

Sermon: “A Living Hope” 19 April 20

Alison Li

Seven weeks ago, at the beginning of Lent, I explored the idea of a crucible, little realizing that we were about to be thrown into one of global proportions. Today, the first Sunday after Easter, we begin a new six-week sermon series on the subject of “Hope.” When the Preaching Team decided on Hope as our theme some time ago, we of course recognized that it was an important subject, but I, for one, had no idea how different the world would look today, how sorely we would be in need of hope, and just how difficult it would be to find words that don’t seem inadequate.

Over the next six weeks, we will be examining hope from many different perspectives and I would like to begin by trying to understand what hope is. At its core, I suggest that hope is an act of the imagination, the ability to envision a desired outcome. Our imagination is a wonderful faculty. We see it expressed so vividly by our children and tapped so fruitfully by our artists. But in recent weeks, perhaps your imagination, like mine, has been walloped by dizzying numbers, swooping curves, and bleak scenes of empty streets and crowded wards. Perhaps it has been tearing, frenzied through a myriad of possible outcomes.

In our day of hyper-connectivity, it is all too easy to be swamped by a constant newsfeed of dread and we know our imaginations can turn destructive if left to run unchecked. How are we to be channels of God’s hope if we ourselves are filled with anxiety and despair? How do we face grim realities squarely, yet find the courage to persevere?

Thankfully the Bible’s vision of hope is not some sunny, light-weight, optimist’s hope. It is a muscular thing. It can be a steadying companion to confusion, anger, grief, and loss; it can stand alongside all the heavy feelings that it is completely legitimate for us to have right now.

The pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson has a wonderful image: he says hope is “imagination put in the harness of faith.” It is a view of hope, not as an emotion that happens to us, but as a deliberate act.

The scale of what we are experiencing during this global pandemic is staggering, and it is quite right that we hear the words “historical” and “unprecedented” being used so often. This crisis is giving us a vivid sense of our fragility and our indissoluble connection to all of humanity and to our planet. But in another sense, as an individual human experience, it is all *too* preceded. There is nothing we are going through that has not been experienced by people in times past and in our own time. Piercing grief, turmoil, dislocation, illness, pain, loneliness, uncertainty and fear, has been—and is—very much a daily reality for too many people in our world.

In the pages of the Bible, we hear the words of generations past who in their distress have cried out to God. Our scripture reading today is from the first epistle of Peter which was written to the communities of believers in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor to offer encouragement during a time of suffering.

The author says this to them:

“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” [1 Peter 1:3]

A living hope. What does it mean to say that hope is living? It may suggest a hope that is vigorous, incorruptible, and sure. We might also think of the fact that living things need to be fed and nurtured. Living things respond to their environments and adapt to change. They maintain homeostasis, continually making tiny adjustments to keep an internal equilibrium in the face of external challenges. Living things develop and multiply. So, if hope is a living thing, how do we cultivate it, ensure it has what it needs to flourish? How do we foster a hope that is nimble and responsive? How do we cultivate a hope that grows?

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, he offers this encouragement:

“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.” [2 Timothy 1:7]

This spirit of boldness and self-command is the same spirit that sustains us in our time. As the ground seems to shift beneath us, it may seem that we must constantly grapple with changing advice, juggle fresh challenges, master new skills, and to strive to maintain that dynamic balancing act. This is time to draw on our reserves of courage, energy, and inventiveness, to act with resolve and fortitude. It is time to feed hope in a disciplined and determined way. It is time to yoke our imaginations in the service of God’s work.

The writer Rebecca Solnit speaks of the importance of creating litanies of hope, by which she means recitations of victories to keep us from forgetting that many of the things we now take for granted—from the abolition of slavery to the gaining of the vote for women--were once only distant dreams that were won through the long, determined efforts of individuals who shared a vision for a better future.¹ There is great power in sharing stories. Let us tell of acts of courage and beauty, acts of ingenuity and resourcefulness--of scientists and engineers re-orienting their research efforts to combat a virus no one had heard of only a short time ago, of nurses and doctors in scrubs who tweet out songs of stubborn joy, of librarians who pivot from packing books to parceling food hampers, and caterers who scale-up to feed the most vulnerable. Of delivery people, grocery clerks, and care workers who carry on caring. Let us tell of acts of loving our neighbor, stories that let us see God’s work being done right in the midst of this viral scourge. Let’s string together

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the dark: untold histories, wild possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2004, 2016).

stories that will sustain us and give us the strength for another day. And let's allow these stories to spark our imaginations to find meaningful ways to contribute.

Especially now, when the previously unthinkable has suddenly become fact, when dramatic shifts in power are conceivable, and existing inequities are amplified, let us be vigilant to ensure that whatever changes *do* settle out of this pandemic will be ones that are shaped by justice, peace, compassion, and human dignity. Let's exercise our imaginations to envision not just a "return to normal"—though I suspect we will never again take for granted all the beautiful simple joys contained by that word "normal"—let us envision something better.

A living hope means, above all, a hope that is founded in a living God. As it says in today's scripture, "for a little while," we may have to "suffer various trials." We must support each other as we stumble onward, helping each other imagine the day when we will get through this, re-emerge, and rebuild a better "normal." For our hope is in the God of Easter, who exists beyond the constraints of space and time, beyond death and life. With Peter, we "rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." AMEN

SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.