

“Real hope”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
All Saints Sunday — November 3, 2019

Ephesians 1:11-23

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Here we are again on All Saints Sunday, as we remember all the ordinary, holy people who made our lives possible, who built this church, worshiped where you sit now, lit candles and spoke other names, whose voices filled this hall, whose children ran laughing through these aisles. We remember all the people we loved, all the people who made us who we are. Never perfect, not always even good, but always the beloved children of God.

We come here because we want hope. We want this hope that Paul describes, when he says, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe.”

The truth is, though, that sometimes we don’t feel very hopeful. Sometimes we don’t even know what hope is. We know what it’s not; it’s not these cheap knock-offs that people offer us: platitudes and advice, a spirit of optimism—turn that frown upside down. We know that we can put our hope in the wrong things, thinking that our career or family or technology will save us. We know that hope can be fragile. You hope that God will save your loved one—and God doesn’t. You hope that God will spare you this pain—and God doesn’t. And all this talk about God’s plan, about heaven and how it will all be better someday, just doesn’t mean anything today—because today you miss them, today you don’t even have the energy to think about someday; today there’s just this hurt.

So where—where is the hope that is real? Where is the hope that does not deny but embraces and tunnels through the dark? The hope that sings—sings us back into the light?

I have spent days—truthfully, years—wrestling with this question. And I keep coming back to this one thought: To give us hope, God could have sent any number of prophets with sage wisdom to offer. God could have torn open the heavens and revealed them to us. God could have lulled us to peace with the song of angels. God could have commanded us to be stronger. Instead, God got down in the muck and the dark, and suffered with us, felt the absence of hope that says over and over again, “My God, why have you abandoned me?”

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ—that God enters our existence, not someday but today,¹ and gives us real hope, not with promises or visions or advice, but with presence, with Emmanuel, “God with us.” He takes us by the hand and he shows us the way out of this pit, because he’s been here before.

¹ This idea of “not someday, but today” is inspired by Jan Richardson. See benediction.

We think of hope as something we produce and thus can run out of; it's a choice, a feeling. People tell us to hold on to hope, as if hope were a switch we could flip inside us. But Paul describes hope with very different language; he describes hope as an "inheritance," a gift, a grace.

Many of you have heard me recite the poetry of Jan Richardson. Jan is a pastor, an artist, and a writer. What you may not know is that her husband died not four years into their marriage; he died suddenly, during the surgery that was supposed to help him. Jan recounts how she and her friends hoped and hoped that he would be OK, and when he died, she felt no capacity to hope any longer. Her will was smashed. And yet, she writes that a stubborn hope persisted, in defiance of every feeling in her. She writes, "In the midst of my grief, what I know is that hope, inexplicably, has not left me... That it lives in me like a muscle that keeps reaching and stretching or a lung that keeps working even when I do not will it."

The hope that Jan describes is the only real hope—the kind that clings when we have none left ourselves. It is Jesus Christ; it is God working in us. It is, as Paul writes, a power that moves through us, driving us onward to resurrection, to life—always to life, in this existence and beyond.

That's the first thing we have to understand—that hope is grace. The second is that hope isn't individual; it's collective. Paul speaks in the plural. Hope moves through all of us, and the more we are together, the stronger it is.

There's this old story, passed down in the Hasidic community, of a disciple and his rabbi sitting, late one night, around a campfire. The disciple asks his master what it means to be a community. For a long time, the rabbi doesn't answer; they watch the flames slowly disappear, leaving only a heap of glowing coals. It's then that the rabbi takes one of the coals and sets it far from the others. They watch as it becomes cold and gray. The rabbi says, "You have your answer."²

The fire that burns in us, the hope that moves through us, needs us to be together. This is the communion of saints. And it's what hope has been working for all along. Right before our reading today, Paul describes a "mystery" that has been working since the beginning of time: "to gather up all things in Christ." The purpose of this hope—this Christ—moving through us is to reunite all the scattered coals gone gray and cold, to reignite the fire by bringing us together, not just with one another, but with God, until we become, as Paul writes, "the fullness of him who fills all in all." Hope drives us to the realization that God is all, and all is God, and separation is but an illusion, death being the greatest fraud of them all. Our hope, in Christ, is this: that what binds us cannot be severed, that what drives me drives you, binding us together, and if it binds us in this life, it binds us in the next, binds us for all eternity. It is the love of God.

The proof of this hope is in its capacity to resurrect us, not someday, but today. It is what allows us to open ourselves every day to this life, and all its hurt and all its love, to grieve and rejoice, to persist. It is what breathed in Midge Drummond and all the saints we remember today; what

² Robert Dunham relates this story.

breathes in Jenna and me; what breathes in Jan and her writing; what breathes in you—after losses that should have crushed us, buried us. It is what compels us every day to get up and live.

Real hope—the kind that makes it possible to stand here and speak these names—is the realization that there’s something bigger than us, stronger than us, willing us every day to resurrection. And it won’t stop—he won’t stop—until every one of us is fully, truly, joyfully, alive. **Amen.**

BENEDICTION

The blessing I offer you today is not my own; it of course never is. Today’s blessing was written by Jan Richardson, on the one-year anniversary of her husband’s death. It’s called “A Blessing of Hope”:

*So may we know
the hope
that is not just
for someday
but for this day—
here, now,
in this moment
that opens to us:*

*hope not made
of wishes but of substance,*

*hope made of sinew
and muscle, and bone,*

*hope that has breath
and a beating heart,*

*hope that will not
keep quiet
and be polite,*

*hope that knows
how to holler
when it is called for,*

*hope that knows
how to sing
when there seems
little cause,*

*hope that raises us
from the dead—*

*not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.*

Amen.