

“So That We Might Have Hope”

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

In the fall of 1949, the Dead River in Maine was diverted and a dam was built in order to create a reservoir that would serve as the hydroelectric power source for most of western Maine. In order to create the massive man-made lake, three small villages had to be flooded and in the months before the flooding began, an interesting thing happened. All improvements and repairs in the towns stopped. Houses began to fall apart, burned out lights were never replaced, people stopped mowing their grass, streets went unrepaired and the communities quickly became decaying ghost towns. As the time for the flooding drew closer, one resident was interviewed about his crumbling village and in response he said, “When there is no hope for the future, there is no life in the present.”

When there is no hope for the future, there is no life in the present. This simple proverb holds a great deal of wisdom and it can be applied to our lives in so many ways. Whether it has to do with our relationships or our jobs, our academic goals or even the sports we follow, without hope for a future, the things in the present lose all meaning, and nowhere does this truth have a more profound application than in our spiritual lives. It’s a principle that Paul understood very well and in today’s reading from Romans 15, he lays out in no uncertain terms the sure and certain source of our hope. Paul writes, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

In this one verse, Saint Paul reveals the very purpose of Scripture and he tells us that the reason the Bible was written was to give us hope! Now, before we go any further you need to understand that the definition of hope that we see in our culture is totally different from definition of hope Paul speaks of in this reading. In fact, the hope of the world is a completely self-centered hope. It is a *false* hope! It’s a hope based on us and what we are able to accomplish. There is no ground of certainty for this kind of hope because when it comes to our abilities, nothing is guaranteed!

Last month, when the Chicago Bulls lost their star point guard Derrick Rose to an injury, reporters immediately announced that “the hope for Chicago’s season was lost.” Now, whether or not you are a basketball fan, I want you to understand that this is a classic example of the kind hope that we see in the world. Worldly hope is always based on human efforts, but the truth is that in the end human efforts always fail. Athletes will get injured! Politicians will disappoint us! Heroes will fall from grace! And, as we saw very visibly this week in the passing of Nelson Mandela, death will be the ultimate reality for even the best of us. My friends, if our hope is built on the temporary foundations of this sinful world then, as Paul writes, “we are to be pitied more than all men” and we are truly hopeless (I Corinthians 15:19). *And that is why today’s text is so important!*

Today, we are told that the foundation for our hope and the certainty from which our lives take shape and the reason that we can face the future with confidence is revealed to us in God’s objective Word! And the message of the Word and the focus of Scripture and the central teaching of the Bible to which every word of Scripture points is that true hope is found only in Jesus Christ. In Genesis 3:15 God promised a savior and from that moment on the Bible focuses on that hope. In today’s reading from Romans Paul highlights our hope by quoting Isaiah who wrote, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; (and) in him will the Gentiles hope” (Romans 15:12). At the end of John’s Gospel we are told, “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ...and that by believing, you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

You see, in the Scriptures, hope is defined by something that God has already done. We say it every week in the words of the Creed: Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary, “so that we might have hope.” Jesus suffered and died on the cross for our sins, “so that we might have hope.” On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, “so that we might have hope.” And, as Paul tells us, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

Our hope is not based on something that we have to do. Scripture reveals that true hope is based on what Jesus has already done for us. Isaiah assures us of this in today's Old Testament lesson where we read that, "He will not judge according to what he sees...He will judge according to righteousness" (Isaiah 11:3-4) and on this promise we base all of our hope; that our eternal future will be determined not by what we have done, but by what Christ has done for us! This truth, revealed to us in Holy Scripture, is the heart of our faith! It is the core of our confidence! And, because the source of our hope is found and bound completely in Christ alone, *we can bring hope to others in our world simply by pointing to Him!*

Two weeks ago one of our members, Cathi Counterman, was involved in a heartbreaking and tragic accident. It was a Tuesday night and she was driving home on Stellohorn Road between Reed and Maplecrest. If you're familiar with the area, then you know that traffic moves pretty fast there and that this stretch of the road is also poorly lit. Like any of us, Cathi was processing the events of her day and thinking about the things she had to do when she got home, when suddenly a man appeared out of nowhere and walked right in front of her van. She slammed her foot on the brakes and was able to stop...but the SUV travelling in the next lane never saw the man coming. The driver struck the pedestrian head on and he was killed instantly. Cathi witnessed the entire episode and as the driver of the vehicle got out and realized what had happened he became hysterical. Cathi called 911 and as they stood together in the darkness waiting for help to come Cathi and the young driver named Felipe met for the first time.

Tragic experiences like this can have a bonding effect and over the next several days Cathi and Felipe began to talk. Cathi sent texts of encouragement and, even as she tried to deal with her own trauma from the fatal accident, she began to reach out to Felipe. Through Facebook and by simply talking with people at Emmanuel and other churches, Cathi first requested prayers for her devastated new friend, then she asked us to send Felipe notes of encouragement and hope. This is not something from which you easily recover and there's no doubt for both Cathi and Felipe this experience will be with them forever. But in His Word God has promised that, "in all things (He) works for the good of those...whom He has called" (Romans 8:28). And in the days that followed, hundreds of cards came pouring in to Felipe and in those cards Christian people from Emmanuel and other churches shared prayers, Bible verses, and encouraging words to let him know that even in this tragedy he was not alone. To put it another way, they shared the reason for the hope that they have.

Last week, Cathi came into my office and before I even had the chance to say "good morning" she began to tell me about the conversation she had with Felipe the night before. Felipe began by telling Cathi that for years, family members had encouraged him to take his faith seriously and to get connected to a church. Like many young people, Felipe had other things going on in his life and faith was not a priority. But then he went on to tell Cathi that in the days following the accident, he had been so overwhelmed by the care and kindness of people from Emmanuel and from other churches that he had connected with a church family and had actually been baptized on Sunday.

This is a difficult story. I hesitated to tell it today because I didn't want to downplay the tragic reality of this accident. There is a family in mourning and we need to pray for the loved ones of the man who was killed that night. They are hurting and they also need words of hope at this time. But I told this story because I want you to understand the impact that we can have as Christian people even in the most dire and daunting of circumstances. We have hope! And we can bring hope to bear in the lives of those around us. The truth is, there are people you work with and play with and even live with who have no hope for the future and consequently, their lives in the present have no meaning. For these brothers and sisters, Christ died! And in God's Word, He has revealed to us a hope based on the certainty and truth of what Christ has already done.

The false hope of this world is based on uncertainty and speculation. It is centered on ourselves and on things we can never do. But in Christ, we know the future...and in Christ, we have something to look forward to...and because of Jesus Christ, our lives have been changed in the present and they can make an eternal difference. And that is what hope is truly all about. Amen. And now, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13). Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold