

“Getting to Hope”  
October 17, 2021

Jeremiah 29:10-14  
Romans 5:1-11

“And hope does not disappoint us...”

Hope, genuine hope, not wishful thinking, is in short supply these days.

Paul is straightforward about this authentic hope: it does not disappoint.

Oh, but we’ve become used to disappointment. Recalling the “hope” that many had at the beginning of the summer, someone said that the light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be just more tunnel. So it is that Rev. Sarai Rice, a minister at Plymouth UCC in Des Moines, was quoted in the Washington Post this past week saying: “The pandemic is the most stressful thing I can imagine, and it just goes on and on. In our own congregation it’s felt like every six weeks we readjust.”

That’s about right.

Genuine hope is in short supply.

Another translation of our text affirms: Such hope is not a fantasy.”

The fantasy that we *call* “hope” comes and goes in our lives. Many tend to feel hope when there is a modicum of good news to cling to—and when that vanishes, hope vanishes as well. So it was that many hoped for a return to “normal” when the vaccines rolled out early this year. The Delta variant and waning immunity over time meant that such hope faded. But now: booster shots! And hope returns.

This is the hope that disappoints.

The Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis helps us when she says that hope “is a way of living that we chose; and gradually, day by day, we learn to be graceful in it. Hope is a way of living beyond our own limited vision and natural fears, a way,” Davis says, “of living *into* God’s faithfulness and there finding fullness of joy forever.”<sup>1</sup>

How do we get to hope?

To choose the way of living that is hope is not always easy, because, as Paul suggests, the beginning of hope is often found in our own suffering. Paul was no more a stranger to the harsh realities of life than we are. So he could write of hardship, distress, and persecution, of famine, peril, and sword and still proclaim that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through God who loved us.”

You know how dangerously close we come to losing faith, hope, and love in times of deep suffering. The pain of illness, or abuse, or deprivation, or persecution, or grief weighs heavily upon us. The suffering of the world has been very much with us over the past 19 months now. Many of those nearest to the pain and sorrow of others are reaching their limits. Daily now we hear reports of health care workers simply walking away because they can’t take the pressure and the demands that the pandemic is placing upon them.

Suffering—your own personal suffering, the pain of others, the hurt of the world—challenges all that we are and all that we would want to be. We might want to avoid such challenges, avoid the deep pain of life, but often the only way out is through.

In difficult times we ask a lot of questions. I once read a list of what were called the “four *worst* best questions.” These questions are:

What are my problems?

What are my needs?

What are my concerns?

What are my weaknesses and shortcomings?

Such questions can leave us stuck where we are, growing in despair, depression, and despondency.<sup>2</sup>

Instead, I would ask you: as someone who has suffered, how did you get *through* it?

I would ask: as someone who has brought you current suffering with you today, how are you getting *through* this?

Sometimes the answer is with the support of family, or the understanding of friends, or the grounding provided by this congregation, the simple presence of a church. Sometimes we get through by putting one foot in front of the other, moving forward without seeing very far down the shadowed road ahead.

How did you get through it? Sometimes the answer is just: “I don’t know—but here I am.”

Very real threats to our well-being do not mean our defeat. John Calvin put it this way: “Though clouds obscure the clear view of the sun, they do not entirely deprive us of its light. So, in our adversity, the rays of God’s grace shine through darkness so that we need not give in to despair.”

However you got through—however you are getting through—Paul’s assessment rings true: “Suffering produces endurance.”

It does, doesn’t it?

Maybe you heard last week of the death of Eddie Jaku at the age of 101. He was the self-proclaimed “World’s Happiest Man.” He was also a survivor of both Buchenwald and Auschwitz.

After the War he married and moved to Australia. He said that after the birth of his first son: “my heart was healed and my happiness returned in abundance. I made the promise that from that day until the end of my life, to be happy, smile, be polite, helpful, and kind.” And he was a man, he said, “who has kept all those promises.”

Suffering produces endurance

I think it was M. Scott Peck who pointed out that all of us are survivors. We are the ones who have come through—often at great cost, often with great, unexpected growth. We have endured.

Ted Kooser, one-time Poet Laureate of the United States, wrote a poem that speaks of how we are able to continue as those who have survived. It is called “Mourners.” In just nine lines, Kooser tells of people coming together to mourn the death of a friend.

They came this afternoon to say goodbye,  
but now they keep saying hello and hello,  
peering into each other’s faces,  
slow to let go of each other’s hands.

Our endurance is nurtured by the support of others.

As we *endure*, something new develops within us. Paul calls this character. Endurance does not lead to perfection. Sometimes, in order to survive we take shortcuts because we are broken human beings, each of us hurting and being hurt.

But we have discovered that where the course of the world reaches its lowest point, where the groanings of our lives are most bitter, and where God seems nowhere to be found, in those very places we encounter the crucified and risen Christ. That encounter sustains us in the darkness—and we find ourselves changed people when the light finally returns.

God is for us, sustaining us in our weakness and despair. In every adversity, through every failure or loss, God is at work within us, remaking and renewing us. “God’s love,” Paul reminds us, “God’s love has flooded our hearts.”

Through suffering, through endurance, through the development of character, we are getting to hope—being able to choose a way beyond our limited vision and natural fears.

The hope that is not a fantasy takes us beyond positive thinking or wishing hard that something might happen.

The hope that is not a fantasy moves us forward—sometimes gently, sometimes with a push—into action because of God’s faithfulness.

Fall brings decay. Leaves drop, grass stops growing.

This is to say, fall is a time of hope. Now is the time, in these days of decay, to get out and dig in the soil, put bone meal into the ground, and cover bulbs with dirt and leaves. As Howard Thurman told us: “Fall accentuates the goodness of life and finds its truest meaning in the . . . breath of spring.”

It is the vision of what *can be* in the future that empowers us to act in the present. In hope we defy the despair and pain that are always so apparent. That’s what Paul was getting at when he said we “boast” or “exult” in our hope, turning ourselves once more toward the light that is the glory of God that we share.

What are you planting in these still difficult and often bleak days?

What is your hope that has grown out of your suffering, your endurance, your renewed character?

We get to hope; we choose to be people who become co-creators with God. We can gather up our strengths, our resources, and our opportunities and move toward the future that we desire and, indeed, the future that God desires for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis, *Preaching the Luminous Word*, pg. 252-253.

<sup>2</sup> Kennon Callahan, "Hope," in *Twelve Keys for Living*