

## **Sermon: Perseverance in Hope**

I'm so glad to be able to be with you this morning in this new, somewhat awkward, virtual worship experience. It may not be awkward for you so I'll just own that I prefer looking into your dear faces and experiencing some of what you're feeling as you hear the words of the sermon. In some ways, virtual preaching takes a lot more faith that the Holy Spirit is interceding as we engage the text and explore what it means together. So with gratitude and faith, I bring you today's sermon. I'm very glad that the sermon focus today is on perseverance in hope.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about hope and what it means for those of us who follow Jesus. Take a moment and think about what this word means to you. What does hope mean to you and what are you hoping for? I would love to hear if your view of hope has shifted or been confirmed in some way as we look at the biblical understanding of hope.

In today's common usage according to the dictionary, hope is the feeling that what is wanted will happen – a desire accompanied by expectation. A child might say, "I hope to get a new bike for Christmas" and an adult might say, "I hope she says yes when I ask her to marry me!" Those are desires with an expectation. In the OT, however, the point of reference is God. To hope in the Bible is to trust and not to fear and is grounded in faith no matter what the circumstances. In fact, in some places the Hebrew word for hope is the same as for trust as well as to wait. To hope is to wait and trust and to trust involves hoping while waiting, they're all intertwined with one another.

Listen now to the words of Isaiah as a biblical example of what this hope looks like:

Isaiah 55:6-13

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Let's pray:

Loving and merciful God, let this word accomplish that which you purpose and let there be much fruit produced by your Spirit in our time together. Tune our hearts to hear your melody of love and draw us closer to you. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you our rock and redeemer. Amen

This beautiful passage is one of my favorites and is attributed to the prophet Isaiah. The same prophet who in chapter 6 tells us that his encounter with God led him to despair as a man of "unclean lips" and to whom God extends grace and forgiveness. Isaiah response to that grace is to answer God's call to be a prophet with the words that echo through the ages; "here I am, send me." And so, God sent him to a people whose minds were dull and ears were shut (as are the minds and ears of most people who hear prophets). In our passage today, this prophecy was spoken to the people of God as their time of the Babylonian exile is coming to an end. It had been a long exile and now Isaiah had the privilege of giving the good news that it was coming to an end. God was going to do it and it would be marvelous. For the rest of the book of Isaiah he tells the good news of what God is going to do. Did they believe it? Could they hear it? It had been a long time, nearly seventy years and it must have been hard to keep hope alive. It must have been hard to believe that something was just beyond the horizon.

Sometimes I feel as if we are living through our own time of exile. Life is not what I wish it would be. I can look back to a simpler time of faith and remember how it “used to be” before there was so much upheaval in our institutions: religious, political, educational. All of our institutions are going through massive change and it is tempting to look back (as the Israelites did) to the good old days, with nostalgia and forget that the good old days weren’t always that good. Or at least not for everyone. It is hard to believe that it is better to go forward when all we want to do is go back. It is hard to believe that where we’re headed is going to be better because God is bigger than all our change. And God is in the midst of our change. Nothing is happening that God is not aware of. These things are hard to remember in the midst of exile and so it was for the Israelites. They needed a word of encouragement, a word of hope to cast their vision forward.

What was God prophesying to the people? What does God prophesy to us today?

God reminds them that God’s thoughts are not their thoughts nor God’s ways their ways. That God’s word will go out and accomplish that which God purposes it to. This is as true for us today as it was for the Israelites. And so we wait, trust and hope.

It is not, however, a passive time of waiting and trusting, there are instructions on how to hope. We’re invited to “seek the Lord” and “call upon him”. The wicked are to forsake our way and the unrighteous to abandon our thoughts. There is a call to return to the merciful God who will abundantly pardon. And then there are the wonderful words of hope in which God reminds us that “God’s thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are our ways the ways of God.” And to that I breathe a big sigh of relief. Thank you, God, that you are not limited to my ways, my thoughts and my narrow expectation of the future. Thank you that you see beyond the horizon and you are calling us forward into a better way of living and being. We are instructed to turn our attention to the One who does know the future and is working out the divine purpose to get us there. And it is probably not going to fit into our expectations because our thoughts are not God’s thoughts.

So let’s look at a couple of working definitions of this kind of hope. A hope that is not tied to expectations but is more of an orientation toward the future. The first comes from recent history and it was spoken by Vaclav Havel. You may know

who Vaclav Havel was but I had to look him up. Vaclav was the first president of the Czech Republic. It was said of him that he was “unintimidated by threats and unchanged by political power.” Can you imagine?! If only.... He was a man who lived through difficult times and managed to maintain his hope. Hope that he defined this way:

“Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. It is an orientation of the spirit and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

If we think back to the beginning of the sermon and how we commonly use the word hope, we can see that this definition is a better fit with a biblical perspective. It is not rooted in expected outcomes but rather an “orientation of the spirit and heart.” Just as God calls out to us to remember that our ways and thoughts are not God’s and to set our focus on God.

There are more wonderful quotes by Vaclav and I especially like this one: “anyone who takes himself (or herself) too seriously always runs the risk of looking ridiculous; anyone who can consistently laugh at himself (or herself) does not! Isn’t that marvelous?!”

The second example of hope is less of a definition and more of an explanation of how to hope when your expectations are dashed. This one came to me in the form of a newspaper article entitled, “Hope never dies, but hope does change.” This one speaks clearly to me because it was written about a chaplain at Seattle Children’s where I currently serve; as manager of Spiritual Care. It is about Ron Gocken who walked the halls of the hospital and sat beside beds of fearful patients and grieving families many years and retired several years before I came on board. Ron described himself as a promoter of hope and had this to say: “I help people to see the hope beyond the last hope.” He shares (and I can attest to it as well) that “parents start with a hope for survival and then move to the hope

of the chance to leave the hospital to provide a fulfilled life with their child at home.” And many times that does happen but for those who do not have their expectations met, that hope changes. Ron would invite the parents to hope in death as a picture of their child free of pain. Hope places the child in the arms of a loved one gone before them. Hope envisions a child living whole and healthy in another place. It is hope in the most devastating of circumstances and those who can reorient their hope leave the hospital with a way to move back into their lives. I have the privilege of walking with families and encouraging this kind of hope even in the midst of excruciating pain. I, too, have to find hope following these losses and process the grief I’ve been witness to. I do this by focusing on the good in life and remembering that death does not have the final word.

The third example/definition of hope comes from a Scottish philosopher and Grandmaster of chess named Jonathan Rowson. Jonathan has started a new organization called Perspectiva whose purpose is to paint a vision of the future and a pathway for getting there that instills a certain amount of hope. He says that hope is not so much thinking things will be better, but actually “seeing a place that’s worth going to and orienting your will towards that.” One of his initiatives is called “Paying attention” with the deep awareness that our attention is being fought over through the use of massive amounts of data that is being gathered on all of us and then used to target and “influence our choices and decisions: what we give attention to, what we choose to buy, who we choose to vote for..” Our examples of Audi letter and vacation to Italy. Joke on FaceBook: I asked my husband why he spoke so softly in the house and he said he was afraid that Mark Zuckerberg was listening. I laughed, he laughed, Alexa laughed and Siri laughed!

And we don’t even have an Alexa (but we do have Siri on our phones!)

I don’t say this to scare you but rather to remind ourselves that there are many who are vying for our attention. Which is why it is crucial that we are aware of these influences and intentionally set our minds on the ways and thoughts of God by drawing close and calling out to God. This is not the same as listening to those who claim to know the mind of God but actually through prayer and meditation on God’s Word. The Word that will not return empty but will accomplish that which God purposes.

How can we know that we are focused on God and not being drawn into the current outrages and crisis of our data driven algorithms? The prophet gives us the answer – joy and peace. We shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. As beautifully stated by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (a Jesuit priest) “joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” When our hope is centered in God it will show in our demeanor. Are we joyful? Are we peaceful? Are all the fruit of the Spirit present in my life? When my life is full of outrage and foment, it is like red lights on the dashboard of my life! Look under the engine! What is driving you?! Where is your attention focused?

How about you? What gives you hope and what are you hoping for? What is the orientation of your heart and spirit? Are you hoping in a certain outcome or expectation? Or are you willing to set your vision toward a more peaceful and joyful world? And that orientation begins with all the little things of your day. How much time are you spending bringing kindness and love into your community? It can be as simple as checking in with the people around you and listening, really listening, to their concerns and their fears?

For me, it begins with checking in with myself, in the presence of God’s love and asking what are my concerns and fears. It starts with knowing how deeply loved I am and asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit through all the moments of my day. As the day goes on, I intentionally check in with my spirit and continue to ask for guidance. (Example of going into a room, before a phone call)

This helps me to be present and to be a witness to a better Presence that is with me. I find that God knows the needs of the person in front of me much better than I do. God is already at work in that person’s life and I can help give witness to that love in the midst of their pain and fears. It’s not about me convincing anyone of anything but rather creating a sacred space for love to be seen and acknowledged. It means I talk less and listen more. I’m curious about myself and the person in front of me. I lay down my agenda and let the Holy Spirit be at work and I let Love be the goal. This is a lot harder than it might sound and I don’t do it perfectly. I try to keep in mind that people are hungry to be seen and loved and that being deeply listened to is so much like love that most people can’t tell the difference.

For me, faith and hope are rooted in the conviction that, regardless of how bad things may be, a new story is waiting to take hold—something we have not yet seen or felt or experienced. . . . God is calling us—as individuals and congregations—to work with God and others to champion that new story. It begins in my heart and my daily interactions.

It all matters...thoughts lead to actions, actions lead to habits, habits lead to character...and I want a character that reflects the Savior that I follow.

Let's take a few moments of silence to orient ourselves toward God's thoughts and ways. With hope, with joy, with peace and then I will close us in prayer.

Holy God, good, loving, restoring and renewing God of hope. We rejoice today in your invitation to wait, trust and hope in you. Let nothing loom larger in our lives than your love. Let us walk in assurance and hope in your goodness. No matter our circumstances and beyond our limited expectations let us find our deep hope and joy in you. Thank you for your presence in this and every moment of our lives. Amen