

LIVING IN HOPE

Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:19-25, NT p 224
Mark 13:1-8, NT p. 50

November 15, 2009
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

The stones that formed the base of that extended temple courtyard are still there. Some of them are 38 x 18 x 12 feet. When I measured those dimensions in this room, I found it would take only two stones that size to fill the room. How did they move them to that location in the first place? No one knows. Even with our engineering skills and machinery, positioning stones of that size wouldn't be easy, though with a big enough crane, it could certainly be done. The buildings and the foundation of the temple and its courtyard were truly impressive. Herod the Great built only the best. No one wonder the disciples pointed them out to Jesus. I wonder if they were disappointed when his response was a prediction of doom for the temple.

“Not one stone will be left upon another.” They couldn't imagine that. The temple was sacred. They believed that God chose to be among them in the Holy of Holies, that secret inner room where no one was allowed except the high priest. How could it all be leveled? “Not one stone,” Jesus said, and he was right. The Roman army completely destroyed the temple in A.D. 70. The foundation stones of the temple mount were not thrown down, but some of the others almost as large lay broken against the retaining wall. Huge chunks of rubble are still piled at the base, daring us to learn their lesson. Even the holiest place can be destroyed. Even the central symbol of faith can come crashing down. Nothing of this earth lasts forever.

Jesus knew that. He knew what he was facing very soon. He would entrust himself

entirely into the care of God, and he began to prepare his disciples to do the same. Their beloved Teacher, the center of their lives, would soon die. Would they still trust God? At first they ran away, but after three days the living Christ came among them and reawakened their faith in the One who is eternal.

The writer of the book of Hebrews called his (or her) readers to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for the One who has promised is faithful.” Two words stand out for me – “hope” and “faithful.”

Christian hope is special kind of hope. We use the word “hope” in a variety of ways. “I hope it doesn’t rain today” is one kind of hope – wildly optimistic in November in western Oregon. It really doesn’t make much difference whether we hope that or not, we still don’t have any effect on the weather. There is the hope that expresses an opinion. “I hope we have pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving.” Wishful thinking is another kind of hope. “I hope I win the lottery.” Of course, I’d have to buy a ticket first. At the other extreme is a kind of hope that is more like skillful planning and control. “I hope that my house will be painted this fall,” and it was. Opinion, optimism, wishful thinking, planning – they all might be called hope, but Christian hope is different than any of these.

The hope centered on Jesus Christ is something like expectation. We expect God to be for us, because we have heard of God’s faithfulness to previous generations. We trust that God will be merciful to all, because we have experienced God’s grace for ourselves. We look forward to God’s new day when justice will come flowing down, because we have already found the new life in Christ. Because we hope in God, we pray, trusting that God is faithful. We hold fast to the confession of our hope, made at our baptism and often renewed. We encourage one another to trust, and we work together toward God’s new day.

Fine words. But living in Christian faith and hope isn't all that easy. For one thing, we can see what the world is like. Wars, natural disasters, and famine have always been part of human life, and our times are no different. The UNICEF report, "Tracking Progress on Child and Maternal Nutrition," which was released this week, states that undernutrition in mothers and children is a factor in a third of all deaths of children under five. An estimated 200 million children under the age of five in the developing world, mostly Africa and Asia, suffer from chronic undernutrition, which stunts growth and makes them more susceptible to disease.¹

That is the way the world is, but hope says that it doesn't need to stay that way. Hope gives a sense of what needs to be made right, and then finds a way to begin. At presbytery meeting on Friday, we heard about five members from two churches in Cascades Presbytery who went to southern India this summer, to work with a local Christian rural development organization. This group has two homes for children who are orphans or whose families can no longer feed them. They attend school. They have a chapel where the students, mostly Christian but some Hindu, can find spiritual strength. In the surrounding villages, microfinance loans allow women, some of them former prostitutes, to learn new skills and to produce goods such as soap. This organization won't solve all the nutrition problems of a developing nation, but it offers hope that when even a few people work together, they can make life better locally.

¹www.unicefusa.org/news/news-from-the-field/unicef-report-200-million.html

On the dining tables at Westminster Church in Medford we found small cans to receive the Cents-ability offering. As we ate, we thought of those who do not have enough to eat, and we gave some small amount to share in their local food program. Those cans and coins are signs of hope. They don't solve everything, but they point in the right direction. The HELP barrel won't solve hunger problems here in Columbia County, but it points it the right direction. We know we can't make everything right in our own efforts, but we continue to hope and to work, because God is faithful.

The contemporary theologian Jurgen Moltmann has spent a lot of time thinking, teaching and writing about Christian hope. He says this: "those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."² The world around us may be full of disaster, disease, famine and war. Our lives may be swamped by troubles of all kinds, but our hope in God gives us a vision of the peace and justice and abundance that will come fully with the reign of God. That hope makes us dissatisfied with life as it is and empowers us to keep working toward God's new day.

"Not one stone will be left upon another," Jesus said. Things will fall apart around us.

²Quoted in Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 248.

We're here just for a short time. Our programs, our style of worship, our relationships, even our buildings are temporary. Yet we **are** here, **now**. Our history reminds us that we can have hope for the future. It was something of a miracle when the original wooden cross, erected in front of the church on October 12, 1962, didn't fall over that night in the Columbus Day storm. Eventually that symbol of our faith did rot and fall over, twenty-some years later. Now we have a metal cross, which has stood for over twenty years. It will last longer than the first, probably longer than this building, which can't stand forever. What do you think? Another 50 years? 100 years? That's not forever. This congregation won't be here forever. Another 50 years? 100? Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) might look quite different one hundred years from now, if it still exists in anything like its present form. Buildings wear out. Crosses fall. Pastors and members come and go.

We don't know what will happen at Plymouth Church in this next year, but we have hope. Not just opinions or optimism or wishful thinking or even planning. We are investing with hope in the future that is God's future. Today we will dedicate our pledges for 2010. With those pledges we renew our own dedication. We will continue to pray, to work, to give, because we hope in God, who is faithful.

Let us pray. Eternal God, may your Spirit inspire us with hope, that we might trust you for our future as we follow Jesus Christ, working together with him for your promised justice and peace. Amen.