

For the Day  
Psalm 42: 1-5, 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21  
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July 23, 2017

This morning's sermon is in part a sequel to last week's sermon. However, if you missed last week's sermon, which was a mistake, please don't leave! This will be a stand alone sequel – whatever that is.

There is one point from last week's sermon that I do want to return to this morning. In the Book of Psalms, there is a group of psalms called laments that speak to the times in life when things are not going well - times of pain, disappointment, and discouragement. I emphasized how honest these psalms are to the way it feels when life is going badly.

Because these psalms are honest about the difficult times of life, we are better able to trust them when they speak about hope and the possibility of a better life to come. We can see this in Psalm 42, our first scripture for this this morning. First we hear the cry of someone in pain:

My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”

The person who wrote this was most likely a Jewish exile, a refugee far from home, separated from the temple and the beloved community. Sorrow and loss have become overwhelming. The psalmist brings these feelings to God in the words of the psalm. This helps the psalmist to let go of these feelings, to become unstuck, and to begin to move into a future where hope is possible again. The psalm continues:

Why are you cast down, O my  
soul,  
and why are you disquieted  
within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again  
praise God,  
who is my help and my God.

The psalm offers hope, but only after it has been honest about times when life was difficult and painful. Biblical hope is strong and resilient. It does not deny bad times, but helps us to get through them, as in Psalm 30, which we read last week, “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

Understanding the toughness and realism of biblical hope is important because we often use the word hope as a kind of throwaway when not much is at stake: I hope it won't rain next weekend. I hope the Twins don't fold. I hope coming to church this morning wasn't a mistake. I hope this sermon will be over by lunchtime. Who knows? No big deal – lunch can wait.

In the Bible hope is a big deal. Paul cites hope, along with faith and love, as one of the three great spiritual gifts of God. The gift of hope sustains us through all the seasons of our lives. Our call to worship this morning is a prayer for hope.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
Give me the joy of your saving help again  
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Don't give up. Keep the faith. Trust God. This is biblical hope.

We hear hope in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." This kind of hope underlies this church's work for justice. In our commitment to the faith-based coalition ISAIAH, we work for a more just society. We know that systemic change takes time, that there will be disappointment along the way. But we will continue. We will not give up the struggle. So doing, we are sustained by hope. Isaiah and the other prophets proclaimed that the establishment of a just and equitable society is the will of God. Thus our hope does not rest in ourselves. It is grounded on the will of God.

Hope also opens up our lives, offering possibilities we had not seen before. I have a clergy colleague, whose was for many years also an executive at Best Buy. In other words he had the best of all worlds: and executive salary as well as those tremendous clergy discounts. But he was not always an executive. When he was new to the company, he struggled, felt he'd never measure up, that he couldn't meet the goals that had been set for him.

One day his supervisor called him in. My friend felt that this was it; he was going to be fired. Instead his supervisor asked him to go stand in the corner. My friend wondered if next he was going to have to put on a dunce hat. His supervisor said, "I believe that this is the way your job is to you now. You feel you're stuck in the corner, no way to move, no options for the future." Then he told my friend to turn around so that he faced out into the room and said, "But that's not true. The future is open to you just like this room. You're not stuck in a corner. You have lots of possibilities, choices, and ways to move ahead. Biblical hope gives us this same message.

In my work as an interim minister, I once served in a small church where hope for the future seemed to have fled. Given declining numbers and growing deficits, the future for the church

seemed bleak, if there was any future at all. One Sunday, early in my time there, we had a congregational meeting. I asked the members present a series of questions: Why did you join this church? What is your best memory of your time here? What about this church has been the most life giving for you? As people answered these questions, lethargy gave way to engagement. People were eager to tell their stories. In memories and stories, they began to find possibilities for the future. They got excited. Hope began to move in the room. You could feel it.

In our New Testament passage, hope burst out in these words: “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” In Christ we are not stuck in the past. Our future can be different; it can be better. There is no need to deny past mistakes, dead ends, failures. The hope here is resilient and realistic, honest to the truth of life, as we know biblical hope to be.

It’s as if Jesus is saying, “I know all that about you. It’s OK. Leave the past behind. In me, in my teachings, my life, my church – there is hope of new life for you. The old has passed away. You are part of something new. For you there is hope for a new life, where you can live in joy, dignity, self respect, be the human being that God created you to be.” This is the fullness of biblical hope, which sustains us in difficult times and opens up possibilities for the future, including new beginning and fresh starts wherever our lives have hit a wall.

I’ll close with a final hope story. There’s a video of an elderly woman in a small Nicaraguan town. Volunteers had helped the community build a new school, and she is standing in front of it, smiling and proud. A commentator asks her if she can read. She turns, points to the school, and says, “Not yet.” This is hope that opens possibilities.

The sermon has ended and well before lunch time.