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Pentecost 08, July 23, 2023

“Grace in the Midst of Hopelessness”

Read: Romans 8: 18 – 27; memorize: Romans 8: 24b - 25

Recently, the world was transfixed by the search for a little submersible that many prayed would be found. At first, there was hope for rescue. Later, it was revealed that the submarine had imploded and no rescue was impossible. Submarine accidents are rare; successful rescues are rarer still. The complexities of the rescue doom most trapped sailors. While attempting a rescue a diver could hear a message tapped out in code. It asked one question: Is there any hope?

As the world turned to the 21st century, opinion guru George Gallop concluded on the basis of his research, “People in many nations appear to be searching with a new intensity for spiritual moorings. One of the key factors prompting this search is certainly the need for hope in troubled times.” Twenty years later, the world still needs hope.

Thinking people create assurance that there are good reasons for waking up tomorrow morning. They hope their presence and efforts are not meaningless; that they making a difference. Sadly, the ground for hope, on which many of us stand, is unable to endure a serious shaking.

All too often our response to the seemingly endless deluge of global change and conflict amounts to a “hope against hope” answer. When confronted with the dilemmas of the world, we may sigh and respond, “I don’t have any clue how to solve these crises. I hope someone will figure it out.” Real hope is not some lottery level optimism.

During WWII Winston Churchill once accepted an opportunity to address the British school boys at Eton, where he once attended. He delivered this electrifying speech in five words. Churchill said, “Never, never, never give up.” He then sat down. He followed his own advice as the leader of Britain.

Despite Mr. Churchill’s admonition to “never, never, never give up,” our dearest dreams and deepest commitments are vulnerable in a fallen world. “Never give up” doesn’t always win the day. There are times when people have to face their inability to fulfill it.

In the world where there are countless “somethings” just around the corner, is there any hope? And on what basis can we believe that what we most value and need can never be snatched away from us?

Paul provides an answer in Romans 8. It is unequivocal: Christians have grounds for hope. Our hope, this confidence that our existence in both the present and future is completely secure and meaningful to God is experienced most significantly through God's gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, who takes up permanent residence within every true believer, gives us hope. The Spirit is God's guarantee that there is an amazing future awaiting us; that we haven't been abandoned to hopelessness in the meantime.

The word hope is vital to the New Testament. It occurs 160 times. The apostle Peter writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." What God offers us is a living vital part of our relationship to Him – a renewable spiritual resource that is "living" because it connects us to a living Savior.

Because of God's mercy in Jesus, Christians are granted an all together hopeful picture: it's called heaven. That's what Peter is talking about when he describes it as, "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you." God guarantees it to all who are followers of Jesus Christ.

Romans is the last epistle Paul writes. He knows he faces death, yet he says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us in Christ Jesus." The present may seem hopeless, but God is gracious; our future secure.

Paul assures us in Romans 8: 24 that, "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not have, we wait patiently for it to appear, just as we wait for those who are before us to understand that very same issue."

Twentieth century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope." We want to remember that the Lord of the cosmos has been working on a plan that is bigger than our abilities and infirmities; longer than our span of life.

Therefore, our trust is not in what we may or may not appear to accomplish, but in God's promise of wholeness. As Paul puts it in verse 23, "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Today we may groan, but our future shall be full of rejoicing."

How does this hope change us? By hope, we are afforded the luxury of taking the longer view of things. Consider the early American pastor Jonathan Edwards and his wife,

Sarah. They parented eleven children, assuring them of several decades of celebration of fears, tears, laughter and frustration.

By 1900 the family had grown to include 1,400 descendants – among them thirteen college presidents, sixty-five professors, one hundred lawyers, thirty judges, sixty-six physicians and at least eighty prominent public officials. Living in hope means knowing that our God of grace is able to multiply our present modest efforts to bless generations to come.

While we may groan, our future will be glorious God assures us. That's not to say that God has abandoned us in our present needs. The Holy Spirit is forever calling out and reaching out to God, even when our natural minds, on this side of heaven, are preoccupied with pains and distractions.

That's why Paul reaffirmed in verse 26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought. The very Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." We need look back only to that last crisis when we just did not know what to say and realize that the Holy Spirit was saying it for us.

Paul reminds us that when we don't know how to pray, when we are fumbling for the right words, or simply crying out our hearts to God, the Spirit within us is interpreting everything perfectly. He is reassuring us that help is on the way.

Like a 911 dispatcher, God knows who we are and where we are. He knows exactly what we need and provides it through the Holy Spirit. It may not be what we think we need, so we want to stay alert to that Spirit's leading and guidance. The Spirit fills God in on our needs, when we can't.

Paul continues in verse 27: "And God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." How often have you found yourself suddenly feeling the need to pray for someone, whom perhaps you haven't even heard from. The Holy Spirit quite literally recruits us to intercede for others, in their needs.

Disciples of Jesus are called to experience and to share God's grace, even in circumstances that seem to scream out in a reality of hopelessness. Author and church leader Lee Strobel, in his book, "God's Outrageous Claims," recounts an incident from his days as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune. It revolves around the Ford Pinto. It unfortunately had a very poor design. When struck from behind it could burst into flames.

A chevy van plowed into the back of a Pinto and killed three teenage girls. Two of them burned to death within moments. The driver, an eighteen-year-old girl named Judy, was thrown clear of the accident but was burned over 95% of her body. Amazingly, she was still alive when the paramedics arrived.

She was taken to a hospital where the doctors realized they were powerless to save her. They sent her, by ambulance, to a burn center, seventy-five miles away so that at least she might receive some comfort. A nurse agreed to ride along with her.

Because of the damage to her nerve endings, Judy didn't feel much physical pain. But as the reality of her situation began to sink in, she was overwhelmed with anxiety and sheer emotional anguish. She grasped that these were her last hours. She was separated from family and friends. She sobbed to the nurse beside her, "I'm not ever going to have children, am I?"

What words of hope could possibly comfort this teenage girl? Nothing seemed to penetrate Judy's personal agony until she mentioned the name of Jesus. The nurse, discovering that she and Judy were Christians, came beside her; provided the one medication that quieted her fears. From memory she recited these verses from Isaiah 43:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flames shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Strobel wrote that in hearing these words, Judy slowly took on a calmness and courage that lifted her through the most difficult hours of her life. Without doubt she grasped that she belonged to God and no fire was able to destroy what really matters.

When we belong to Jesus, we share in a living hope. Through His Spirit we grasp whose we are. No frailties in the present can keep us from the Lord. No fears about the future can prevent God from blessing us. Most importantly, we discover that whatever happens, God will never, never, never give up on us. In that faith and by that faith, we can face life with a clear assurance that "there is nothing in all of creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus." In the assurance of the hope we have in Jesus' love and care, we can abide forever.

Count me in: How will you share your hope in Jesus with those who need it?