
HOPE OF THE NATIONS

ROMANS 15:4-13

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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In October 2020, I will have been an ordained minister for 20 years. Over these years, I've learned that to be a minister is more than being acquainted with the Bible; it is a calling to be acquainted with the human condition—to read scripture but to also read the world and to see the gospel at the intersections. Over these almost 20 years in the gospel ministry, I can say with early church father John Chrysostom, “What plunges us into disaster is not so much our sins as our despair.” If we only see ourselves trapped within the immediate world before us, we will plunge into despair. The “despair producers” are well known: “The failure of public institutions; the collapse of moral consensus; the failure of political nerve; growing economic inequity; and the pervasiveness of top-down violence against the vulnerable” (Walter Brueggemann). This doesn't even include the public display of the shortfall in integrity, kindness, compassion, and basic respect for the dignity of all people.

If all we perceive is an immediate terrorizing world, then despair will be the end game. If all we are consumed with is the latest news on impeachment hearings or recent scandals at a university or debates over climate change, we will be stuffing ourselves with despair. And despair may not be a sin, but it is a deficit in hope.

There is a deficit in hope, real hope. Not the elementary infantile kind that hopes for a parking spot right at the front of Best Buy for Black Friday shopping or hopes to win the next biggest lottery for a trip around the world. This is a distorted view of hope; it's too myopic, limited, and self-centered to be the hope stressed in the Letter to the Romans.

In Romans, hope is the trumpet-tongued theological theme. Today's lesson begins and ends with hope, that “by the encouragement of scriptures we might have hope” and “may the God of hope fill us” that we may “abound in hope.” The apostle Paul hopes for hope. It's a thread throughout the entire letter. Abraham, the model of faith, “hopes against hope” that God will make good on the promise of an heir, even though Sarah is barren and they both received their ancient AARP cards a long time ago (4:18). Through Jesus Christ we also “rejoice in hope of sharing the glory of God” and present suffering builds a character capable of hope (5:2-5). Then in Romans 8, the present time is a time of suffering, but we live in confident hope of the redemption of our body. This hope is for something that cannot be seen at present, “for who hopes for what they see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Advent is a season of waiting, a season of hoping, so Romans fits right in.

Hope in Romans is more than a word that carries an overtone of uncertainty like “I hope to see you next summer” when you're not quite confident that it will happen; hope in Romans is an expectation of good (cf. Rom. 4:18) closely aligned to trust; hope is confidence in God (James D.G. Dunn). For Paul, Christians, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, experience a “hope [that] doesn't disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rom 5:5). Hope then is “one of the primary blessings of the Spirit...” (Dunn). It is internal to us. It is within us. But this isn't to claim that it is only about us, only about the self, because it isn't.

Hope is scriptural, which means it is not confined to one person but involves a whole community. Paul tells us that through the encouragement of scriptures we can have hope. Often in theological education, we are taught to dissect, deconstruct, tear apart the biblical texts of terror, possess a hermeneutics of suspicion, interrogate the powers, the empire, the oppressor, the dominant, pull it all apart, use historical criticism, postcolonial criticism, literary criticism, criticize, critique, question. But what we are left with so often are just shreds of despair when the scriptures, God's word, are really meant to give us hope, not headaches. But it all depends on how you read.

You can experience all of that in a divinity school, but let a funeral come, a loved one or close friend die, and watch what happens. At funerals and memorial services, we turn to the scriptures for a word when we have no words, for hope when we feel hopeless—“The Lord is my shepherd....” (Ps 23) “Do not let your hearts be troubled...if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again...”(John 14) “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8). At funerals, we push aside a hermeneutics of suspicion for a hermeneutics of trust and love. At moments of grief, we realize again that the scriptures are a source of encouragement from God, a resource of life amid death and sorrow. The scriptures are a reminder that we have not been left alone, that we are not alone, that hope is not individualistic, but hope comes from past witnesses to help us in the present and to live into the future. Through Scripture, words echo down the acoustical corridor of biblical history from the saints of yesterday. As St. Augustine said, “The Holy Scriptures are our letters from home.” When William Sloane Coffin lost his son in a tragic accident, he preached a sermon titled, “Alex’s Death.” In it, he proclaimed, “Scripture is not around for anyone’s protection, just for everyone’s unending support....minimum protection, maximum support.”

Scripture as a source of hope when suffering, not apart from suffering, but in the midst of it. And when we say ‘scripture,’ this suggests it is the church’s book. A community of faith’s book that has been passed on to us so that we know we are not alone in life. Even as Paul says that what was written in the past was written for our instruction, he uses other scriptures to make his point. He uses scriptures in his letter to give hope. We hear other voices of the community of faith. In today’s lesson, he quotes from 2 Samuel, Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and Isaiah, to generate hope. He uses multiple sources, multiple voices, different people, to show how scripture is not only hope-generating but deeply communal. Hope is not a solitary experience. It takes a community to spur us on toward hope; hope is communal. The scriptures are communal, ancient wisdom from people of faith throughout the ages. It takes a whole community—past, present and future—to spark the hope we need to endure. Hope is scriptural and as such, it is also communal.

If we try to have hope on our own, we will miss out on God’s hope because the Christian life can’t be sustained without others, past and present. Hope is not isolated but resourced by a community. When you are on a lifeline, you need others in your lives being the word of God for you and to you. You need their voices. You need their presence. You need their love and comfort.

In the animal kingdom, scientists talk about reciprocal altruism. Vampire bats are a good example of this. When a starving bat has not been able to feed enough to survive the night, other bats regurgitate some of their food for it and share their blood meals (New Scientist). It takes other creatures to survive, to be sustained, to carry on in life.

This isn’t to suggest that we should regurgitate our food and share it with each other but it does suggest that within God’s creation, community is vital. Paul knows this by using different scriptural voices from the past to make his case about hope. But he also shows how hope is shared with others and occurs from within a community and because of community. Self-centered hope is not Christian hope at all. Hope occurs, according to Paul, as “we live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ.” “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you.” Hope occurs within community. The harmony is the hope that God creates and works toward. There is no hope in disjunction and division because those are the home of despair and that’s what we see so much of in our world.

Rather, Paul reminds us of the expansive nature of God’s hope that is all-inclusive, encompassing Jews and Gentiles. Over and over, the word ‘Gentiles’ is stressed, literally *ethne*, meaning ‘nations.’ That’s how wide and expansive God’s hope is. The hope of God is for all people, all nations. Not just one solitary person, one tribe, one denomination, one ethnic group, one political organization, one location. All nations. Every crack and crevice of the world. “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the nations; in him the nations shall hope.” God’s hope is communal, and even global. It is about worldwide communion, togetherness. It’s relational and helps us hopefully see that we were made to be with God and one another. Without God, without each other, without the communion of saints, there is no hope.

The despair we may have is because we don't have community and perhaps only rely on ourselves and not even God. Despair sets in when we are siloed, some sitting comfortably in segregated enclaves of difference. Despair comes when we confuse nationalism with the hope of God for all nations because there are no controlling borders that can imprison the hope of God. "Hope in God reaches to the clouds," Jurgen Moltmann writes, "and embraces the whole inhabited globe. It is all-embracing and catholic, in the literal sense; it crosses frontiers and is all-comprehensive."

Hope is dynamic and uncontainable, which is why Paul prays that we might "abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Hope is like dynamite, an explosive abundance even in the midst of hardship. In the dynamite of the Spirit, it spreads, it pours, it spills, it covers, it breaks out, it ignites, it overflows, it pursues, it funds, it heals by coming when we might not even expect it. It's explosive. Hope is a dynamo of God.

And let's be clear that we can still hope today because God is a God of hope, the source of any real robust hope we may have. Hope is rooted in the promises of God all throughout the scriptures. Hope is grounded in a God who is steadfast and blesses us with encouragement.

And "the ultimate reason for our hope is not to be found at all in what we want, wish for and wait for; the ultimate reason is that we are wanted and wished for and waited for....We are waited for as the prodigal son...is waited for by his father. We are accepted and received, as a mother takes her children into her arms and comforts them. God is our last hope because we are God's first love. We are God's dream for his world and his image on the earth he loves"(Moltmann).

Hope is dynamic, expansive, communal, and eternal because it is rooted in God. And hope is not cheap by any means. It costs God's Son his life and God's hope persists and refuses to resign to suffering, despite its painful persistence. God's resurrection hope rises out of the ash heap of hell. Paul knew this when he spoke of the groans of all creation. But hope refuses to die a death by despair and is not defined by the present state of the world. It is defined by God.

So like that old milk commercial asked, "Got milk?" I ask you today, "Got hope?"

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -
(Emily Dickinson)*

We may live in a so-called post-everything world— postmodern, postliberal, postcolonial, postdenominational—but as Christians, who live in the power of the Spirit, may we never become post-hope because Christ is in us, the hope of glory (Col 1:27).