

Redemption

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O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem. – Psalm 130:7

What a hopeful time we're living in! I don't know how many of us would put it that way, but it seems obvious to me. Hope is everywhere, on everyone's mind, and in everyone's heart. It's even in some people's actions, who are living for the future. That's hopeful living.

One of my preaching professors had a grammatical pet peeve. It was about the word "hopefully." When you and I say hopefully, we generally mean that we hope something will happen. Hopefully, we say, it won't rain tomorrow. Hopefully, we'll get to the hospital before the baby is born. Hopefully, the tests will come back negative.

What we're really saying -- and how we should put it, according to my old teacher -- is "It is to be hoped that" such-and-such will or won't happen. It is to be hoped that it won't rain on our picnic. It is to be hoped that babies have the good sense to be born in the delivery room and not in the back seat. It is to be hoped that the test results won't irrevocably alter our sense of who we are and what's going to happen to us. It is to be hoped that these things will or won't happen.

Hopefully, on the other hand, as a word and as a concept, is another matter. Hopefully isn't about rain or babies or test results. Hopefully is about us. The word literally means "full of hope," and only people hope. The rain doesn't hope, infants don't hope, and test results don't hope. Grown-up people, with sufficient life experience and a fully developed sense of reality, hope. And some of those people are full of hope, and that's how they live their lives -- hope-fully. Hopefully.

Biblical Israel lived hopefully. Listen again, from Psalm 130:

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

Hope and redemption go together. You and I -- like the psalmist, like Ezekiel, like Paul and the Christians at Rome, like Jesus and his first followers -- we are a people hoping for

redemption. God has made us, as the prophet Zechariah put it, "captives of hope" (9:12). And what we hope for is that the world in which we currently find ourselves is not the only world there is. We not only hope this, we believe this. We believe in another, better world, what our Jewish ancestors and siblings call "the world to come." We Christians frequently call it heaven. Sometimes we over-individualize it and call it "life after death." Jesus called it the realm of God. It's all the same thing, it's profoundly biblical, it's the real meaning of redemption, and it's grounded in hope. And hope, as we heard in church a few weeks ago, does not disappoint us, because hope -- biblical hope, Christian hope, genuine hope -- has been poured into our hearts with the love of God, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Hope, at its deepest, is a spiritual and not simply an emotional, reality.

Hope is at the base of Ezekiel's vision of restored Israel. You and I tend to be creeped out by Ezekiel's famous vision of the valley of dry bones, but it was immeasurably worse for Ezekiel himself. Ezekiel was a Kohen, a priestly descendant of a priestly line, and ancient Israelite priests of this sort lived by a strict code of ritual purity. Coming into physical contact with human remains rendered a priest ritually impure and unable to function. Imagine, then, being dropped into an entire valley of human remains -- a valley of dry bones. Everywhere he looked, Ezekiel would have been surrounded by defilement; if he tried to walk through the bones to escape, he would have made the problem worse. He would have felt imprisoned, trapped, helpless. Of all places on earth for God to deposit an Israelite prophet of priestly descent, a valley of dry bones would have been the absolute worst. As he surveyed the scene of his vision, Ezekiel would have been engulfed in waves of panic and despair.

And it's very likely that when he wasn't in a visionary state, Ezekiel and his wife would have felt very similar emotions as they endured their Babylonian captivity on the banks of the Kebar canal near the ancient city of Nippur. Ezekiel lived during the worst period in Israel's history. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the temple had been razed, and the nation's leaders had been marched into exile. The people who believed they had been called by God for a mission of blessing to the world found themselves cut off from the epicenter of their faith and surrounded by valley after valley of ritual defilement and unbelief. Nippur was home to a great temple dedicated to the Sumerian god Enlil, whose name means "Lord Wind." Ezekiel, whose name means "God will strengthen," had to live out most of his life in the shadow of a temple devoted to a god and religious practices he didn't believe in.

Ezekiel believed that there was a different Lord Wind, and his name was Yahweh. You and I know him as the Lord. Ezekiel preferred to call him Lord God. "O Lord God, you know," Ezekiel replied when God asked if the dry bones could live. Ezekiel believed that it was the Yahweh, and not Enlil, who caused the breath of life to animate the world, so it's no accident that when he has his vision of the valley of dry bones, he is told to prophesy to the wind -- or breath, it's the same Hebrew word -- and the wind comes not from Enlil, Lord Wind, but from Yahweh.

"I am going to open your graves," God says to the Israelites in exile, "and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall

know that I am the Lord. . . . I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'"

That's redemption, biblical-style. That's old-time religion. When life has been shattered, and everything you know and love has been taken from you, and when you're under pressure to give up believing in the one who gave his name to Moses as "The Great I Am" -- in those dark and uncertain times, God promises that life will come back -- somehow, someday, even if you personally don't get to see it. Ezekiel saw a vision of a restored people of God, brought back to their base of operations so that they could continue their mission work of being a blessing. That's redemption. In a horrifying vision of ugliness, death, and despair, Ezekiel sees a vision of Israel's redemption, through the power of God, when Israel saw no way of redeeming itself.

Life is always a contest between those who accept it as it is and those who believe in the world to come. That's the struggle we see played out in the pages of the Bible -- a long struggle between what we see, on the one hand, and what we hope on the other. "Who hopes for what is seen?" Paul asked the Roman Christians (8:4). Nobody, of course. You don't need hope for what you see; you need hope for what you don't see. You need hope to believe in redemption.

You need hope to see life in the midst of death. You need hope to see a restored future beyond a shattered present. You need hope to believe that we will eventually descend the curve of mounting infections. These are the days when hope is most needed, and these are the days when hope is most at hand. This is our valley, the valley of the shadow of death.

Again, the words of the psalmist:

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
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God's love is steadfast. I believe that; do you? I believe it because of all of those people working night and day to help get us through these difficult days. People are opening stores early so the most vulnerable will not go hungry. People are working extra shifts to keep essential services operating. People are risking their lives, every single day, to help those struggling to breathe or to take their last breath.

Hundreds, thousands, millions of people around the world are doing things like these in plain sight, not to mention those working feverishly in secluded places to try to find a cure or a vaccine to deliver us from the worst of a new virus. There is great power to redeem in people working like that. God's power to redeem isn't floating around out there in the atmosphere; it's right here, incarnate in us, just as it was incarnate in Jesus the Christ. The worst is bringing out the best -- not in all of us, of course, but in millions of us -- and that's all the proof I need of God's love having been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Religious people are always tempted to overlook the obvious while we're searching for the miraculous. We look for the proof of God's existence in places like the raising of Lazarus -- we want a miracle-worker to do that for us today. We want some mind-blowing interruption of business-as-usual to be the sign of God's presence. We want the unexpected cure, the inexplicable healing, the naturally freakish to show us Immanuel, that God is with us.

But God is with us all the time. Immanuel is right here, right now, in plain sight, all around us. "Christ plays in ten thousand places," Gerard Manly Hopkins put it, and if we cannot see the Christ in our midst, the failure is not on God's part, it's on ours -- on our unwillingness to allow God's Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our minds and hearts to see it, to allow ourselves to become the authentically spiritual people that Paul described in our reading from Romans: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

You and I and more than seven billion of us on this planet right now are hoping for life and peace. We want this time of sickness and dying and fear and turmoil and fatigue to be past. And, I can promise you, someday it will be. The suffering is not God's will for creation; Paul again: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now." Paul says in that same passage that life without Spirit is futility; if nature is all there is -- if the world that you and I can see and touch and taste is the only world there is -- "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ" -- then we are, as Paul says, of all people most to be pitied.

But you and I do not hope only for this world. We hope not only for what we see, but also for what we do not see. We hope for restoration, for healing, for wholeness, for recovery. And we hope that when this ordeal is past, we will be better for it.

A week ago I was returning from my walk in the Euclid Creek Reservation. Two young men passed me, one carrying a handful of leaflets. Their family dog, Kelly, had gone missing. She's fifteen, deaf, and needs medication. The young man asked me if I'd seen her, and I hadn't, but I took one of his flyers and put it inside a plastic sheath and taped it to the telephone pole outside my front door. The day before yesterday, I noticed that the plastic sheath had been opened and the flyer was gone. The empty sheath was still taped to the pole. I hope that means that that Kelly has been found. I don't know that for sure, but until I have evidence to the contrary, that's what I will choose to believe. I'm leaving the empty plastic sheath on the pole as a reminder of Kelly's redemption, her restoration, her return to the family who loves her. I'm leaving the sheath on the pole also as a reminder of my belief and my hope. Because I live hopefully.

And finally, once again, the psalmist:

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