

Keeping Hope Alive

Genesis 8: 6-12

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Our congregation has been deeply wounded by the loss of Will Finch, the son of Lesley Deaton and our Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care, Dolly Jacobs. The shock of their deaths came like a series of tsunamis, one tsunami after another. We are overwhelmed. We feel helpless, inadequate and diminished in the face of death. We find ourselves in darkness. Our questions go unanswered. Our world has changed. Our emotions are like a roller coaster racing up and down. Shock, depression, anger, anxiety, and every other emotion imaginable rage through our bodies. There is no orderly set of stages for us to follow. We all express grief individually. We struggle to make space for these painful feelings in our lives. The depth of our pain now, reflects the depth of our love. Grief is a lonely journey. There is no such thing as closure. At best, hopefully we adapt. By the grace of God, we place one foot in front of the other, making our way. The journey is hard, very hard, but we walk it.

We live in the tension between hope and despair. Despair is when you believe there is no way out, no exit, and no way forward. Hope, on the other hand, says Paul, is “*a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*”¹ An anchor works only when it hits bottom. It holds the ship, keeping it safe. Our hope is in the Lord who made heaven and earth. Hope in the Old Testament means trusting in God, waiting for God, and watching for God. E. Glenn Hinson said, we can live without many things, but we cannot survive without hope. The greatest gift you can give another is the gift of hope.²

Noah lived between hope and despair. It was a time of darkness. God said that “*the wickedness of humankind was great.*” But God believed in Noah because Noah trusted and obeyed God. The flood was devastating. It was a time of darkness as sheets of rain continuously beat upon the ark. That tiny ark carried the hope of the world. It was hope afloat.

¹ Hebrews 6:19

² *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, Volume XXVII Number 2, “Elpisizing” by E. Glenn Hinson.*

After the storm came the waiting, bobbing up and down, and drifting with the wind. Noah sent out a dove and it came back with an olive leaf in its beak – a sprig of hope! Noah lived between hope and despair, but the sprig of hope breathed hope into him. In my imagination I see Noah running through the ark to show his family the olive leaf, a sprig of hope. Life would continue. Isn't it amazing how the little things can point to eternal things. Most anything can become a sprig of hope, the presence of a friend, sunshine spilling across the kitchen floor, or being in this holy place.

Do you remember that wonderful story about the two disciples walking to Emmaus carrying their emptiness? Their hearts were broken. Jesus had been crucified. For them, all hope was dead. It was hard to know what to believe. Out of nowhere, Jesus joined them as they walked the 7 miles to Emmaus. They did not recognize him. They were focused on the past and not the present. They were disillusioned and distracted by a lot of conflicting information. Plus, they were not expecting to see Jesus. But a lengthy conversation followed when Jesus joined them. When they reached Emmaus, they invited Jesus to eat with them. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened. Augustine said, it was “*God’s very presence that was poured into their hearts.*” Here, in the midst of mystery, the broken bread became hope. The Risen Christ was with them. And I will wager that every time they saw bread for the rest of their days, they saw Jesus in their midst. That is why we have the sacrament of Holy Communion so that we can be sustained by the hope that only Christ can give.

You never know how a little sprig of hope will show up breathing life into you. In her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*³, Rachael Remen tells a story of restoring hope in one of her patients. There was a lady who have suffered many losses and now faced a critical surgery. So, Remen invited her to find a little stone big enough to fit in the palm of their hand. Remen asked the lady to invite several family members or friends to meet with her. Once assembled, Remen arranged them in a circle. Each one was to hold the stone as they told a story about a crisis in their life and how they survived. Then the stone was passed to the next lady. The stone became the repository of all these stories of despair and hope. If going to surgery, most of Remen’s patients

³ *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, pp. 151-153. by Rachael Remen (Psychotherapist)

would tape the stone to their hand. If lost, the hospital staff would search high and low until it was found. It was a sprig of hope and hope was important to healing.

In 1983 I was assigned to Fort McClellan, AL as the Protestant Pastor. When I had a Sunday off, my family and I would worship in one of the local churches. The Sunday we visited a United Methodist Church, the regular pastor was away. In his place an elderly gentleman with a crown of grey hair mounted the pulpit steadied by his cane. His sermon was about hope and I figured if anybody knew about hope, he would. He was the picture of gravitas. Every line in his face reflected his sacrificial journey in ministry. He said, *“Hope is like full cream, anything else is just skim milk.”* Those are words I have never forgotten. The thought of full cream carried me back to an earlier time in life when milk was delivered to your front door in glass bottles and when you opened the milk, there was a cardboard like cap underneath an outer wrapping and on the underneath side of that cap was full cream. Sometimes, Mother would shake the milk to mix it up, but sometimes she would sprinkle a little sugar on the cream and give it to me. Now that was full cream! *“Hope is like that, full cream.”* May you know the full cream of God’s hope.

Sometimes the words of a poem speak to us in ways normal conversation cannot. Marilyn Chandler McIntyre’s poem entitled *“What to do in the darkness”* is such a poem.

Go slowly
Consent to it
But don't wallow in it
Know it as a place of germination
and growth
Remember the light
Take an outstretched hand if you find one
Exercise unused senses
Find the path by walking it
Practice trust
Watch for dawn