

Care of the Soul: Holding on to Hope **Isaiah 40:31; Romans 8:24-25**

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Have you ever noticed how frequently the number forty appears in the Bible? There are 146 times in scripture that the number forty is mentioned. Think about it - the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years after escaping from Egypt, it rained for forty days during the great flood, and of course Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before beginning his ministry and then later appeared to his disciples forty days after his resurrection.

Biblical scholars agree that these stretches of time were not actually forty days or forty years, but that the number forty signifies a long period of time that is often a time of testing, trial, and tribulation. We have long since passed forty days since the start of the Covid pandemic as well as forty weeks. I pray it will be over by the time we reach forty months! However long it lasts, it has certainly felt like a long period of time defined by testing, trial, and tribulation!

This is the last of our Care of the Soul sermon series in which we have explored different ways of caring for ourselves and others at a spiritual level during the pandemic. We have looked at everything from authenticity and vulnerability to self-forgiveness, boundaries and self-care to seeking wisdom. Today, I would like to wrap up the series by looking at what sustains us as Christians during our own forty day trials - our hope. I emphasize “sustains us as Christians” because I believe that our hope - not based on empty words but rooted in the stories of God’s faithful presence with us and God’s promises to us - is one of the greatest gifts we, and our Jewish brothers and sisters, have to offer the world.

So, what is the difference between hope in a general sense and hope that is grounded in scripture? There are, of course, many experiences in life in which we find ourselves hoping. We may say, “I hope I get a good grade on my test” or “I hope I can find a parking place downtown”. These are wishes for things that are uncertain. This kind of hope speaks to something we desire but we don’t know if it will happen. At a more profound level, we might feel this kind of hope while fighting a battle with cancer or waiting for a child or spouse to come home from serving in a war. It is the uncertainty that feeds the hope.

Biblical hope is somewhat different, I think, because biblical hope is founded on just the opposite - on certainty, or as much certainty as we are able to muster. Biblical hope grows from our knowledge and experiences of God and our faith that, no matter what our challenges are in the moment, God goes ahead of us, working for life, overcoming evil with good, and presenting us with new opportunities, new beginnings, and new hope. That is resurrection hope, the hope that sustains us because we believe in something greater than ourselves working for the greater good.

One of the most powerful examples in U.S. history of this sort of faith-based hope is the civil rights movement. I recently watched an excellent documentary on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “King in the Wilderness”, and I was struck by how important the hope of the protesters was in sustaining them through bombings and beatings and political machinations meant to stop them. That hope was rooted in a deep belief in God’s goodness and justice, and it gave them the courage to stand at the funeral of three little girls killed in the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist

Church in Birmingham and sing, “We shall overcome. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.”

As people who believe in the goodness of God, much of our hope comes from the promise of the Kin-dom of God. I often say kin-dom rather than kingdom because it emphasizes the inclusive nature of the beloved community God envisions for us. In the kin-dom of God, we are all one human family and humanity lives together in harmony. Our community is just, everyone has food and equal opportunities to grow and learn, evil and hate no longer drive our behaviors. We are a human community characterized by love, justice, and abundant living. God has promised that some day the kin-dom will be fully realized. So, our hope comes from trust that the overarching trajectory of the world is toward that kin-dom.

Robert E. Kruschwitz, in his study guide on Faith and Ethics written for Baylor University, writes, “The Christian virtue of hope is a deep confidence that God provides encouragement, guidance, and assistance in becoming the people God calls us to be...Our hope is grounded in how God sees us, not in what we accomplish...Sometimes we get glimpses of the economy of God’s kingdom, in which we do not compete for wealth, prestige, or power, but each of us contributes to the flourishing of one another...These glimpses of the kingdom enable us to aim our lives coherently, knowing that the good of the whole will in the end prevail over what-ever is set against it.”

Yet, we all know that there are times when our faith waivers or we struggle to find that kind of deep, sustaining hope - especially over forty days or years! So, what can we do to find hope and to nurture it?

One option, suggested by Rev. Kathy Escobar in her book “A Weary World: Reflections for A Blue Christmas”, is to borrow hope. “Borrowing hope to me,” she said in an interview, “just means that we don’t always have to muster it up but we can look for it in other places (and people)”. Borrowing hope reminds us that we don’t struggle alone and that others who are struggling may have hope to spare. Who do you know who seems especially hopeful right now? Ask them what has sustained them and if you might borrow some hope from them. For example, imagine the spouse of a cancer patient who is just beginning treatment talking with the spouse of a patient whose treatment has been successful.

Alternatively, turn to scripture. Read the stories of people who put their hope in God’s promises despite horrible circumstances - Noah, the people of Israel, Moses, Joseph and his amazing, technicolor dream coat, Mary and Joseph, the apostle Paul, and, of course, Jesus. Or, read what Jesus said about the kin-dom of God, sometimes called the kin-dom of heaven. Read through the Beatitudes or Matthew 25 to understand what the kin-dom might look like. Comb through the Gospels looking for examples of Jesus’s compassion for the poor, the broken, even tax collectors, and his promise that love will ultimately defeat evil.

Another source of hope is stories that convey the goodness of people. After all, as Paul points out in the passage we heard from Romans 8, we often can’t see what we hope for. At this point, we can’t see the kin-dom of God fully realized. Nor are we able to see God. What we can see is how humanity reflects God and God’s work for goodness and wholeness, justice and peace.

One of the most hope-filled movies I've seen since the start of the pandemic is a documentary titled, "A Most Beautiful Thing". Released in 2019, it tells the story of the first all-black high school rowing team which came out of Manley High School on the west side of Chicago, an area of extreme poverty, rampant drug use, gangs and gunfire. We learn the story through interviews with the men who were on the team, their family members, principal, and coaches. These guys came from different neighborhoods ruled by rival gangs. They had missing fathers or drug-addicted mothers. They saw shootings more days than not and some had lost family members to gun violence.

Yet, for whatever reason, when a young white coach showed up to start a crew team at their high school, these guys signed up. There were tensions between them at first particularly because some represented rival gangs. Yet, they practiced together and worked out together and when they went out on the water together, they experienced a peacefulness they had never known on the city streets before. Over time, they became like brothers to each other.

Now, this story isn't all joy-filled. Of course, they struggled. They experienced racism, rejection by their peers, any number of mishaps on the water. They didn't win any meets and ultimately the team disbanded. BUT, some twenty years later, four of them had a reunion and decided to enter a race in Chicago. They wanted to show their kids and their community that there are paths out of poverty and gang crime. Not only that, but they also wanted their race to be an embodiment of hope. So, these black men, who had every reason to be bitterly angry and fearful of the police, contacted the Chicago police and invited four white, male police officers to join them. The group of eight, representing two completely different worlds and a long history of racism and violence, trained together, laughed together, and ultimately raced together.

It's an imperfect story about imperfect people, yet it is a profound example of God at work, building the kin-dom through us, as flawed and broken as we may be, and it offers us hope - hope for the future, hope for humanity.

There are examples of human reflecting God's goodness happening around us every day. We see it in the dedication of health care workers, in the commitment of teachers, in the kindness of neighbors. We hear of it in stories of good Samaritans and of people who spend their days off helping out at food shelters.

And, in fact, we grow in hope when we become a part of God's goodness in the world. We have made it this far. Now is the time for us to step out courageously and be part of building the kingdom - tackling racism, engaging with our community, making our church a microcosm of the kingdom and a symbol of hope. In my mind, that is where hope is found. A hope that is far greater than a mere wish but is rooted in faith. A hope that, as the prophet Isaiah says, renews our strength, lifts us like the wings of eagles, enables us to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. A hope that lasts long beyond forty days.

May it be so. Amen.