

2nd Lent

February 25, 2018

Church of the Advent

Hoping Against Hope



We live in challenging times. Perhaps all preachers have said that throughout all time; it certainly seems to have been the perception of Paul, as he was writing to the early Christian churches. One might argue today that we are *not* living in a war zone, that there were no hurricanes or bursting pipes this past week, and if any of us skipped breakfast this morning it was by choice, and not because we had neither food in the cupboard nor the means to get it. Yet our ever-intense daily intimacy with the wider world around us make it pretty hard to perceive ourselves as secure and untouchable inside a bubble of safety and well-being, even if our immediate material needs are met today. At the touch of a screen, stories of violence, conflict, suffering, animosity—and fierce competition for control of the narrative of our common life—flood our consciousness, demand our attention, and leave us overwhelmed and longing for escape. Our desires for complete freedom to be who we are, and to do what we want to do when we want to do it, come up against circumstances where the desires of others are in conflict with ours, and we have lost the ability to determine how to resolve those conflicts—or how to find a common good, much less live with it. Our fear of suffering and untimely death and its aftermath of grief grows in proportion to our loss of control over environments which have evolved in our lifetimes from indisputably safe havens—church, school, and places of entertainment—into places of potential physical threat. We find ourselves debating whether or not our fear would be smaller or greater by knowing every venue we approached was an armed camp.

Where is the Good News here? Where is God in these challenging times? Some would say God is directing traffic, capriciously punishing some with suffering while letting others off the hook—leaving us unsure where we stand while in judgment of those who get the short end of the stick, as if magically keeping their bad luck at arm's

length. Others claim that God sits idly by and allows the suffering of the innocent, bringing either God's omnipotence or God's compassion into question—leaving morality on shaky ground as a precept on which to build community. And more and more people in our lifetime say that there is no God at all—for they argue, “How could a God of love look on this world and allow such violence poverty, famine, and flood? How could a God of love allow the world's most privileged people to adapt to a life in which their children have become collateral damage in a quest for wealth and power disguised as a desperate necessity for self-preservation?” So for them, there must not be a God. Therefore, if there is no God, then there is no role for religion, or belief, or faith, leaving us all in a secular world where we are in charge. This means all we need for our common life together is to agree on common law to manage it—including what the law should say, how we should uphold and enforce it, and what should be the consequences of breaking it. Then we would be in control of our own destiny, life would have order and stability, and everyone would be safe and secure and happy. Somehow I think our times might be as challenging as they are because we *do* ascribe to some version of this way of being—perhaps with the best of intentions. For otherwise, who is qualified to put words in God's mouth to tell us how to live?

Paul's letter to the Romans from our readings today seems to be wrestling with this same thing—2000 years ago. In Paul's time, the law was what held civilization together. Romans especially believed in the power of law and its enforcement, especially because they were in charge. The Jews had their own Law—with a capital L, and it was comprehensive and detailed, though they were careful not to cross the larger law of their occupiers, the Romans. Paul, a Roman citizen and an educated Jew, was a man who believed in the law—so much so that he had made it his mission to persecute Christians, who in his mind and the mind of the Roman state, lived outside the law, refused to honor and worship Roman Gods, and professed a faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God—an insult to both Rome and the Jewish authorities. He led raids on Christians for the purpose of arresting them and delivering them for punishment that included death.

Then God intervened in his life and Paul fell off his horse. For a time, blinded in the conversion experience that completely changed him, Paul underwent a radical transformation—from persecutor of the followers of Jesus to one of their leaders, seeing the world in a whole new way. And from the first moment of recovering his sight, until his death as a martyr himself, Paul traveled and preached and wrote to new congregations of Christians trying to describe what God was doing in the world, and how Christians needed to shift their focus from being righteous followers of the law, to grace-filled followers of Jesus. Today's excerpt from his letter to the Romans has not lost its relevance today.

Paul makes his argument, claiming his descent from Abraham and standing on the promise that God—*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist*—had made to Abram when he changed his name. For Paul, Abraham's belief that God would keep his promise is what saved him—even though it was a wild and ridiculous promise that he, at 99 years of age—and as Paul says, was as good as dead in his body—would have a child with his elderly barren wife Sarah. Adhering to every law of man he knew, had he followed the law alone, Abraham would not only have laughed at the idea of becoming the father to many nations, he would have scoffed, and gone back home to his bed, and probably laid down and died—and who would have blamed him? Instead, Abraham *hoped against hope*, trusted, and believed, and gave his life over to God's outrageous plan, God's will, and God's grace. And to this day, Abraham is the father of the generations of God's people.

And what did Jesus teach us about hope? Once again today the gospel of Mark cuts to the chase as Jesus hammers home to his disciples that to be his followers they needed to turn their perception of the world inside out and upside down. *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* Where is the hope in denial of self? Where is the hope in losing one's life, and how then are we saved? How do we live with this hard teaching—harder than being told at the age of 99 that we are about to become a parent for the first time?

Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest and author, says that hope is not the same as optimism; hope does not come from positive predictions about the state of the world. Rather, hope is something that matures and grows through suffering, because it has to do with God overcoming the darkness of the world through the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. It is hard to define, but we know it when we see it. Hope is the sunrise after a long night of darkness. Hope is the trees bursting with flowers after a bitter winter. Hope is a stable CAT scan after a punishing round of chemotherapy. Hope is a newborn's cry after a long hard pregnancy. Hope is the sound of the siren coming to the rescue. Hope is witnessing unbelievable courage in one who has just emerged from a land of suffering. For Emily Dickenson, *hope is a thing with feathers*. Sustaining hope is a gift from God, that when accepted and nurtured can free us from fear, and all the dark roads that fear takes us down. Hope is what saves us from cynicism, discouragement, and a stance of futility. Hope is what opens us up to understanding what Jesus was talking about when he explained that it is in trying to save ourselves—particularly at the expense of others—that we are lost; that in losing ourselves in love—particularly for others—that we are found, saved, redeemed. Hope grows from a tiny seed of faith into trust, and eventually into a love that we recognize as coming from God alone. Living into hope, and love, we begin to see how to live in a challenging world where *who* we are becomes less important than *whose* we are—where God's grace can overcome even our wildest fears. Living into hope, embracing love, we are liberated from our need to control our world, because we do believe and trust that God is at work in the world—and in us—everywhere we go and in every situation, without exception. Does this mean we can live without the law? Not quite, as we need some kind of order in our imperfect world of sinners trying to live together as we make our way home. Living into hope and embracing love *does* mean that our hope—and our faith—will be reckoned unto us someday as righteousness, freeing our minds to rest on divine things—and not human things. And especially in the challenging world in which we find ourselves, that is Good News. Amen.

Rev. Ellen Richardson