheme of things.

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath—a great Cry—which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!' Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, 'I don't want to. What are you urging me to do! You are demanding the impossible!' But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo! as a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared—worms—making themselves at home in water and mud. 'We're just fine,' they said. 'We have peace and security; we're not budging!'

But the terrible Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins. 'Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!'

'We don't want to! We can't!'

‘You can’t, but I can. Stand up!’

And lo! After thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. He has been fighting, again for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting - this is his new struggle - to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair. ‘Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.’ And the Cry answers, ‘I am beyond.’ All things are centaurs. If this were not the case, the world would rot into inertness and sterility.

Does not that give you goose bumps! I love Robinson’s comment:

The Cry - it links with what the Bible speaks of as "the call" of God, that evocative, purposive love, which not only summons men to leave the securities and satisfactions of life about them, but "calls generations from the beginning" (Isaiah 41:4) ... But it links also with the cry of creation itself, the yearning sigh of all being for its goal ...

There you have it; that is what I meant in the beginning when I said hope is grounded in God. That is the explanation of the mystery as to why it is, how it is, that the human being keeps on hoping. It is "The Cry," the relentless cry to transcend all we have yet been and known. And we are driven on by this creative, purposeful, enlivening life source. I can see no other explanation for the presence of indomitable hope.

Thus we hope in spite of the news - Will the President be vindicated or will he resign? Will Saddam Hussein back down, or will we go once more to war? Will we acknowledge our arrogance and bully nature and open up to Cuba, or not? Will the stock market steady or plunge? The list goes on; nothing is certain, all is fragile and perilous. But hope will not be crushed nor defeated because God will not abandon Creation and God’s purposeful love is for life.

I purchased an old book newly re-issued. I like the author; I like the subject matter, but to be honest, I bought the book for the title. It is *The Lure of Divine Love*. Is that not beautiful? Will you simply take that away with you from this sermon? Let it seep into the pores of your being, because that is the deepest truth of Christian faith - the lure of Divine love, pushing, pushing all things to life. Hope is justified because it is hope in God, by God.