

Hope is More than a Word

Mark 2:1-12, Exodus 5:1,2

Pelham Road Church

Greenville, SC

Summer 2018

This year we have explored in sermons, readings, music, and prayers the subject of hope. Yet, even still hope can feel a little like Jell-O, hard to nail down.

While this will not be my last time to speak of hope, it will be the last time for a while. So, let's begin with what hope is NOT.

It's not wishful thinking. Many a person has promised to turn their life around and concluded their plea with "With God's help I hope to turn things around." Things did not turn around. Just like love, hope is much more than a word. Hope and love are verbs they are not nouns. I can't say "We hope to win ten games this year" and then not practice and expect it to happen. Hope is not magic.

Further, I think our language betrays us a bit---"I hope to see you tomorrow." What does that mean? You either have made plans to see them or not. What hope got to do with it? Hope is not a substitute for a plan. Yet many a plan is born from hope.

Here's what I mean. In Mark, there is a story. These friends look at another friend, and they are moved with compassion. Their friend is tied to a bed. He has lost the

use of his legs. These friends cannot let this be. They cannot let someone they love miss out on so much, so they make a plan.

Jesus, a local healer, is coming to town. They decide on the day he is coming to take their friend to Jesus and ask Jesus to have a look. They gather at their friend's house for a bit of breakfast before the day begins. The paralyzed friend is overwhelmed by the love from his buddies. The army of friends heads out to where Jesus is, only to find Jesus is more popular than they imagined. The house is full and spilling out into the street.

There is no seeing Jesus today. The paralyzed friend reaches his hand up and grasp the sleeve of his friend and says "It was a good idea, Jesus will be back, it was enough that you thought of me." The friend carrying the right front corner of the stretcher said, "Who would have imagined he was this popular, let's take a seat by this tree, surely when he leaves he will see us." However, the friend whose sleeve was touched said, "No, we are going to do this now, I have an idea." Then with determination and purpose, he finds a way to get on the roof of the house. With effort he removes the roofing materials (likely some weave of wheat) and finds a way to bring his friend's stretcher to the roof, then he lowers his friend to Jesus.

Jesus sees the faith and forgives sin and heals the man. It's a miracle; it's the value of faith. It is. However, it is more. Look closely. It's about compassion, to care enough to do something. It's about effort to overcome the obstacles.

Sometimes we think HOPE is the product. However, consider for a moment that hope is a by-product. The equation goes like this effort (like these friends displayed) + _____ = HOPE

For the rest of this equation, I direct your attention to Moses in the book of Exodus. The story of the Exodus begins with Moses waking up in the Hebrew ghettos. Each morning he rises to the smell of illness, death, and poverty. He leaves his overcrowded room and emerges on the street to see the elderly lying dead in the street. He says a prayer and steps around them. As he walks out of the ghetto, he enters the construction zone. Jews are bent over carrying bricks on their backs for their Egyptian masters. One Egyptian stands with a whip in hand, another on a horse yelling at the Hebrews to work faster. Meanwhile on the ground laying bricks from sun-up to sundown is a Hebrew, he's 30 but looks 70, aged by the sun and constant work.

Moses thinks to himself what cruelty, this has to change. Then he enters the palace of the Pharaoh. Chariots and horses with riders ring the perimeter. Gold, marble, and purple adorn everything. People line the hallway waving fans to ensure your comfort; tables are decorated with the bounty of the Nile Valley. Pharaoh is guarded by several men with weapons drawn, and he sat on a throne high and lifted up. Moses thinks to himself---what chance do we have against this? How can broken-down Hebrews without a weapon, compete against the wealth, power, and influence of Egypt? Moses approaches Pharaoh and when the opportunity to speak is granted Moses' says "God says, Let my people go!"

It must have sounded hollow and weak in the halls of marble and gold. How were these people going to overthrow the Pharaoh?

You know what it took for Moses to make that journey every day and to utter those six words----God says Let my people go? To stand up to the Pharaoh and mighty Egyptians? It's the second half of the hope equations-----effort + courage= HOPE.

Hope is not words. Hope is birthed when the seed of effort is planted in the egg of courage. Hope is not a wish and a prayer. Christian hope is dressed in overalls and looks a lot like work. When we make an effort and walk with courage, then hope makes the difference.

Hope does make a difference, but not wishful thinking. When we care enough to carry a friend or when we are strong enough to stand up against a bully then God blows his holy wind through our effort, and hope changes the friend or pushes over the bully.

Surely you have heard the realism of "Hope is not a strategy." The core of the "hope is not a strategy" mindset (or, sometimes, "hope is not a plan" or "hope is not a course of action") carries some validity. It's meant to express the uncontroversial notion that action is more important than words, careful planning is more valuable than lofty ideas. It expresses the idea that it is better to be prepared than not. Any strategy that only espouses high ideals without at least laying the groundwork for turning that strategy into reality is fruitless at best and

hazardous at worst. This is exactly what I have been saying this morning effort + courage = HOPE.

This summer one of our own Dana Hasty was involved in what I call a “bit of a hope experiment.” I’m going to close by reading (with her permission) a little excerpt from a letter she wrote about this experience.

I recently had the exciting chance to be a camp leader at a Links Retreat. Links is an organization that helps youth in foster care learn independent living skills and brings them together in a way that they can support one another throughout their lives. . . This experience has well-surpassed anything I could have ever dreamed it up to be. We spent our days fishing, camping, laughing, crying, playing sports, hiking, and truly just enjoying nature and each other. . . Recently, my family became licensed to foster children, and although we are currently waiting on a phone call for our first placement, I truly feel like the timing of this camp was part of God’s plan.

This camp is composed of foster children. Removed from homes, rejected by parents, and kids who face abuse, neglect, and apathy routinely. So the question was asked, “What are some of the struggles each of you have and would you be willing to share in hopes of helping another teen who may be facing the same kind of thing?”

“My mom was a drug addict, and when she would run out of money, she would invite men over, and they would pay her money, and she would allow them to

take advantage of me. Just to get her fix... and all I have ever wanted is for her to say I love you and mean it. I don't understand how she could do this to me."

"My parents are addicts, and our house got foreclosed on."

"I was raped when I was five by my own family members. They would not stop, and I ended up in foster care."

"My dad would badly beat me, just for asking a question that he did not like. He beat my mom, he was a drug addict, and it was my fault. And now, it's my fault that I am following in their footsteps. I have no one which is why I struggle with attachment. My Grandma used to let me call her but she has since changed her number, and I wonder why? Why? I have already struggled with drugs in my life, and I am afraid I am going to turn out just like my dad. I have no one."...My heart broke because these kids blamed themselves and have had to carry guilt and shame caused by the very people who are supposed to love and support them throughout their lives.

How can we bear such a world, how can children hold up under such weight? But they talked, they cried, they prayed, they held in each other, they shared phone numbers, and they melted their pain together. I kept listening, and from this brokenness, I heard...

A youth tell my sister that "she knew it didn't always seem like it but that she loved her and viewed her as her mother, despite knowing she had called her

many times telling her that she hated her and wanted a new social worker. I felt hope fill my heart as I saw the two hug and wipe the tears from their eyes. I felt hope fill my heart as I watched these youth console and comfort one another.

I felt hope fill my heart as I saw smiles on their faces as we all played sports together and forgot about everything else.

I felt hope fill my heart as I watched the teens help cook food, serve and clean up after each meal.

I felt hope fill my heart as I watched my Mom and Jessica teach the kids how to cook.

My heart became full of hope when I realized that my family maybe just maybe might be able to prevent a foster child from sitting on a similar couch in a similar living room ten years down the road and sharing the same heart-wrenching struggles and experiences.

She understands hope. There is no hope if she does nothing, there is no hope if someone does not bring the camp together, there is no hope if some agency does not sponsor it and fund it. Yes, there is no hope with no effort.

Friends, hope is powerful and eternal in the hands of those who like Dana who say no more, not in my lifetime.

The world suffers because apathy and obstacles convince most to cash the check, punch the clock, and grow our garden, but don't you dare start caring. The thing the world fears the most is someone who will march up to a bully and say "Let my people go." The thing the world fears the most is someone who will take a friend and say, you're not living this way anymore, come with me to see Jesus. The thing the world fears the most is a woman and a man who will see the pain of neglected children and say this stops now. The most dangerous people in the world don't carry guns, they wear hope, they infect others with hope, they carry the aroma of hope to the paralyzed, enslaved, and the broken. When the paralyzed walk, the enslaved are loosed, and the broken are made whole, the game is over, and that's why the world fears those infected with hope. That's why the world works to dash our hopes and distract us with shiny objects because the world is renewed with Christian hope, without hope it's a dumpster fire of brokenness, slavery, and pain.