

A Living Hope

II Corinthians 4:7-18

It's hard to believe, but this is already my 5th Sunday to be with you as your new pastor. I am grateful for all the prayers, uplifting comments, and the faithful witness and ministry that is part of this congregation. It has been a joy to get to know some of you on a more personal level at our meet and greets and to hear how this church has helped to shape your faith and to hear your hopes personally and for the life of our church. I look forward to what God has for us in the days ahead. As we work and serve together, we put our trust in a God who can do far more than we can ask or imagine!

Now that I have had the opportunity to preach for 4 weeks (or should I say 16 times) I hope that I haven't put too many people to sleep...at least I haven't heard any snoring from the pews. I am reminded of the story about a pastor who died and was waiting in line at the pearly gates. And ahead of him was this guy who was dressed with a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter addresses the guy," So who are you, so that I may know whether to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven? The man replied, My name is Joe Harris, I'm a taxi driver, from Noo Yawk City.' Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi driver, "Take this silken robe and this golden staff, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The taxi driver goes on through the pearly gates and then it was the pastor's turn. He stands of straight and in his best preacher's voice says, My name is Henry Snow, and I've been the Pastor of St. Stephen's for the past 43 years. Saint Peter consults his list. Then says to the minister, "Take this cotton robe and this wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of heaven." Well, this catches the pastor quite surprise and he says to St. Peter, " Now wait a minute, that man was a taxi driver and he gets the silken robe and golden staff." What's going on here? St. Peter replies, " you see, up here, we work by results. While you preached, people slept, while he drove, people prayed."

I hope you will continue to stay awake during my sermons, but the Sabbath is to be a day of rest, so if you need an occasional nap, I'll understand. Perhaps the more important part of that humorous story is the emphasis on people praying.

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And I hope that as we serve together, that you will keep me in your prayers as well as the ministry of our church, that as the body of Christ we can make a difference in our community and world.

Last week a mission team from our church travelled to the shores of New Jersey to continue the work of rebuilding homes that were devastated by hurricane Sandy. Thousands of homes were either lost or severely damaged in the storm. So many people whose lives were shattered and still even now almost 2 years after the storm are displaced, feeling confused, unsure where to turn. There are groups like our team that went out last week seeking to restore hope to people who feel like they have no hope. I wanted to show you just a few pictures of some of our mission team on the job doing God's work. (show slides of Sandy relief) Our United Methodist response to hurricane Sandy is seeking to rebuild 300-500 homes of the poor and elderly affected by that monster storm. Our conference's theme is simply titled: A Future with Hope. That's what these victims of the storm are longing for: something that will give them hope. Something that will bring them out of a state of desperation to the possibility of positive change.

There is a powerful statement found in I Peter that I often use in funeral and memorial services which describes our condition as followers of Jesus Christ: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! Sometimes referred to as a doxology. A doxology is a word of glory or a statement of praise. You know, like when we sing the doxology after receiving the offering...Praise God from whom all blessings flow. It is giving praise to God who is the source of all of our blessings.

It is a declaration that reminds us that in the midst of life's circumstances...the good times and the hard times we are people who can turn to a God who gives us hope. And I like how Peter describes it as a LIVING hope. In other words, it's active, it is present. It's not a hope like something we wish for, or a maybe will

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happen, or possibly we might experience it. No, we are a people with a Living Hope.

I want you to see the distinction: It's not this kind of hope...I hope I win the lottery, I hope tomorrow will be a nice day, I hope I get an A on this test. I guess you could call those things a wish list...those things revolve around our own desires and sometimes our selfish interests.

Living hope is different. As followers of Jesus Christ we put our hope in the Lord, not because we have the wish that God's promises might be true, but we have a certainty that they are true. Biblical hope is not founded on one's earthly desires, but rather it is standing on the promises of God.

This is how the apostle Paul states it in the book of Romans: For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. That's a living hope...it is something we hold on to, it's something we can live with everyday.

It does make a difference when we can see beyond our present circumstances, and when we believe that it is possible to see another reality.

From Parade magazine comes the story of a self-made millionaire, Eugene Lang, who greatly changed the lives of a sixth grade class in East Harlem. Mr. Lang had been asked to speak to a class of 59 sixth graders. Obviously not an easy task. He thought to himself: What can I say to inspire these students, most of whom would drop out of school. He wondered how he could get these kids who were from very poor homes and very trying circumstances to even look at him. He decided to scrap his notes, and just speak from his heart. He decided to make his message simply this: I want you to stay in school, and I'll help pay for the college tuition for every one of you. At that very moment the lives of those young students changed dramatically. Because for the first time they had hope. They had something they could depend on. As one child put it: I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was based on a real promise. The end result: Nearly 90% of that class went on to graduate from high school.

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It becomes very clear that when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he was not talking about a hope that was devoid of the trials of life. He wasn't sugar-coating this Christian journey, saying that as a Christian, you won't have any problems. No, he was speaking about real life. Life that can have major challenges, life that can be difficult and trying. Life that sometimes causes us to ask God why. It is part of that wrestling with questions of life and faith that we talked about last week. Hear again how this kind of faith, this living hope is described for us:

⁸" We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

This is not a hope that hides from life's struggles, the pain of suffering, times of feeling perplexed, or struck down. This treasure is in clay jars, That's an interesting way to put it, isn't it? A clay jar doesn't seem like a place to keep your treasures. Mary Fairchild in a devotional on overcoming despair puts it like this:

"Usually we would keep our valuable treasures in a vault, in a safety deposit box, or in a strong, protected place. A jar of clay is fragile, and easily broken. Upon further inspection, this jar of clay reveals flaws, chips, and cracks. It's not a vessel of great worth or monetary value, but rather a common, ordinary vessel.

We are that earthen vessel, that fragile clay pot! Our bodies, our outward appearance, our essential humanity, our physical disabilities, our shattered dreams, these are all elements of our jar of clay. None of these things can bring meaning or a sense of value to our lives. If we focus on our human side, despair is bound to set in."

What a difference it makes when we put our focus on what God can do rather trying to overcome our problems in our own strength. This vessel may be a fragile clay jar, but it allows us to discover that we can't do it ourselves, but that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

This morning I encourage you to put those things that weigh you down into the hands of God. They may be concerns about physical health, things that worry you,

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things that keep you up at night, family problems, financial concerns, memories of hurtful experiences in your past that still haunt you. And you know you're that jar of clay. There are chips and cracks and you feel like that jar can be easily broken. God wants to show you his extraordinary power...when you turn it all over to the Lord. When you let go, stop trying to manage it all yourself. Stop trying to wish for things to change, rather letting go and allowing God to be your source of strength and hope.

That's a Living hope...that's hope you can live with and hope that allows you to live in the midst of life's storms.

Today you come to the communion table. We believe that receiving communion is more than a remembrance, a memorial feast remembering Jesus' death on the cross. We also believe that in the partaking of this holy meal, Jesus is present with us. God's love and grace are real for us as we gather at the table. I ask you to come to the table today...come as a jar of clay, come with your needs, your hurts, whatever you may be trying to carry on your own, and give it to God. Believe that the One who went to the cross for our salvation, who carried the weight of our sin, is also able to carry the load in our hearts. Jesus has already won the victory for us. We sing it: Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. Come, to the table and allow God to reveal his power and strength. Come, trusting in God's care and promises. Come, as people with a living hope.