

Words to Live By In Times Such as These

HOPE IS THE LINK

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Several weeks ago, I saw a meme on Facebook that said: “Fifteen years ago we still had Steve Jobs, Johnny Cash, and Bob Hope. Now we have no jobs, no cash, and no hope. Dear God, please don’t let Kevin Bacon die!” For many reasons, we don’t want to have no bacon — certainly for the economic fortunes of Duplin County!

But it’s not true that “we have no hope”! Even when all of the circumstances of life argue that the situation is hopeless, we Christians have hope. Three weeks ago we heard from the letter to the Hebrews that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Today we hear the apostle Paul say, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:24-25)

The Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner has written that “if preachers decide to preach about hope, let them preach out of what they themselves hope for.” So, that’s exactly what I’m going to do this morning. I’m going to preach out of what I myself hope for.

Like all of you, I hope for many things:

- * I hope that I will live a long and healthy life.
- * I hope that my children will be happy and prosper.
- * I hope that there will be peace in the world one day.
- * I hope that I will lead a faithful life.
- * I hope that I have been and will continue to be a good friend, a good husband, a good father, a good citizen, and a faithful minister.
- * I hope that my family will be safe.
- * And the list goes on and on . . .

But I can easily substitute the word “want” for “hope” in that list and actually come closer to the true meaning.

- * I want to live a long and healthy life.
- * I want my children to be happy and prosper.
- * I want peace in the world one day.
- * I want to lead a faithful life.
- * I want to be a good friend, a good husband, a good father, a good citizen, and a faithful minister.
- * I want my family to be safe.

There's even an element of "I wish" to that kind of "hope." And, to be honest, there's also a certain amount of uncertainty to that kind of "hope." We use the word "hope" so casually every day: "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow. I hope the Braves start winning more games. I hope my child gets a good teacher this year. I hope the stock market doesn't go down. I hope the test results come back negative."

That kind of hope is what the dictionary defines as "to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen or be true." But that kind of hope is not biblical HOPE. Biblical hope is also found in the dictionary under the definition that reads "to expect with confidence or trust." A Bible dictionary calls HOPE "the expectation of a favorable future **under God's guidance.**" (emphasis added)

That kind of hope sustained me and continues to sustain me:

* when the doctor came into the conference room and said, "I'm sorry, your father didn't survive the surgery."

* when I had to do the hardest thing I've ever had to do and tell Nancy, "Your mother died this morning."

* when a father called me and told me about his young adult son, "John has killed himself upstairs. Please come now!"

* when an adult son made the decision to end his and his mother's struggles with their health by shooting her and then turning the gun on himself, and Nancy and I were left with the task of consoling a grief stricken congregation and entire community.

* when I sat in the Blue Room off of the Fellowship Hall or in my study and talked with many different people from the Northeast community and Chinquapin who lost everything they owned in the floodwaters of Hurricane Floyd and had no hope.

* when I stood in this pulpit on Sunday, September 16, 2001 and struggled to find the right words five days after the planes had flown into the World Trade Center towers and 3,000 people died.

* when I have led worship at the funerals and memorial services for beloved friends who have died — some unexpectedly and tragically, some at the end of long and fruitful lives — from infants and children to promising young people to folks who have lived a long time.

The HOPE that has sustained me and continues to sustain me in those times and situations is not wishful thinking or wanting something to be true or wanting a positive outcome. Instead, the HOPE that has sustained me and continues to sustain me in those times and situations is, first and foremost, HOPE **in** God, a trust that what God has promised me and all of us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is true. Not that it **might be** true — not that we **want it to be** true — but that it **is true.** That kind of HOPE doesn't do away with the heartaches and heartbreaks and tough times in life, but that kind of HOPE can get you through those times.

When she was "pondering the ideas of life, death, spring and winter, Good Friday and Easter, and the whole reawakening of the world that happens every spring," Natalie Sleeth was inspired by a line in T. S. Eliot's poem "East Coker," which says, "In my beginning is my end." Shortly after Mrs. Sleeth composed the hymn "In the Bulb There

Is a Flower,” her husband, Ronald, was diagnosed with a terminal malignancy. He requested that “Hymn of Promise” be sung at his funeral.

While the entire hymn speaks of the HOPE symbolized by the flower in the bulb, the apple tree in the seed, the hidden promise of a butterfly in a cocoon, and the dawn in every darkness, the third verse sums up the biblical idea of HOPE in God: “In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”¹ I find it very interesting and appropriate that the text and music are copyrighted by the **Hope** Publishing Company and the tune name is PROMISE.

At last Tuesday night’s session meeting, the elders and I read part of Abram’s story in which God promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky, even though Abram was already seventy-five years old and his wife, Sarai, was barren. Despite all of the circumstances of Abram’s life that argued against God’s promise coming true. “Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6)

After our Bible reading, we talked about a review of a new book with the intriguing title, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs*. The reviewer, a Presbyterian minister in Alexandria, Virginia, admitted that the tragic death of a friend and church member at the hands of a drunk driver, just after they had prayed for “journey mercies and a safe trip home,” shook his “correct beliefs” and made him confront what it really means to have HOPE in God.

The reviewer writes about “a faith that is less about belief and more about learning to trust.” Several of us commented on the final two sentences of the book review: “Most importantly, he helps us to see that letting go of certainty is not in any way a compromise to faith, but rather a demonstration of it. For ours is a God more eager to develop our ability to trust than our capacity to believe.”²

If someone says to you, “Trust me!” it helps if that person has a track record of trustworthiness. Aren’t you more likely to trust that person if you have a history together? A history of promises fulfilled, of the person’s word being reliable, a record of faithful actions.

HOPE is our link between God’s faithfulness in the past and God’s promises for the future. In the meantime, here we are. We live in a world that can leave us heart-broken and heartsick. We live in a world that can seem hopeless at times. The circumstances of life — personal, national, global — sometimes overwhelm us. What hope do we have?

I used to think the phrase “hope against hope” was kind of negative. Some interpretations of the saying include: cling to a mere possibility; hope very strongly that something will happen, although you know it is not very likely; hope or wish for something with little reason or justification.

However, when I looked into it, I discovered the saying comes from Romans 4:18 which says, “Hoping against hope, Abraham believed that he would become ‘the father

of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.'" The biblical story is full of God's promises — past, present, and future. Our trust in God for the here and now and for the future is based on God's trustworthiness in the past. So, when things seem "hopeless," we can have HOPE in God — not wishful thinking, not a mere possibility, not with little reason or justification. There will certainly be times in our lives when we can say with the psalmist, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" When our hope in God is based on what God has already done for us, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then even in those times when our souls are cast down and disquieted within us, we can also say with the psalmist, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." (Psalm 43:5)

Frederick Buechner said, "let [preachers] preach out of what they themselves hope for." I hope I've done that this morning. Here at the end of the sermon, I'd like to let Buechner himself preach some. In his sermon called "Hope," he says:

"Ministers and congregations both, they came to church year after year, and who is to say how if at all their lives were changed as the result? If you'd stopped and asked them on any given Sunday, I suspect they would have said they weren't changed much. Yet they kept on coming anyway; and beneath all the lesser reasons they had for doing so, so far beneath that they themselves were only half aware of it, I think there was a deep reason, and if I could give only one word to characterize that reason, the word I would give is hope . . .

"I think it is hope that lies at our hearts and hope that finally brings us all here. Hope that in spite of all the devastating evidence to the contrary, the ground we stand on is holy ground because Christ walked here and walks here still. Hope that we are known, each one of us, by name, and that out of the burning moments of our lives he will call us by our names to the lives he would have us live and the selves he would have us become. Hope that into the secret grief and pain and bewilderment of each of us and of our world he will come at last to heal and to save."³

In the funeral liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship*, there is prayer that reads in part, "O God, before whom generations rise and pass away, we praise you for all your servants who, having lived this life in faith, now live eternally with you." In the next part of the prayer, the person is named as we pray, "Especially we thank you for your servant _____, whose baptism is now complete in death."

For years I resisted using that phrase, "whose baptism is now complete in death." However, thinking about the HOPE we have in God and how our hope is the link between God's faithful past, God's faithfulness in our lives, and God's promises for the future, I have thought again about that phrase. What God has begun with us in our baptisms, God will bring to fulfillment when we die. In the meantime, we can live with HOPE in God who is always faithful.

All of this reminds me of the beautiful hymn that says:

*“I was there to hear your borning cry; I’ll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.
I was there when you were but a child with a faith to suit you well;
in a blaze of light you wandered off to find where demons dwell.”*

*“When you heard the wonder of the Word, I was there to cheer you on.
You were raised to praise the living Lord to whom you now belong.
If you find someone to share your time and you join your hearts as one,
I’ll be there to make your verses rhyme from dusk to rising sun.”*

*“In the middle ages of your life, not too old, no longer young,
I’ll be there to guide you through the night, complete what I’ve begun.
When the evening gently closes in and you shut your weary eyes,
I’ll be there as I have always been with just one more surprise.”*

*“I was there to hear your borning cry; I’ll be there when you are old.
I rejoice the day you were baptized to see your life unfold.”*

***Let us pray: God of hope, when we are troubled by fear and uncertainty,
teach us to commit our lives to your care, and to trust in the knowledge of
your love and forgiveness, that we may find peace in Jesus Christ our Re-
deemer. Amen.***

NOTES

¹The information about Natalie Sleeth writing “Hymn of Promise” is from “History of Hymns: ‘In the Bulb There Is a Flower,’ by C. Michael Hawn at www.umcdiscipleship.org. The information about the verses is taken from *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), Hymn #250, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower: Hymn of Promise.”

²Robert Melone, Jr., review of *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs* by Peter Enns, online at www.pres-outlook.org, August 11, 2016.

³Frederick Buechner, “Hope” at www.day1.org. Originally published in *A Room Called Remember* and later in *Secrets in the Dark*.