

## Hope—The Rev. Timothy Safford—July 19, 2015

I want to preach about ‘Hope.’

Not a sentimental, misleading hope that politicians bandy about, but the hope that makes us human, fuels the imagination, and gives us the vision to see the world, not as it is, but as God means the world to be.

### I.

We see hope unleashed in the gospel reading this morning.

Jesus is in the midst of his “boat ministry,” sailing from place to place, from one side of the lake to the other. Everywhere Jesus and the disciples rowed the boat, hopefulness followed in the wake.

Listen: “When Jesus and the disciples got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.” *Mark 6:53-56*.

In these early days of the ‘Jesus movement,’ the true nature of the Kingdom of God is being revealed, and hope that the world is different that it appears is being unleashed. We see that the sick are hopeful for a cure, the hungry for a meal, the tearful for a hearty laugh, and the prisoner for a second chance. Every time he steps onto dry land, he is mobbed, for he embodies the prophecy that the naked will be clothed, the blind will see, and the oppressed will be set free.

Listen: “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.”

The hope that Jesus embodies so overwhelms the people who encounter him, they run with abandon to people they do not know, who are too sick to walk, and carry them to the place where Jesus might walk, where they might reach out from a prone position and touch the fringe of his garment to be healed.

The word, “Fringe,” is important. Jesus is traveling along the fringes; he is not at the center of power in Jerusalem but in the far countryside of Galilee. He is not among the elite and ruling class, but among the people of the fringe, those who are ruled by the elite, and thereby oppressed.

Jesus is bringing hope that the oppression will end, not because the power in the center will change, but that a new power, a power of the Kingdom of God will take over from the fringe and edges and move to the center to make all things new.

So it always is with the hope that fuels the religious imagination that God reigns, and that peace and justice are possible.

## II.

In the height of the fight against Apartheid in South Africa, an interviewer, David Frost I believe, asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu if he were “optimistic” about the chances of a nonviolent movement succeeding in getting Nelson Mandela released from prison and blacks the vote.

“What do I have to be optimistic about?” Tutu replied.

But then he added, “But I believe we will succeed. I am a prisoner of hope.”

This is an allusion from the prophet Zechariah (9:12). “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.”

This sentiment echoes throughout scripture.

I particularly like the Apostle Paul’s observation about hope in God’s kingdom and Christ’s resurrection (I Cor. 9:10): “Whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop.”

The Catechism of the Episcopal Church asks, “What is the Christian hope?” The answer, “The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.”

## III.

But what about realism? Wasn’t Benjamin Franklin wise when he quipped, “He that lives on hope will die fasting?”

Indeed, we cannot live on “hope,” alone, but I have learned in my 56-year study of being human that we cannot live without hope, either. To live without hope is only to see the world—in its brokenness—as it is, and not to view the world as God would intend it to be.

Without hope, realism devolves into pessimism, or worse, cynicism. Existence can be bleak and life appear meaningless.

Often, realism serves as the handmaiden of oppression, while hope remains the currency of the poor. Hope purchases optimism for the oppressed when the ruling despots use force and injustice to make realism sour. We are told that it is futile to “Fight City Hall.” The only motivation to fight city hall is hope.

In Suzanne Robbins’, *The Hunger Games*, there is a telling exchange between President Snow, who fears that Katniss Everdeen’s victory will foment revolution in far-flung districts, and the game-master Seneca Crane, the one responsible to make the Games serve the needs of the oppressive empire.

President Snow says, "Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it's contained."

Seneca Crane asks: "So?" and Snow replies, "So, CONTAIN it."

In the gospel this morning, we see Snow's, and every despot's greatest fear, that hope, rather than being contained, is unleashed.

#### IV.

But what about you and me, right now, this morning? What does this mean for us, in our daily life that may be long on realism and short on hope?

Yes, there are people here this morning who need hope, and there are people here who can give hope. I suppose we all live on both sides of that equation.

I want everyone who feels hopeless today to feel they are in the right place.

When you need hope, find someone who has it. And when you have hope, give it away.

Hope inherently causes the person otherwise concerned with his/her life to consider others, to worry not just about what is best for one, but what is good for all. Hope unleashes generosity and cooperation whereas realism easily encourages hoarding and independence. Without hope, there is little motivation to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Hope is a spiritual discipline, a spiritual muscle that needs to be exercised. When cynicism starts to overtake, try hope.

When sarcasm seems the easiest reply to the abundant hope of another, let it pass and get on board.

Sometimes, we just need to be hopeful, because good things will flow from that.

Hopefulness doesn't calculate what is possible, but imagines what is necessary and gives the fuel to achieve it.

#### V.

In July, 1999, my first summer in Philadelphia, I took the Anglican Archbishop of Southern Africa, the Most Rev. Njongonkulu Ndungane, to see the Liberty Bell. Archbishop Ndugane followed Archbishop Tutu. For a few years in the early 1960's, Ndugane was imprisoned on Robben Island, with Nelson Mandela.

He had never seen the Liberty Bell, but it was quickly clear that the Archbishop knew much more about it than our Park Ranger guide, especially about the importance of the 25th chapter

from the Book of Leviticus inscribed on the bell, which reads, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

"The passage is not about 'Liberty' in an American sense, but refers to the year of Jubilee," the Archbishop told him, "which comes every fifty years. Remember the bell was commissioned on the 50th anniversary of the Charter of Privileges that guaranteed freedoms. This liberty is from God, a liberty of righteousness where no person or nation oppresses the other, where people are free from slavery, debt, hunger and injustice. It is the liberty of perfect peace."

The tour guide, looking like a deer stuck in the headlights, said, "Why do you know so much about our bell?"

"On Robben Island," he replied, "We heard about this bell, and we hoped it to be true. Now I see it is."

I was reminded that all liberation, be it personal or political, begins in hope.

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