

Romans 8: 24-25

Where Are You God?: Finding Hope in our Time

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This week we begin a new worship theme that will take us through Christmas. Our theme is hope. Today we start Advent, the season of preparing for the birth of Jesus. In Christian Churches everywhere around the world we begin to take a journey together as collectively we remember the story of the birth of Jesus. During Advent we remember the ancient prophets who reminded the Hebrew people that God would never forsake them or forget them. We recall the people like John the Baptist who predicted that God was about to send someone who would change the world, and answer every prayer. We re-tell the story of how Angel Gabriel came to Mary and Joseph had dreams. We re-call that shepherds waiting on a hillside for something they did not know was coming, but which transformed their lives. Each Sunday between now and January we will be talking about this story in terms of how it is a story of hope. The birth of Jesus came to the world in a time when people felt particularly lost and weary. The people felt as though God had forsaken them, and so the birth of Jesus is a story of hope. The candle we lit this morning sets the tone for all that will follow. It is the candle of hope.

Now you might imagine that we turn to the Bible in Advent because the people here lived with perfect hope and faith. However, the Bible is a story about some of the most unlucky people in human history. A band of slaves set free to start their own nation, they were buffeted about by the winds of fate. You would have thought no one would care about them, because they were that inconsequential. But they had the poor judgment to think that God wanted them to settle on the land east of the Mediterranean Sea a region of the world which has shown itself incapable of peace for at least thirty five centuries. And in those pockets of time when peace did prevail it was almost by accident, and could not last. The people of Israel had settled in the hinge between Europe and Asia and Africa. The Jews could not have mattered less to the powerful empires of

history but their land was strategic for everyone. Powerful empires on all three continents have always been grasping for this small strip of land.

Israel was perpetually under attack – the Philistines, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Seleucids, and of course all the big empires ran right over Israel: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Like mice caught on a field of large cats, the Israelites were the perpetual underdogs, always up against enemies who were stronger, nastier, and more violent. The fact they survived at all was something of a miracle. Schooled in disappointment, however, the people of the Bible never gave up. Civilizations have come and gone and the world has lost touch with their wisdom. But somehow these people who wrote this sacred text inspires people still, in part because it can teach us, who have so much more, how to live with hope.

Let's take a look.

In the first place, and this is my only point today. Hope is not logical. Hope is stubborn. Hope is subversive. Hope is the original outside the box thinking. Hope takes a leap of faith. It is the stubborn refusal to give up. The passage we read today comes from a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. Paul had been starting churches for 10 years when he wrote this letter. We think of Paul as an early founder of the church but he was not popular with the other disciples. He and Peter did not get along. Peter was running the church in Jerusalem, but Paul had been pushed out into Greece and Turkey for the harder assignment of starting churches among the Gentiles. One of these churches was in Rome. We are used to thinking of Rome as the headquarters of Christianity but at the time it was a long shot to start a church that worshipped a man whom the Romans had crucified right inside the Roman headquarters. The church in Rome was shaky and contained a coalition of Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah and Gentiles attracted to his teachings and faith. Never an easy coalition, the Jews ran the church and the Gentiles knew their place. But then in 47 CE Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome and the Gentiles took control of this fledgling Christian community in Rome.

Paul knew it was a miracle this community existed and his letter- considered the greatest of his writings – was sent to offer encouragement to these folks. He talks about the human condition and how we have so little control over so many things in life. Then he talks about faith and how you can choose whether to be

discouraged by all the things around you, or you can live with faith and hope. It is not logical. But we all have the power to choose. “We are saved in hope. If we see what we hope for that is not hope for who hopes for what they already see. But if we hope for what we don’t see we wait for it with patience. Romans 8 24-25

This was a hard week in our nation. Many of us believe that our country is strong because it is a huge melting pot and people from every race and nation have found a home here. But the story of the shooting of Michael Brown, a man who grew up in the heartland of this nation in a suburb of St. Louis has sickened us as a people and divided us as we strive to sort through its implications for our nation. Eighteen- year old Michael Brown was a black man shot dead on August 9th in Ferguson Missouri by 28-year old police officer Darren Wilson. A grand jury spent three months listening to evidence against Wilson and decided not to press charges. Yesterday Mr. Wilson resigned his from police work after weeks on administrative leave. The US Justice Department started a civil rights investigation into the shooting and a probe into the police practices in Ferguson. A lot of questions linger about the Grand Jury protocols, and racial profiling in the nation’s police departments. Why makes white people, even armed whites assume the worst when they meet a black person? This topic is more than we can tackle before Christmas, but the theme for January is Justice and I plan to dedicate a lot of pulpit time to thinking about how we can wrestle with our own racism. Things like this shake our hope in the justice system, and in the dream that in this nation we are creating a new kind of society.

But we are only defeated if we give in to feelings of hopelessness. We are defeated if we grow cynical and despair of ever making change. Tuesday night’s decision by the Grand Jury set off street protests all over the country from St. Louis to California to Massachusetts. In Roxbury, 1500 mostly young adults marched all the way across the Massachusetts Avenue Connector in an effort to close down I- 90 and I-91 before the police intervened and arrested many of them. There are lingering questions about police scuffles with the demonstrators, but to their credit the police dropped the charges to warnings and citations tantamount to traffic tickets. I find that hopeful. Hope is not logical. It is the ability to see the big picture. It is the ability to step back and analyze the true importance of what you are doing. It is the refusal to get into the weeds, but to keep your eye on what really matters.

Though it does not seem logical, we humans are born in hope and thrive when we remember that piece of God's plan. This week my daughter, Sarah, gave birth to her first child, a girl, on Thanksgiving. I spent the day yesterday with her and Paul and seven- pound Delilah Grace. I enjoyed watching Sarah and Paul and recognizing the way the bond of their togetherness has blossomed into a deep joy and wonder as they gaze at this new little person. But what struck me as I stared at this little baby is how illogical it is to send such vulnerable little creatures into the world. The crown of creature – human beings – begins as tiny beings utterly dependent, whose eyes cannot focus and whose reflexes prompt them to search for nourishment and strive to breathe and not much more. Each of us started this journey with an incredible leap of faith, that someone kind would catch us and that we'd land gently on this earth.

A plan like this, so precarious and wonderful, renews our hope whenever we see an infant. Total strangers will stop to congratulate you if you have a baby in your arms. I think it is because at the core of our being we know that God is hopeful for us. God has big dreams for us. God's hope for the world is unquenchable. Whatever you face this December- worries about your family, your work, the economy, the violence in our world. Whatever keeps you up at night and prays on your mind, I invite you to consider that God is way out ahead of us. God is watching over it all. God has not given up on the world. God does the best work of all when things look bleak.

Emily Dickinson got it right:

Hope is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul,
and sings the tune--without the words,
and never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
and sore must be the storm
that could abash the little bird
that kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
and on the strangest sea;
yet, never, in extremity,
it asked a crumb of me.