

Sunday, 2/27/22 · Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church · Casey Perkins

Lent 5 · Year C · [Isaiah 43:16-21](#) | [Psalm 126](#) | [Philippians 3:4b-14](#) | [John 12:1-8](#)

KIDS: What does hope mean? What do you hope for? What's the difference between a hope & a wish?

Hope is a kind of prayer where we imagine the future and then trust that God will help us get there.

Dear God, teach me to be hopeful and trust you to guide me every step of the way. Amen.

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Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts, and kindle in us the fire of your Love.

Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

The opening stanza from one of Emily Dickinson’s most quoted poems paints a lovely visual of hope as a determined songbird perched in the human soul. Like so much of Dickinson’s work, I love this poem - so much so that its lines immediately came to mind when I began reading today’s scripture passages in preparation for this sermon. However, I have to wonder if this songbird imagery is an example of how **hope** has become little more than a Christian buzzword too easily found on wall art and coffee mugs but too rarely found making a difference in how we live our lives as people of faith.

I want to reflect for a moment on what hope *is not* and then turn to our readings and see what the scriptures tell us that *hope is* ...

Hope is not attempting to make sense of a bad situation (“this is punishment for something done wrong” ... or “God is teaching me some lesson”); hope is not saccharine positivity (“everything’s fine!”); nor is hope blind optimism (“everything *will be* fine!”).

Years ago when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, I experienced all these things that hope *is not* firsthand. I wanted to understand *why* it was happening, I wanted to know

that it wasn't as bad as it seemed, and most of all I wanted to be assured that everything was going to be ok - meaning, that my mother would be healed. As she has done more times than I can recall, my mother pulled me close and told me that she could offer me none of the answers or assurances that I was so desperately seeking. However, she reassured me, it was okay to feel frightened and angry and not know what would happen next. However, we would get some sleep and wake up tomorrow to keep on living - until that wasn't the case.

So what *is* hope; and what does it look like in practice?

Unlike many of the world's religions, our faith is foundationally rooted in hope as the posture of response to the unsettling changes happening all around us.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims a vision of what God is going to do - "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." So often we cling to what has been in order not to face our present reality or our fear of the unknown future. Yet God's promise is to be with us and do more than we can ask or imagine. Our task is to trust and respond.

In the Psalm we hear the song of a people rejoicing in this new thing that God has done. "Those who sowed with tears ... will reap with songs of joy." Fear and hope - it seems - are two sides of the same coin. Yet the joy that comes from trusting God and watching what happens is so great that they say it's like being in a dream.

At the beginning of our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, he seems to be engaged in some of his *thinking out loud* rhetoric. And it seems to me that Paul is trying to make it all make sense ... but in classic Pauline fashion, by the end of the passage he has returned to hope: "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize

of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Once again we are called not to live in the past or worry about the future but to trust and respond to God’s vision.

Finally, we come to what is perhaps one of my favorite Gospel stories of hope. Each Gospel writer gives us a version of this story, but only John - who we heard today - ascribes the act to Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus) and one of Jesus’s closest friends. I think Mary must be feeling the same anxieties about what happens next for Jesus and his followers, but she alone has the courage that rises out of deep, abiding hope to trust God’s plan and respond in this loving act of adoration - in which she fully accepts and even prepares for Jesus’s coming death - an event she no doubt cannot see beyond.

Yet for the people of Israel, for Paul, for Mary, and for us, hope is holding on to a vision of how things *might* be and then working tirelessly to make that vision a reality as co-creators with God.

Over the past nine months it has been my privilege and great joy to serve as a seminarian here at Thankful and be inspired by this “little church with a big heart.” In so many ways this sermon is preached ‘to the choir,’ because there is no shortage of hope here. Through a global pandemic, unexpected financial challenges, the loss of beloved Thankful ones, and exciting growing pains, you have continued to hold fast to a vision of what it means to be the Body of Christ serving St. Elmo, Chattanooga, and the world. Thank you for welcoming me, supporting me, and teaching me new ways to hope alongside you.

In the collect for today we prayed these words: “Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.” ‘Among the swift and varied changes of the world ... our hearts may surely be fixed where true joys are to be found...’ That’s

hope. We are called to trust God and respond. That's all ... but it certainly is not easy. And so we keep practicing and supporting one another, and we hear these words anew and they become our constant prayer and call to action:

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