

United Methodist Church

Solon, Iowa

Rev C A Kress

November 27, 2011

Sermon: Hope for a broken world

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

Prayer

It's the first Sunday in Advent. Surprise, surprise! And as we have already been reminded, the first candle on the advent wreath is traditionally the candle of expectation or hope.

In these difficult times, in a world that's broken in so many ways, we need hope. We need the real deal because hope makes all the difference in the world.

"Hope" as defined by Webster's dictionary is "A desire or an expectation for fulfillment or success." So a realistic hope is strong motivation. It's the force that drives a person or a church. When we have it, things are great. When hopes wane, we're in trouble.

There's a difference between human hope and spiritual hope too. Human hope is something we just have – unless you're in a difficult situation, and there's a big old rock on your path.

People have these natural hopes that build from the day we're aware of our individual identity in this big old world. There are natural hopes for all kinds of things and that's good. When we're children we have hopes and dreams of becoming someone or something. Children want to grow up to be a firefighter, a nurse, a teacher, an astronaut, a professional golfer and that's good. We want our children to have aspirations.

As we get a older the dream is of making our own decisions and having freedom to drive a car, go on a date, to enroll in college or to enlist in military service. And that's good.

Then when we're a little older we dream of building --- a marriage, family, a home, a community, a church a life!

We hope to achieve things to raise our children in safety and teach them right. And that's good too.

We carry all sorts of hopes and dreams for the next generation.

When we get even older, the scope of hope shifts again. In the later stages of life I find that people are seeking deeper meaning. We want to know that our investment in this world made a difference (whatever kind of investment it has been). People have this desire to pass on their wisdom or

values or other kinds of legacies for our children, grandchildren and another generation.

I appreciate the scripture lesson because Paul realizes that while we have these kinds of hopes and dreams for ourselves and the ones we love – our hopes and expectations in life get frustrated. The truth is there isn't a single person in this sanctuary that will see every one of his or her hopes and dreams fulfilled. For some of us our marriage or careers didn't work out as expected. Or we may be on the edge of financial collapse, or tragedy, or there are illnesses of which we know and some that are coming on. We're so very aware of these raw and sensitive wounds. But this is life. And the truth is there will be hopes of ours that will not be fulfilled.

But so far, however, I've only been talking about human hope only. The hopes and dreams that we have naturally.

Look at the scriptural text again and you will see that it however, is talking about a different kind of hope. It's presenting a spiritual kind of hope.

This is a hope that changes things. Because (according to Paul in the book of Romans, chapter 5) this hope comes

with suffering attached. Suffering and hope come in the same package.

“Suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character. And character produces hope.” This kind of hope, Paul says, will not disappoint us because it’s not grounded in the capacity of humans, it’s grounded in God.

Let me try to explain my meaning by using an illustration from Lewis Smedes. He wrote “The director of a medical clinic told of a terminally ill young man who came in for his usual treatment. There was a new doctor on duty who hadn’t had taken the course *Bedside Manners, 101* yet. And he said to the young man the meanest thing. He said, “You know, don’t you, that you won’t live out the year?”

Well, as the young man left he stopped at the director’s desk and he was in tears, weeping. “That man took away my hope!” He blurted out.

“I guess he did,” replied the director. “Maybe it’s time to find a new hope.” (repeat)

Commenting on this, Lewis Smedes wrote, “Is there a hope when hope is taken away? Is there hope when the situation is hopeless?”

Christian hope has something more to it than first meets the eye. In the bible, hope is not a passion for what is possible; hope is a passion for the promises of God.

The hope humans have naturally is the kind which is rooted in our own expectations and desires. The hope God offers goes a giant step beyond human hope. It rests on God's expectations and our trust in God's saving, strong, loving, wise and supportive foundation.

Human hopes can slip into a sense of entitlement on our part. They rise to the surface when we express this sense of entitlement to a good life; to live the American dream. I can speak to my own family. Many of you know my brother was mentally ill. He was bi-polar and struggled with depression to the point of disability. I personally struggled with a lot of anger on behalf of my brother. He didn't do anything to get that diagnosis, he didn't hurt anyone either. His life was just simply hard and that isn't fair.

But what does God really owe any one of us? When life leads to a place where someone we love must suffer, or where we face the hard-knocks ourselves, or something else causes us to suffer, we get bent out of shape.

All of us will experience something. There will be unexpected challenges, suffering and even a few disappointments tossed into the mix. That's life.

I myself wasted a lot of time being angry with God for some of the cards life has dealt me. And so it doesn't surprise me to hear others say that God's angered them too. But, that attitude doesn't take any one of us very far. We can get stuck in bitterness – OR we can get better. We can find that new hope.

That second type of hope is a hope against natural hope. This kind of hope has the ability to ease those wounds. It empowers, and leads to a new attitude called acceptance, adaptation, and a different kind of joy that's not easy to describe, but you know it when you find it. This is hope that leads to an inner state of peace with God and the universe.

The second kind of hope Paul talks about, is on the other side of the mountain. It's there when human hope fails us. It's a hope not in our own ability but in the ability of the God who is all around us, and even inside of us. It's a hope in God's promise to protect us, to hold us, to empower us even through the valley of the shadow of death.

So, maybe I should put a challenge in front of us. Paul challenges each and every one of us to nurture our spiritual hope. The one based on God's promises. That's the kind of hope that will sustain us no matter what happens to us in life. The challenge for you is to find God's promise in the scriptures that apply to your own situation.

It can be amazing to open the bible and discover a scripture that's speaking to you directly, especially when it applies to our own difficulties. It raises our hope. And when we have a new hope, suddenly the future doesn't look so bleak any longer. Because we see God in it. And that's the best kind of hope to begin with, that's the hope that will last and sustain us. Amen!