

“Abounding in Hope”  
Lamentations 3:21-22;  
Romans 15:3-13; Matthew 12:14-21

December 1, 2013  
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Hope is an elusive word. William gave us a pretty good definition of it as he was lighting the Advent candle: having confidence that something that you expect or want to happen will happen. That's pretty general, isn't it? Some general expectation that you have that something you want to happen will happen. That's hope, but generally. I think we can begin to think a little more about what our actual hopes are.

Even Paul suggests that hope is pretty elusive. He says, “Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what is seen?” Hope is one of those things we can't quite grab because it's that thing we can't quite see. And yet it plays an important role in our lives.

So, what are our hopes? What are your hopes? What are the hopes you have and what is the basis for those hopes? So many times, when a microphone is put in front of someone's face in front of a group of people and they are asked, “What do you hope for?” the most common answer, I think, is “world peace.” When we think broadly, we think of those wonderful things we might want to have, like world peace. Sometimes I think, these days we might just say, “rationality,” “the ability to actually get something done,” “reasonableness,” “civility.” We hope for things. That's on a grander scale. We can think of other things we might want. We might want healing for the folks who have gone through the ravages of a typhoon. We might hope for the ceasing of conflicts in certain places. We can begin to place our hopes on a larger scale.

Then, what is it that we hope for when we come down to our own scale? I began to think about this and it felt like there were some categories. Sometimes I hope for more of something—more money, more work, more grace, more fellowship, more time together. So one of the things I hope for is more of something.

Another kind of hope is that finally something will happen. Finally the family will all be together in the same place, finally I will get that job, finally I'll graduate, finally I'll get the car that I want, finally... (fill in the blank).

There's also the beginning kind of hope. I hope to begin to exercise more. That's a New Year kind of thing. We do that a lot with our resolutions. I hope to begin to eat right. I hope to get together more with friends. I hope to change my behavior. I hope this piece of work will change. I hope to do this differently. So there's a beginning kind of hope.

As we deal with all these different hopes, we begin to recognize how important hope is. Indeed, in Christianity the symbol for hope is the anchor because there's a way we recognize that hope anchors us in the midst of the wild and changing seas of life. We need that hope.

It also suggests that there's another side that goes with hope. I read someplace that depression is the opposite of hope, but I don't think that's true. I'm not sure what the opposite of hope is, but there seems to be something that goes with it, and that seems to be anxiety. In fact, in one of our Christmas carols we sing that all our hopes and fears are born in Thee tonight. It's interesting, that phrase went through my mind, and I thought, "Why are those two together?" Then I thought about it. The other side of hope is anxiety or fear. A certain fear that things won't happen the way I hope they will, or have confidence they will, or even think they will or think they should.

I have a glass with a little bit of water in it. Generally we talk about a glass that is half empty or half full—are you an optimist or a pessimist? But this isn't even half way. Suppose I drink some. As the water level goes down, what do we think about? Pretty soon, it will be gone. There's a little anxiety about something being gone, a fear. We think about things that have gone in our lives, never to happen again. Choices made that have determined directions for us. It's easy to think about what's gone.

An empty glass—it made me think about what's gone. But there's another way to think about it. What else is an empty glass? It's an opportunity. I now have something I can fill. We think about the fullness of our life that has gone—we have drunk it. Now we have the opportunity to refill, to fill again.

It's hard though, isn't it? When we begin to think of things going away, there is a certain anxiety, a certain fear, even. A fear of the emptiness, but the emptiness can also be an opportunity—an opportunity to allow God to enter again, a place to open our lives to God. Not sure what will come next. Will there be water again? Will the Spirit move and fill our lives?

So we think about the nature of hope. It's that ability to recognize the possibility, to think back on the promise, to think back on what has happened in our life and not see it simply as gone, but to see it as the foundation for what's next. To recognize in it that God was at work. Even if it's gone badly, the next part might go well especially when we open ourselves to the work of God.

So hope is an interesting, interesting thing. We are lucky. We not only have all the prophets, but we have the remembrance that we have. Gathering around the table is a way of reminding us of the one who came who holds us together and invites us into the fellowship of faith, who enables us to know the hope of God.

The Israelites, as they were waiting, hoped for a Savior. In some ways, they hoped the glass would be overfilled immediately. The Romans would be pushed out. Their hope actually was violent. They wanted those Romans defeated and gone. They wanted to be in control. God has a way of surprising us sometimes, of fulfilling our hopes in ways we may not have expected. As Jesus reflects on the passage from Isaiah, there's a real gentleness in it. He's talking about justice coming to victory, but it's not a justice that simply wipes people out.

It's interesting how Christianity moved, isn't it? People began to hear about it, care about it, to encounter the love of God in Jesus Christ and become communities. As those communities grew and spread, it changed the world. If we look back at the nature of the world in 30 AD, it was very different. God has been at work and it is through seeing God at work that we can continue to hope.

We know the promises and the grace. It's there. We have hope through God as we open our hearts and lives to our God. We have the encouragement, as it says in the scripture today. We have the encouragement and the steadfastness of scriptures that tell us about the steadfast love and everlasting mercies of God. We have that promise to go forward with, and we know the grace of Christ bringing the victory of justice into our lives. It's sometimes hard to see. Hope seen isn't hope. But as we rest in it, trust in God, our hopes are filled. Our lives are filled and refilled.

So I am reminded of what Paul wrote: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Spirit.

Prayer:

Lord, the hardest times seem to be those times where we feel the emptiness or we recognize the removal of things in our lives, the things we can no longer hold on to. In wondering what will come, help us trust in you. Open our hearts and our lives to you through a confidence in what you have said, the promises you have given, the grace you have shown us, so we have hope and follow you. Our lives are made so much richer. The emptiness refills. Lord, you are a God of hope because you are trustworthy and grace-filled. So we come, Lord, asking once again that our hope be renewed and that as we gather, we are reminded that you are a God who is good, whose mercies are new every morning. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen