

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

*“Hope is Anchored
in Our Souls”*

August 3, 2014

By The Rev. Tim Ahrens
Senior Minister

Note: When I delivered this sermon on 8/3/14, several people asked of other stories that are supportive of the Israeli community working for peace and helping the victims of war. While I know of these stories and while my family and friends are intimately connected to the Jewish Community and Israel, the point of this sermon was to uplift and name the Christians in this conflict and this region. I invite you to share other stories with me – stories of Hope!

Blessings,

Tim Ahrens

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 8, August 3, 2014, dedicated to our sisters and brothers in Israel, Palestine, especially Gaza who are caught in the crossfire of war, to G. Dene Barnard for 41 years of life among us sharing his gifts all this time! And to WIB Smith on his 87th Birthday and always to the God!

“Hope is Anchored in Our Souls”

Part I of V in the sermon series “Hope Comes Alive!”

Romans 5:1-5; Hebrews 6:19

“We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain...”

Hebrews 6:19 (NRSV)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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When the latest “cease-fire” was broken again and the hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza resumed on Friday only a few hours into the 72 truce, the warfare claimed its first confirmed Christian victim: 60- year-old woman Jalileh Ayyad. There are only 1300 Palestinian Christians in the Gaza – compared to 1.8 million Muslims. But, with Jalileh’s death, our tiny minority religious community caught in the crossfire of this larger conflict paused to give thanks to God in Jesus Christ for her life and witness. In her death, there was a resurrection.

The Christian churches, schools and hospitals in the Gaza have become beacons on light in this highly volatile and deadly conflict. Two days before The Sisters of Charity Home (Mother Teresa’s place) was bombed. Established to provide Hope to 28 adults with disabilities and elderly citizens of Gaza, the Sisters had received a call from the Israeli army warning them to vacate the building. They responded, “*Don’t bomb us. We do not support Hamas. We have no bombs and weapons. We have nowhere to go. We are only here to bring God’s love and hope to the most vulnerable of God’s suffering children.*” The bombs fell anyway. People were killed anyway. On the same day, the residence of the religious sisters serving the Latin Parish in Zeitoun, Gaza, was damaged by an Israeli shell.

Reporting from Gaza, El-Yousef, a Christian writer continues:

I received an urgent call two days ago from Suhaila Tarazi, director of the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, explaining the urgency for medicines, medical supplies and, more importantly, fuel to operate the hospital's generator. She reported the hospital had to make a painful decision to shut down their generator for 4 hours that afternoon in order to ration fuel. She was very upset not knowing what impact it will have on the patients' treatment and recovery. We immediately lobbied with our connections to ensure the hospital gets the fuel supply it needs to continue to save lives.

El-Yousef praised the work of George Anton, a CNEWA team member: *“George leaves his young family on a daily basis and risks his own life to visit local institutions and individuals in order to assess the situation on the ground.”*

He describes his personal experience and the stories of ordinary people affected by the war, the dozens of displaced families housed at the Holy Family Catholic Church, the hundreds of injured patients at the Anglican-run Al Ahli Arab Hospital and over 1,100 devout Muslim women and their children are taking refuge at the ancient Greek Orthodox church of St. Porphyrios. There is an appeal for

blankets, water and food. Another reporter says that “whole families are living in churches.” Wherever there are churches, there are people moving in for shelter.

“(We need hope in Gaza). Our churches and Church institutions in Gaza continue to be that beacon of hope despite all of the misery,” El-Yousef wrote. “Holy Family School, the Greek Orthodox parish and the Greek Orthodox Cultural Center have all opened up their facilities to hundreds of displaced families, giving them food, clean water and above all a safe roof over their heads. The Al Ahli Arab Hospital continues to open up its facilities in this emergency crisis to anyone needing medical treatment, free of charge. Incarnate Word Father Georges Hernandez continues to risk his life every day by making home and hospital visits. The Missionaries of Charity continue to call Gaza home despite the various offers for evacuation.”

Despite all of the suffering, with over 1,200 Palestinians dead and thousands more wounded, the Christian mission is certainly at its best. These brave souls — who are personally risking their lives — continue to comfort the injured and displaced, and provide assistance to the weak and marginalized with the Gospel in their hearts. Please know that your support and prayers for the people of Gaza, especially the women and children, are priceless and help to keep hope and faith alive.”

Drawn from: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/pope-holy-land/christian-mother-killed-in-gaza/#ixzz39HdtuWrO>

In telling these stories, did you hear that “Hope” was lifted up as a primary driver for the good being done in this war-torn conflict? The Christian presence in this conflict is one of shelter, care, hospitality and love – living into Hope. I, for one, am inspired by Hope rising from the violence and rubble of war.

As Christians, I believe Hope is the anchor of Christian faith. And I believe our Hope is anchored in our re-framing Christ's death on the cross as the beginning act of His Resurrection from the dead. This is Resurrection HOPE. As theologian and scholar Elaine Pagels writes about resurrection hope:

“(Jesus’ end) would be very bad news if it weren’t that underneath this rather dark story is an enormous hope that this very unpromising story and its terrible anguished ending is nevertheless not the ending, that there’s a mystery in it, a divine mystery of God’s revelation that will happen yet.”

But, there is even more to be said of Hope in faith-filled people. Our hope is grounded in our prayers. We are people of prayer. We confess our sins and our brokenness. We attest to our part in the world which is unhealed. Quite

simply, we repent. And every act of repentance is an act of Hope. Whenever and wherever we can acknowledge, name and claim our part in what is broken, we begin to rebuild and heal ourselves and this world – what the Jews call “Tikun Olam” healing the world. When we are building or rebuilding we have become “agents of hope” (I will return to this August 31st).

It is never too soon or too late for you to Hope. It is never too soon or too late to speak of Hope, to act on Hope – no matter what tempts you to be afraid, angry or desperate. Hope begets hope. Rubbing shoulders with Hopeful people makes us hopeful as well. This is the precious gift of the Spirit of God alive and well in this world – despite all evidence to bring you, me and God to our knees. So, hope rises in faithful people.

To this end, the Apostle Paul writes so beautifully in **Romans 5:1-5:**

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² 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. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ 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.

Hope reflects the state of your soul rather than the gravity of circumstances surrounding your days. When we praise God, our souls get stronger. Hope is “realistic” writes Jurgen Moltmann in his Theology of Hope. He continues:

“Hope alone can be called ‘realistic’ because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. Hope does not take things as they happen to (be), but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. Only as long as the world and the people in it are in a fragmented and experimental state, which is not yet resolved, is there any sense of earthly hopes. Hope is not a transfigured glow superimposed on a darkened existence but a

realistic way of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such, hope sets everything in motion and keeps it in a state of change.” (Jurgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope*, SCM Press, 1967, p. 25).

In other words, hope is living, breathing, real and realistic. It is moving, changing and ever bringing us new possibilities in the midst of our lives.

When we live into hope, we see the challenges before us as opportunities. We drop anchor in the immense sea of God’s love, and we place ourselves in the faith of the Risen Christ as we discover that our anchor of hope keeps us steady in the storms of our lives.

This week, look into your life. Name and claim your anchor of Hope. And hang on to it! Look at your life and give thanks to God for the hope that is in you. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: *“Seize the hope that is set before you. Trust that this hope is your soul’s sure and steadfast anchor placed there . . . through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Amen.

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