

## Living Into Hope

### Psalm 71:1-14 Romans 8:18-28

I'm going to preach a short series on faith, hope, and love the next 4 weeks.

I know, that's three virtues in four weeks, but there will be two messages on love.

It's worthy of two sermons! I'm going a little out of order, and beginning with

hope. Listen to these words, not just with your mind but with your heart...

### **Romans 8:18-28**

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Just after the pandemic hit in 2020 I attended a webinar (online seminar) titled “Leadership in a liminal season.” The subtitle of the workshop was more to the point: “How to lead when you don’t know where you’re going;” which is a more accurate description of the content. The workshop leader worked with this idea of liminality; of being in a liminal time and season. “Liminal” simply means “in between.” But here is the full definition we were given, and see if this doesn’t describe for us where we have been, and are right now: “Liminality is a quality of ambiguity and disorientation that occurs in transitory situations and spaces, when a person or people is betwixt and between something that has ended, and a new situation not yet begun.” Does that fairly well describe things in our world these days? We’ve actually been in a liminal time before covid-19 hit, and before the 2016 election, and before that. Our world has been going through one of those every-500-year culture shifts for a few decades, actually; it’s just that the pandemic and the politics and the racial reckoning and wars and refugee crises have magnified for us that we are indeed living through a liminal, ambiguous, & disorienting season.

And during liminal times and seasons, what we need to have, and exercise, is hope—a trust that God is present, that God is at work, and that because God is at work there is good in the world, and there is good in store for the future, as we

make a transition from what was, to what will be. Even if we have no idea what's happening in the moment, or what the future will look like. Or how long it will take to get where we need to go, personally and collectively.

As we hold onto hope, practice hope, and think about hope, remember that in the Bible the Old Testament Hebrew word *hope* is also the same word for "wait" and also the word for "trust." So, to hope is to wait, to wait is to trust. To trust is to hope. You heard that in our reading from Romans as those words were used interchangeably from the Hebrew mind of the apostle Paul. Another good example is from Isaiah 40:31: "Those who hope/wait for/trust in the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

And so, what is needed at this time is a lot of trust in God, a lot of waiting for God (patience, in Paul's words), and a hope in God that has confidence that God will work all things together for good, in God's time.

So, therefore, an important aspect of having hope, Christian hope, is the ability to release our expectation of specific outcomes, on specific timelines. We leave outcomes to God. We have to leave the timing of things to God. Now, we do our part: we pray, we listen, we "do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with

God” as the prophet Micah put it so well. We love our neighbor, as we’ll talk about in coming weeks, and commit to doing as much good as we can. We *do* all of those things that we are clearly told to *do*. But we don’t force anything in terms of outcomes. We let God show up when and how God desires to show up, we live in the flow of the movements of the Spirit of God, and we act in ways that show our trust, our hope, in the goodness of God.

Liminal time is not a time to hurry up, or try to “fix” anything. That’s like trying to ‘fix’ a plant that is growing in spring and hasn’t bloomed before its time. There is nothing to fix. There is only patience, trust, waiting, and doing the appropriate and life-giving things during the waiting time—in hope and confidence that something beautiful is coming (the flowers) at the right time.

Our hope is in *God*, not in outcomes. We put our trust in God, because God’s outcomes are usually better, often surprising, and more beneficial for everyone involved. And God seems to be at work most often during in-between times, or liminal spaces. Just like the ocean is more active at the turning of the tide, whether the tide is ebbing or flowing. Because things get stirred up at the turn of the tide. Same thing during liminal seasons. Things are stirred up, people

are more open, and God just seems to show up in new and surprising ways.

Wonderful ways. Even if it is messy (like the ocean floor when the tide changes).

Ancient Israel was in a liminal time when the prophets had gone silent. For 400 years! That was the period of time between Malachi and Matthew—the last book of the Old Testament and the last prophet heard from, and the first book of the New Testament. Can you imagine?! 400 years of liminal time when God had gone silent, in the usual ways at least, to people’s eyes and ears. God actually was at work, quietly, underneath the surface. But the usual ways of hearing from God had gone dormant.

During those 400 “silent” years, the Greek empire was declining and the Roman empire was expanding and tightening its grip on Palestine. It was a time of social and political upheaval and violence, religious pluralism and turmoil and even religious violence (there were revolts, and attempts at purification of those who were deemed as unclean or evil). And it was toward the end of this liminal, in-between time that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, in what Celtic Christians would call a thin-place experience on the fuzzy edge of things, and announced that God had a plan, and that she would be part of it if she was willing. No one could’ve seen that coming!

And like Mary, during liminal times we can open ourselves up in new ways, and imagine new possibilities. To make ourselves aware and awake and present to God's new possibilities. This is what the prophets of old did. Their preaching wasn't mostly hellfire and brimstone, as is often thought. A lot of it is calling people to have hope, by use of imagination and startling imagery.

Along those lines (imagination and startling imagery) I think of JRR Tolkien (a devout Catholic) who wrote the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings trilogy starting in 1937, and finished them in the mid-1940's; and CS Lewis (who became a Christian as an adult, and affiliated with the Anglican church in England) who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia series starting in 1939 on through the mid 1940's. Anything going on in the world from the mid 1930's to the mid 1940's?!?

All of these fantasy stories were stories of hope, written during the rise of fascism in Europe, and throughout the second world war. They are stories about everyday characters who overcome fear, who exercise courage and hope and hold onto hope in the midst of terrible evil and major setbacks on their journeys. But no matter how bad things looked, they hung in there, each played their part, doing the next right thing, right in front of them, believing that good will prevail,

in spite of not knowing what the heck they were doing or where their journey would lead them.

Tolkien and Lewis wrote these stories as a way of saying, we have to exercise hope no matter how bad things look. God will prevail; good will prevail. They wrote them almost as a way of thumbing their nose at evil, and telling their readers: hang in there! Do what you can do in expressing your hope, and living from a place of hope, but don't despair.

In fact, Tolkien is quoted as saying: "Despair is hubris, because we think we know what the outcome will be, but we don't." In the words of Gandalf, the wise and benevolent wizard from Lord of the Rings: "Not even the wise know all ends." So we have to trust that God will work all things together for good, in his time.

GK Chesterton (who wrote a few decades before Tolkien and Lewis, at the time of World War 1): "As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, hope is as unreasonable as it is indispensable." He probably had Paul's words in mind: "Hope that is seen is not hope. Who hopes for what is seen? If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it, with patience."

Hope is not merely a wish for things to get better, and soon. It is the confidence that the darkness will not have the last word. Hope is living in the confidence of the brightness of a new dawn.

What does having hope look like for you and for me right now? What does exercising hope look like? Here are a couple things:

1. Do something that expresses your hope, no matter how small it is. Do *something*. Like the old adage: if you want to build self-esteem, do esteemable acts. Little things, every day. Same thing applies to hope: if you want to grow in hope, do hopeful acts. However small. Jesus described the Kingdom of God as like a small seed. As like yeast in dough. Very small, practically invisible. But repeated over time, and combined with the small acts of hope of others, the effect can be great as God works all these small things together for a larger good.

Every smile, every warm greeting, every encouraging email or text message, every act of generosity toward others or toward the planet can be used by God, in ways we may never know the full effect.

2. Make the effort to look for the good. Find the good. Look at the good that is being done around you and in the world. As you and I do hopeful

acts, listen to the stories of others who are doing hopeful things. It's easy to become cynical or despairing because of what we see and hear about on the news or elsewhere.

I was talking to someone this week (not from here), who said: "People... stink." That isn't really what they said, but close enough. I can see how a person could come to that conclusion if all they are paying attention to is bad news, but in my heart of hearts I don't believe that! Most people in the world are good people, who want to do good. But we have to train ourselves to find the good, and look for the good that others are doing. It's one of the reasons I want us to hear from these amazing people over the next few weeks who are doing God's good work in our communities. There is a lot of good that's being done!

In the spirit of Mother's Day... Mr. Rogers' mother would tell him, in tragedy, difficulty, violence: look to the helpers. That's where you'll find God. Look to the helpers. That's where you'll find God; that's where you'll receive hope.

And, look to those who are showing resilience and hope. If you want encouragement in hope, don't look at what Russian bombs are doing, look at what Ukrainian citizens are doing. We are inspired to hope by Ukrainian citizens

being savvy and sacrificial and strong, supporting one another and keeping hope alive in the midst of devastation and cruelty.

3. Finally, pray. Or, let the Spirit of God pray in you, and through you. I don't know if pastors are supposed to have favorite Bible verses, but I sure do, and I love Romans 8:26-27, where we heard that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, because we don't know how to pray as we ought; so the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

It's a mystery; when you find yourself sighing, or taking deep breaths in, and out—that's the Spirit of God praying in and through you. Think about that. Or, don't think about it! Just rest in it. God, through the Spirit, knows our hearts, knows what's going on in the world, and intercedes for us all. How cool is that? That in and of itself gives me hope.

So, pray, and consent to the gracious movements and intercessions of the Holy Spirit in you.

Wonderful quotes about hope in the bulletin insert... (see below)

Benediction from Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. And all God's children said

## Thoughts on Biblical hope:

Hope, in gospel faith, is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just work out. Rather, hope is the conviction, against a great deal of data, that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world, that God intends joy and peace. Christians find compelling evidence, in the story of Jesus, that Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability, everywhere he went, turned the enmity of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy, introduced a new regime where the dead are raised, the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again.

Walter Brueggemann, from his book *A Gospel of Hope*

Optimism is a natural virtue and a wonderful gift of temperament when things are going well, when we think tomorrow will be better than today. Yet Christian hope has nothing to do with the belief that tomorrow is necessarily going to be better. Jesus seems to be saying that if even one mustard seed is sprouting, or one coin found, or one sheep recovered (see Luke 15)—that is reason enough for a big party! Even a small indicator of God is still an indicator of God—and therefore an indicator of final reason, meaning, and joy. *A little bit of God goes a long way!*

Richard Rohr, from his book *The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder*