

“Still A Bouyant Utterance of Hope”

Psalms 34:1-4, 19-22

Mark 10:46-52

As I did last week, I have reached back into the bag from three years ago for a place to start with our conversation with the texts for today. After reading the texts, I asked:

What do you hope for? Is it something tangible or something more abstract? Can you explain it to your closest friends or family, or do you hold it tight to your own heart? Does what you hope for leave you longing for more or does it feed you and inspire you?

I continued by sharing the powerful story of a shipman, John Newton, who was forced to join the Royal Navy and while at sea, was disgraced, relieved of his post, and traded for another man from a passing slave ship. He contracted malaria and was the victim of abuse. While at sea, a violent storm brewed and left him alone to captain the vessel. As Newton returned to shore, he confessed that through the dangers, toils, and snares, it was only the grace of God that could have saved him. John Newton would go on to write the words to “Amazing Grace,” one of the most profound anthems of hope still to this day, as God’s amazing grace is our greatest source of hope for all life throws at us.

I highlighted then and it is still true today, that one of the greatest written sources of hope we can turn to are the Psalms. The Psalms are a compilation of inspirations that instruct us to praise God for unsurpassable glory, to trust God for unquenchable love, and to rely on God for unfailing nurture and grace. What they teach us is that amidst the challenges over the course of our lives, God will answer our prayers, dwell with us in our fear and loneliness, and give to the faithful every good thing. The psalms remind us of a God who has a reputation for listening to the cries voiced by the hopeless (Abel in Genesis 4:10, Ishmael in Genesis 21:17, the Hebrews in Exodus 2:23-24). The psalms remind us that God is responsive to human needs; God redeems, drawing us out from one world into another; God saves, delivering and rescuing us from what restricts or oppresses us. In specific reference to Psalm 34, I highlighted that Psalm 34 is an utter praise and thanksgiving to God for deliverance from trouble and the fear of what comes next. It is fear that often keeps us from hope.

If one source of hope is good then two sources of hope is better, right? I also highlighted that another great source of hope we can turn to are the gospels, which seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ as God’s Son sent to save the world; sent to give us hope in an otherwise hopeless life defined by sin. In the gospels we encounter God incarnate, Jesus, who, rather than ignoring those others would ignore or conveniently not see, Jesus stops, listens, cares, and responds. The gospels portray a compassionate Christ who brings the good news of God’s victory over the physical brokenness of the world.

The gospels are filled with the good news of hope found in Christ. In specific reference to Mark 10, I highlighted that Mark 10:46-52 is the repetitive loud cry of the blind beggar sitting by the roadside waiting in hope and faith for Jesus, the only one he believed and witnessed would be willing and able to heal him.

In relationship to these two texts from three years ago, I proclaimed them as “a **buoyant utterance of hope** (Louis Stulman, FOTW, 201).”

I believe today, as we hear these stories of God’s deliverance and healing again, they are still a buoyant utterance of hope for us. They still invite us to ask ourselves and remind ourselves what it is we hope for and where it is, or to whom, we place our hope in life? In addition, they invite us into a consideration of how we are to live into our hope.

Hear this if you don’t hear anything else. HOPE in God, floats! It is HOPE in God that leads us to God’s power to deliver and heal; overcome fear and misdirection; give purpose and inspiration. To be clear, what I believe these texts lead us to is that God is the key to hope. Without God, hope is not truly hope, just wishful thinking. Therefore, we need to recognize that it is HOPE in God that moves us from the concept of “Livin’ on a Prayer” as Bon Jovi sings, to being a “living prayer” as Jesus proclaims. What is the difference you might ask? The concept of “Livin’ on a Prayer” carries with it a wishful set of emotions, whereas being a “living prayer” works with God in building hope as a life raft in which to depend.

As we, with all life has to throw at us, still have a buoyant utterance of hope in God, it is here, on how we can all live into our hope in God beyond wishful thinking, in which I would like to focus today.

To desire or long for hope is to desire “all shall be well.” David Cunningham, in an article “Getting into the Habit of Hope” (Journal for Preachers, Advent 2021), writes, “Few of the sayings of the medieval mystics are as well known to Christians as is this brief phrase from the 14th Century English anchorite Julian of Norwich. Many may even know the slightly longer phrasing: “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Of all the memorable language of the Christian tradition, this phrase might best express the sense of hope to which we are called as followers of Christ.”

Julian’s words are a part of her *Showings*, a series of fifteen divine revelations that she received and recorded when she was- so she thought- on her deathbed. She was gravely ill and in considerable pain. So, we can be certain that for Julian at least, her words of assurance were neither felt nor meant as sunny optimism. She has experienced pain and suffering and loss, so it must have caused her a certain amount of existential angst to write that “all shall be well.”

What about us, are we able to say, “all shall be well”? Can we really generate that level of hopefulness?

“Hope is often portrayed as a feeling: a person’s inner disposition toward the world. Understood in this way, it is easy to understand the usefulness and disadvantages of hope. Those who can cultivate a feeling of optimism about the future are appreciated for their positive attitude and, at the same time, roundly criticized for their inattention to everything that has transpired. And in a parallel way, those who cannot muster up feelings of hope are lauded for their clear-sightedness, and yet also disparaged for being killjoys and making us feel guilty for any trace of optimism that we might have left. These difficulties,” Cunningham states, “stem from a misunderstanding of hope. As long as we think of hope as a kind of inner feeling of optimism, it will always face the challenge of being too much or not enough.”

Cunningham continues, “Hope, however, is not an inner feeling, but a virtue; a particular character trait developed overtime by certain good habits. Hope is not a mere feeling we can summon up on the spot, just because we think it would be good to be hopeful from time to time. Being hopeful requires practice. It requires us to be in distinctly un-hopeful situations, committing ourselves to whatever degree of hope we can manage. When we face such difficulties and make it through to the other side, whatever hope we have been able to generate will nudge us toward hope as a habit: a positive character trait, a virtue.”

Paul addresses hope as a virtue when he writes, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope (Romans 5:3-4).” In reflection to Paul’s address, Cunningham comments, “Getting in the habit of hope was the goal of the Christian life rather than some weak silver lining around some nasty grey cloud.”

This insight from Paul helps us learn more about hope as a virtue and that we really do need endurance and character in order to be hopeful, because there are so many reasons in life that call hope into question. Think about our sins, the state of the world, and the terrible things people do to one another (even while attempting to be church). All of these are good reasons we have given ourselves not to have hope (in God, one another, the church...) and therefore, all are good reasons to remind ourselves of God’s goodness that has endured from generation to generation and redouble our efforts to cultivate hope.

Do we long for more hope in our lives? One way to experience more hope is to help cultivate hope by doing things that require hope. We become courageous through acts of bravery; we become people of faith by believing; we become hopeful people by doing hopeful things. Consider these small but hopeful acts: planning a trip even though we might not be able to

take it; greeting strangers, despite the meager chance that they will become our friends; planting a tree knowing that we will not see its fruits for many years, if ever.

Cultivating Hope can also be fun. Put items in unmarked boxes with no dates attached and scatter them randomly throughout the house. Don't count how many you've done; just fill them until you run out of things and leave a few completely empty. Open one box each day- hopefully.

We all need hope. Hope in God first and foremost. As Christians, we must remember that we are citizens of heaven. As citizens of heaven that means our life here on earth is not all but only part of our journey. It is as if our individual lives are like single ships a drift at sea, and we are all looking and waiting for a dock of deliverance, healing, safety, and salvation.

When life was dark and dim and seemingly gone, Julian of Norwich expressed hope that "All shall be well." I think what she declared was that with hope in God, there is nothing that will not be well, nothing that will not ultimately be redeemed. I think this is at the very foundation of the Christian faith. Because if we are hopeful knowing that all shall be well, we will not really need to know whether... (you name it)... will come or not, because all shall be well, regardless.

In God, we still have a buoyant utterance of hope. HOPE in God, floats!

Let all God's people say... Amen.