

From the Pulpit

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“Hope in Trying Times”

Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

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

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A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 15, verses 21-28.

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

L: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

P: Thanks be to God.

Norman McLean in “A River Runs Through It” writes, *“Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn’t. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.”*

The hope that a fish will rise.

Hoping for what you already have is no hope at all. Scripture tells us this. And our own common sense tells us too. Hope is a different kind of thing. So what is hope? Perhaps it’s easier... and more effective to determine what hope is *not*.

Hope is not wishful thinking. We light birthday candles and keep a secret wish to ourselves and then take a deep breath and get all the candles at once – whether it's 5 candles or 50 or more. And then our wish will come true. We wish for good weather or a winning lottery ticket or to be magically transported to a beachside bungalow. And then we empty our lungs on the little candles and nothing changes. This is not hope.

Hope is not daydreaming. Daydreaming, instead, is a workplace coping mechanism. Zoning out, checking out leads us to turn off our brains and mysteriously stop blinking. Then something startles us and we realize we are where we were all along – in the cubicle, in the client meeting, in traffic, in the classroom. This is not hope.

Hope is not planning and practicing. We plan gardens and they grow. Hope doesn't make my tomato plants bloom and bear fruit. We practice instruments and learn to play. Hoping to perfect Bach's Prelude in C from the Well-Tempered Clavier

will do nothing for my fingers and the keys. Practice will, hope won't. Planning and practicing is not hope.

So what is hope if it doesn't involve birthday candles and daydreams? What is hope? Hope is what you do when things are... well... hopeless

This is the third installment in a five week series Rev. Tim and I are sharing on hope. Today's sermon is called, "Hope in Trying Times." We could have saved two syllables and simply called the sermon "Hope in Times." Is 'trying' even a helpful modifier? Let me ask you, when have times not been trying?!? I don't remember. The thing about 'times' is that they always seem to be 'trying'.

There are people and places right now experiencing these times – these 'trying' times – and the world is watching... Places like Ferguson, Missouri, Eastern Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, Northern Iraq, Robin Williams' bedroom. These hopeless places

feel close to home. They have been on our screens and in our news feeds this week.

And even closer to home... there are unknown people in quieter places right now experiencing these times – these ‘trying’ times – and the world spins on without noticing... A middle school student is being bullied for his sexuality... a marriage is on the edge – there’s no tenderness left and every little thing becomes a big thing... the tests were last week and the doctor should call with the results this week.

Hope is what you do when times are... hopeless.

Psalm 9 is a somber and solemn song. We know this from the lyrics, but if we weren’t certain, we see too that the tune assigned to it is called *muth-labben*, or ‘Death of a Son’. Perhaps Psalm 9 was written when the community was experiencing grief and loss... and hopelessness. Perhaps Psalm 9 to the tune ‘Death of a Son’ was composed for the death of Lesley McSpadden’s and Michael Brown Sr.’s son. Perhaps it was composed for the

victims of territorial disputes in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Perhaps it was composed for the Yazidis, a people group ISIS is attempting to eliminate. Perhaps it was composed for those whose lives were touched by a comedic genius who was overcome by his depression. Perhaps it was written for the bullied and broken among us.

Listen now to this Psalm, sung to the tune, 'Death of a Son':

I will give thanks to God with my whole heart;

I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.

The word for wonderful actually, more accurately, means 'strange' or 'inexplicable'. Yes – sometimes things don't make sense. Often things don't make sense. And sometimes, even God doesn't make sense. When times are hopeless, yes, I am full of wonder if by wonder you mean confusion.

You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked...

But God sits enthroned forever,

God has established God's throne for judgment.

God judges the world with righteousness;

God judges the peoples with equity.

Judgment and righteousness. In Hebrew, *mishpat* and *tsedeq*. These words more fully defined point to a fair and responsible way to live... they point to the beautiful dance that occurs between creativity and love.

Now we are starting to move beyond wishful thinking and daydreaming, beyond extinguishing candles and zoning out. Maybe there is hope for the hopeless. Maybe there is hope if God generously gifts the universe and its inhabitants with responsibility and creativity, love and justice.

Sing praises to God, who dwells in Zion.

Declare God's deeds among the peoples.

For God who avenges blood is mindful of them;

God does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

Is God listening? Is God remembering? Does God hear the sound of riots in Ferguson? The sound of murder in Franklinton? Does God hear the loneliness in the dining room, the argument in the bedroom? Does God hear the cry of a bullied child on the playground?

The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;

in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

God has made God's self known, God has executed judgment;

the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

Higgaion. Selah

Higgaoin and Selah are musical directions. Here there was an interlude, perhaps some improvisation. It's a break from singing, for sure. And that's a gift. We who are hopeless yet trying to get our heads and hearts into a grateful song about love and justice... we who have just gotten honest about how wickedness is a parasite and destroys its own carrier... we need a break. This is heavy. This is hard. We need a break to let this sink in. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest.

*For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.*

*Rise up, O God! Do not let mortals prevail;
let the nations be judged before you.*

Put them in fear, O God;

let the nations know that they are only human. Selah

Selah. Another break. And we need it. Another chance to let our humanity sink in. We need breaks like this. The hope of the poor will not perish forever. This is interesting. The psalm doesn't indicate that hope will not perish *ever*, but just that it won't perish *forever*. Sometimes hope is nowhere to be found. Sometimes hope vanishes. Sometimes hope seems to even betray us. It slips through our fingers and runs from our hearts. Hope will perish. Now and then. Sometimes. And for a time. But hope will not perish *forever*. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest. Let it all sink in. Take a much-needed break.

One of my favorite ways to take a break – and I don't get to do it often though I really enjoy it – is flyfishing. Selah. Breathe. Listen. Rest. Drink a hot coffee early in the morning on the way to a cold river. Put on boots and waders. Look around to see what bugs are hatching and tie the right fly on. And then get that line in the water... joining Norman McLean in the hope that a fish will rise.

The first time I went flyfishing – 10 or 12 years go – I went with a friend who had been flyfishing since before I was born. I put the gear on he told me to. I tied on the fly that he told me to tie on. I false casted like I had been taught – I learned to get the fly out there – to the best spots. And then I fished. And fished. And fished. And then... nothing. And then I fished. And fished. And fished. And then... nothing. I was starting to lose my faith that there were fish in this river. I was making wishes every time I blew a bug away from my face... I was daydreaming, zoning out to the rhythm of the river. I had planned and practiced. And nothing. No fish. There I was, haunted by these waters and left with nothing... nothing, that is, but the hope that a fish would rise. There were only two things for me to do: stay connected and wait.

I had to stay connected to my experienced fishing companion. He knew more than I knew. Had seen more, experienced more, tasted more... fresh beer-battered and fried rainbow trout. I had to stay connected to a more hopeful person than I, someone whose hope had been fed by time and experience. Staying connected to a more hopeful fisherman gave me hope.

And I had to wait. I didn't *want* to wait. I didn't *like* to wait. I'm not necessarily good at waiting. My assumption is I'm not alone in this. But the *hope...* is *in...* the *waiting*.

Listen to a selection from "East Coker" from The Four Quartets by T.S. Eliot:

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark...

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you

Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,

The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed

*With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness
on darkness...*

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

The hope is in the waiting. When haunted by the waters of the rivers of life, we need to stay connected to people who are hopeful. When haunted by the emptiness and the violence of life, we need to stay connected to a hope-full God, or as St. Paul, author of the letter to the Romans says, the God who is the *source* of hope. Stay connected. And wait.

I don't know what will emerge in Ferguson or eastern Ukraine or northern Iraq or Israel and Palestine. No one does. I don't know what will come of the darkness of war or the emptiness in our lives or the violence in our neighborhoods. And yes, there are things we can do and be to plant a love and justice that will bloom before our eyes. But we can't do any of it apart from hope. So we hope. And we wait. Through the darkness and emptiness and violence. We wait and hope through the sadness.

Here is what Robin Williams said about hope and his battle with addiction in a 2006 interview with Diane Sawyer.

(Robin Williams audio clip.)

“There’s sadness. And then there’s also hope.” Stay connected and wait for it... and the fish will rise. Amen.

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