

Accounting for Hope

Who will harm you if you are zealous for good? But happy are you, even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don't be terrified or upset by them. Instead, regard Christ the Lord as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it. Yet do this with respectful humility, maintaining a good conscience. Act in this way so that those who malign your good lifestyle in Christ may be ashamed when they slander you. It is better to suffer for doing good (if this could possibly be God's will) than for doing evil.

Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous. He did this in order to bring you into the presence of God. Christ was put to death as a human, but made alive by the Spirit. And it was by the Spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison. In the past, these spirits were disobedient—when God patiently waited during the time of Noah. Noah built an ark in which a few (that is, eight) lives were rescued through water. Baptism is like that. It saves you now—not because it removes dirt from your body but because it is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at God's right side. Now that he has gone into heaven, he rules over all angels, authorities, and powers.

1 Pet. 3:13-22 (C.E.B.)

Some of you may recognize the name Amanda Gorman. She took the national stage as a poet when Joe Biden asked her to read a poem at his inauguration. Do you remember her?

I asked Lowell to read another one of her poems as a part of his introduction to our worship service today.¹ This poem is about hope from the perspective of grief. It was written at the beginning of the COVID shutdown when she saw evidence of hope in the midst of the fear we were all experiencing. Her poem includes this invitation:

*For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,
Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.
So, ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.*

Her words could easily become our prayer for today: “Show us how to find hope, if we ever lose it, O God.” But she isn't asking God to help us find hope. Instead, she says we already have the answer, if we don't ignore it. The answer lies in our grief. We simply need to learn how to give it purpose and use it.

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I don't know. Maybe her words resonate with me because I'm still living in grief, still trying to find my stride, if not my footing after the death of Melissa. The truth is I still find myself coming back to the Psalms of Lament, identifying with the prayers I find there.

Take this one, for example.

Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed?

¹ Amanda Gorman, “The Miracle of Morning.”

*Why are you so upset inside?
Hope in God!*

Ps. 42:5 (C.E.B.)

Rather than chiding myself for the waves of sadness I still feel, I try to follow the Psalmist's lead and encourage myself to trust in God. Like Gorman's poem, there is an assurance, a confidence that hope is present, even when I feel like I'm grasping with a sense of uncertainty.

Hope in God. And so today, I also invite you to join me as we find ways to place our hope in God together.

Let's pray:

*Living God,
by the power of your Spirit,
help us to hear your holy word,
that we may truly understand;
that, understanding, we may believe;
and believing, we may follow
in faithfulness and obedience,
seeking your honor and glory in all that we do,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.²*

"Hope in God," the Psalmist says. It's almost as if Peter has those words in his mind when he writes his to Christians dispersed throughout the world (1 Pet. 1:1).

Hope in God.

But what does hope look like? Specifically, we want to know not just Webster's definition, but the biblical definition. We have to know what we are talking about before we can understand or experience biblical hope.

We typically use the word hope in one of three different ways.

1. Hope is the desire for something good in the future. The children might say, "I hope daddy gets home early tonight so we have time to play." Hope is their desire for him to get home early, a longing.
2. Hope is also the good thing in the future that we are desiring. We say, "Our hope is that Gail will arrive safely." Gail's safe arrival is the object of our hope.
3. And hope is the reason why our hope might indeed come to pass. We say, "A good tailwind is our only hope of arriving on time." In other words, the tailwind is the reason we may, in fact, achieve the future good we desire. It's our only hope.

So hope is used in three senses:

1. A desire for something good in the future,
2. the thing in the future that we desire, and
3. the basis or reason for thinking that our desire may indeed be fulfilled.

All three of these uses are found in the Bible. And equally true, all three start with an assumption about uncertainty.

² *Voices Together*, # 911

- “I hope daddy gets home early,” means, “I don’t have any certainty that daddy will get home on time, I only desire that he does.”
- “Our hope is that Gail will arrive safely,” means, “We don’t know if she will or not, but that is our desire.”
- “A good tailwind is our only hope of arriving on time,” means, “A good tailwind would bring us to our desired goal, but we can’t be sure we will get one.”

In other words, when we express hope, we are expressing uncertainty. But that is not the biblical meaning of hope. Biblical hope is not just a desire for something good in the future; rather, biblical hope is a confident expectation of something good in the future. You could say hope is the future tense of faith.

Biblical hope not only desires something good for the future – it expects it to happen. And it not only expects it to happen – it is confident that it will happen. There is a certainty that the good we both expect and desire will be done.

“Hope in God!” doesn’t mean, “Cross your fingers.” It means, “expect great things from God.” It is an expression of trust in the certainty of God as we face the uncertainties of life.

Way back in October, Melissa Hofstetter came to visit us in person as we began working together toward an uncertain future. In her sermon that Sunday, Melissa told us that in Hebrew the word for “hope” (Tikvah) is the same word used for “rope” or “cord” – something that holds us together and brings hope.

We took her idea and using a cord created a Trinity knot, an ancient symbol representing the eternal, unbroken presence and interconnectedness of the triune God. Like a circle, there is no beginning and no end. This symbol of the rope in the shape of a Trinity knot reminded us that God is the One in whom we find hope.



She presented her insights as a discovery she made while preparing to meet with us and help us work through our grief and trauma together. What she didn’t know was how Hope Mennonite Church decided on its name. (I don’t think it has anything to do with a rope, by the way.) Of course, she didn’t know that. She didn’t ask. And until recently, I hadn’t thought to ask, either.

I do know that story has its roots in today’s scripture. So I’ve asked Eldon and Annette Chlumsky to tell us that story.

<< At the time of preaching, I didn’t know what they will tell us.>>

Eldon began by recognizing the three other people in the room who were at the retreat at Camp Mennoscah, before inviting Lori Regier to tell the specifics. The group had narrowed their choices down to two when someone offered “Hope” as an alternative, a name that was immediately acclaimed by the group. The pastor then worked with that name to connect it to our text from 1 Peter.

Since Easter, I’ve been reading and re-reading First Peter as part of my sermon preparation. As I said in one of my earlier sermons, the book was written to Christians who were disbursed throughout the world as a result of persecution. Some scholars suggest it was written during the reign of Nero, a man who seemed to find joy in being ruthless. You may have heard some of the stories about him.

For example,

- he kicked his own mother to death with his own boots;
- he set the city of Rome on fire and played his violin as the city of Rome burned;
- Nero took Christians and wrapped them in oil cloths and lit them on fire;

- he covered the heads of Christians with honey and buried them with only their heads above the ground so the pigs would come and eat them;
 - he fed the Christians to the lions in the gladiator games.
- I'm sure there are other stories. Some of them are even true!

Rome was the seat of government, but it was also recognized as the center of the world. It's why they say all roads lead to Rome.

Prior to his ascension, Romans had built an incredible highway system, allowing commerce to travel more easily. More importantly, it allowed Nero's armies to respond to uprisings anywhere in the empire.

But there was also a downside. Seneca, the famous Roman philosopher, said, "All gutters lead to Rome." All pollution. All vile. All depravity flows to Rome. For Seneca, Rome was the immoral cesspool of the empire, and Nero was at its center.

Despite its depravity – or maybe in response to it – Rome was also becoming the central location of the Christian faith. In the year 62, during the reign of Nero, four of the most influential followers of Jesus found themselves in Rome at the same time. Peter, Silas, John Mark, and Paul. They were all in Rome. In fact, it is from the arrival of Peter in Rome that the Roman Catholic Church dates the beginning of the papacy.

And there are some scholars who claim it was during this time that Peter wrote our text for today.

And in today's text, Peter reminds Christians of the importance of telling our story, of being ready and able to give an accounting of our hope (1 Pet. 15). Apparently that's why the early church leaders found themselves in Rome. If ever there was a place in need of God's love and grace, a place it felt as though hope was lost, it was Rome.

Of course, the same could be said of any place and time, including Wichita.

When Kathy Goering Reid gave us the report from the congregational survey, she said she believed we need to be better at telling our story. We've spent too much time fretting over Peter's insistence that we tell our story – with humility – that we have forgotten the focus of his point is to tell the story (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

It isn't hard to do. Just ask Eldon and Annette who told the story of how Hope got its name. If you don't know what to say, just pay attention when we talk about the work of the church in worship. Most weeks there is at least one thing worth repeating to someone when you leave this place.

Sometimes all we have to do is notice what God is doing, and we will find hope. In the words of Amanda Gorman again:

*I thought I'd awaken to a world in mourning.
Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.
But there's something different on this golden morning.
Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.*

*I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.
Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.
A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.
She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.*

As I read her words, I hear her say that when she looks around to see what is happening, she finds evidence of hope. Her words are an invitation to notice what God is doing. And once we have noticed, to give voice to it. It's why the Psalmist is so certain we can hope in God.

But I want to add, don't just hope in God. Give hope to the world. We do that by telling the story, the story of hope. It is the story of new life.

We are a resurrection people, after all.

So hope in God. Amen.

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