

# *“Hope is a Tether”*

**Joshua 24/1 Thessalonians 4**

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, Hope of all our years, by your Holy Spirit, illumine these words this day. Open us to the power of your word proclaimed so we may live into the fullness of this life! Amen.

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In the last weeks, certainly the last few days, I have been living with the tension of grief and hope. Maybe some of you have too. I have devoured the 24-hour news cycle. There has been a restlessness in my soul. Some of you have shared with me your worries, your fears and your struggle to find a center, a balance, a strong hold for your lives in recent weeks.

In our nation today, we are well aware of the pandemics that plague us. There is grief. There is sorrow. There is pain. There are those of you who took a large exhale and rejoiced yesterday with the announcement of a new President and Vice President Elect, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Even as votes are still being counted, this was certainly an historic moment in our nation, as the first woman, first woman of color, first woman of Asian American descent to be the country’s Vice President-Elect.

And there are others--who are grieved with the news of a defeat for our incumbent president Donald Trump. Our nation, split along party lines, could not be more divided.

The challenge of healing a nation and rebuilding any sense of national identity and shared core value still stands in the balance. There is much between grief and hope this day.

This week, I came across the words from Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Currey. His recent book, “Love is the Way: Holding on to hope in Troubling Times” explores what the way of love looks like, even as we walk in a world that feels at times closer to a nightmare than to the dream.

The way of love is how we stay decent during indecent times. It’s for all of us who are sitting, looking around at the world, at our leaders, saying, “Something has gone very wrong.” It’s for those who are fighting hard for a better world, and feeling lonely and defeated, and very, very tired.<sup>1</sup>

All our scripture passages this morning speak to a deep urgency in the life of the world. It is a freighted moment of deep urgency for the life of the world: Awaiting a bridegroom’s arrival, new life called forth with hope, and a narrative about whom to choose in one’s life to follow. These texts provide us an opportunity for a community of faith like ours to think about our “treasure” (our heart, our passion, or deep purpose) that runs far deeper than any political election.

In the passage from the book of Joshua this morning that Drew Wade read a few moments ago, God has chosen Joshua to lead the Israelites. Joshua has been a good leader, but his time was near. He realized he was about to die.

Joshua speaks to the Israelites in the hope that he can point them in the right direction. He can not help them forever, but he can at least set them on the right course before he dies. He recounts all that God had done for them; choosing Abraham to father a great nation, blessing him with a son, helping them escape famine and tyranny, making clear passage through a great escape route, feeding them manna in the desert, protecting against adversaries over many years. The Israelites clearly had reason to trust the Lord, so Joshua challenges them.

He says, “Choose this day who you will serve.” Choose. Make a decision. Do not choose foreign gods who will lead you astray. Follow the God of Abraham, the God who brought you out of Egypt and protected you and fed you. The challenge for God’s people is choosing who they will serve.

In our polarized, media driven world, we, too, are challenged to remember who we serve? It may be difficult for us today to name the false gods we serve; those who have our control, those who have our attention, those who keep us away from a deeper relationship with the one True God. You may already know what keeps you from fully committing to a life that has God at its center.

As we come to the end of the liturgical year, the lectionary texts become increasingly urgent! If we haven't felt the urgency outside of our community of faith, we are certainly hearing it in our texts today! We are hearing messages of staying alert and keeping watch, getting our house in order, preparing for what is to come.

Beloved Old Testament Professor Walter Bruggemann suggests that, we know from the ongoing election count in America this weekend, we are at a new beginning of something new, because God's economy will not wait. We have to pay close attention in the midst of our lives because God is doing a new thing.<sup>2</sup>

When our focus is on God there can be the revival of love as the guide for living; for relationships; for leaders; for our individual and collective spiritual, material, and physical well-being.

Bishop Currey will say: Only God is God. None of us are. While we must be discerning, love is the ultimate criteria for that. Our job isn't to tell anybody how they should work out their relationship with the living God. Our job is to love, and in the case of Christians, to witness to the way of love that came to us from Jesus's teachings.<sup>3</sup>

When we are not at our best selves, when our rhetoric gets the better of us, when the pundits drive our curiosity and deciding making, it is easy to forget who Christ taught us to care for and who Christ taught us to love. And when we are at our best---we have an opportunity to live into the hope that Christ offers, if we are open and willing to go.

The passage from First Thessalonians Chapter 4 is about the balance of grief and hope. Do not be uninformed about what is going on around you. Don't grieve like those around you...but hold fast to something greater. Grieve as if you have hope!

In another way, God is inviting us to hold onto hope because it offers us creative ways to view the world. In that there is power for new life that Bruggemann may suggest. New life because God is in it and a part of it and calling us forth into a new thing.

The hope we hold doesn't have to be some epic conquering event to proclaim a victory of any kind and the more we think of hope, the more we come to believe that in the small things---powerful stories of hope can arise.

Debie Thomas, a blogger and director of a family ministries program at a church in California offered these words that I share with you. I share them because in the midst of the turmoil, anxiety, fear, uncertainty of this time in our lives surrounding the

future of our country, the battle against Covid-19 pandemic, and the centuries long plague of racism and systemic oppression of Black Indigenous People of Color these words bring some comfort---and offer hope. For God is doing a new thing.

Debie writes these words as she observes and journeys with her young adult son, who had a bicycle accident at the age of 17 and two years later battles with the effects of chronic pain. Here is how she talks about hope.

She says: “When I read biblical stories of hope, the ones that resonate are no longer the stories of epic victories and grand celebrations. Those are lovely, but they don’t speak to where I live as the mother of a son in chronic pain.<sup>4</sup>

Instead I take hope in the story of Sarah, 99 years old and pregnant, laughing her head off because she thought for sure she was too old and wise and jaded to ever again be surprised by God. I take hope in the story of Hagar, a slave woman dying of thirst in the desert, who even in her abandonment becomes the first person in the Bible to name God. I take hope in the story of Hannah, who cries so hard and so earnestly in the presence of God that people take her for a disrespectful drunk. I take hope in the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who ponders hard mysteries deep in her heart. I take hope in the persistent widow who pounds down the door of a corrupt judge day after day after day, insisting on justice until she drives the man nuts. I take hope in the story of Mary Magdalene, who refuses to budge even when evil, tragedy, death, and despair seem to have won the day.

She goes on:

What these stories suggest to me is that hope isn’t about magical results—it’s about the long haul and the long darkness.

Hope is robust and muscular and ferocious and long-suffering. Hope never gets so cynical that it can’t be surprised.

Hope finds and names God in the world’s most desolate places. Hope kneels on hard ground and yearns without shame.

Hope ponders and meditates and ruminates.

Hope gets in apathy’s face and says, “No. Not good enough. Try again.”

Hope sits in the darkness—outwaiting torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and death—until finally a would-be gardener shows up at dawn and calls us by name.” (unquote)

People of God, we do not go through days without hope. In times like these, we hope not because things are even close to being OK, but because the God of the small and the mundane calls us forward. Slowly and cautiously, we live with the mystery of the already and-the-not-yet kingdom of God.

Yes, this kingdom has already come, and its in-breaking during Jesus' time on earth was marked by all kinds of signs and wonders. And yet, those signs and wonders are not a daily reality. So the great sorrow and the great calling is to live graciously and compassionately in this vast and often terrible in-between.

To offer the comfort of a steady presence? To ask others to hope on when you don't have energy to get through another day. To pray into the mystery of things that make little sense, into what looks and feels like a dark, desolate grave.

Thomas suggests: "After all, what else is hope? Isn't it precisely the mystery that strains toward what I don't yet have? Isn't it all about the unseen, the unknown, the unreached?"

If I already had what I longed for, I wouldn't need to hope." (unquote)

Therefore, beloved, as it is, hope is a tether, a sure footing, and solace. It's a bridge, wider and sturdier than we imagined it would be, that connects us still to the God who loves [each and everyone of us] in Jesus Christ. May this new thing, lead us to be the people God needs us to be---healer, repairers of the breach, peacemakers for our communities and the world.

So people of God, do not be like those who grieve without hope. Because the God of our salvation, our living God, offers us hope....hope to be a tether to the one who was and is and is to come, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rt Rev. Michael Currey, *Love is the Way*, Penguin Press, 2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/preaching-on-the-sunday-after-election-2020>

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Michael Currey, 2020

<sup>4</sup> Debi Thomas, *The Christian Century* article, 2019