

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Power of Hope"
Dr. J. Dent

July 22, 2007

Hell is said to have a greeting sign, at least according to Dante who wrote his *Divine Comedy* in the early 1300s. Do you know what that greeting sign says? Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. This is also written sometime during the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride in the Disney theme parks. But what I really wanted to talk to you about today is the profound power of hope in our lives. For to abandon hope is to truly live a hellish existence.

Hope sustains us when we are waiting a long time for something to happen. Hope causes us to keep trying when we want to give up. Hope keeps us believing for the best.

And there are many times that we want to give up, that I want to say "I quit." And since today is only the second Sunday here you probably know that I'm not feeling that way right now, although I must say the diversity of the weather here is quite amazing. But that's good.

So what do you do to gather your courage and your hope together to face the tough times of your life? What do you and where do you go when you need strength to fight the storms of negativity, of pessimism, of sarcasm, of despair? Because every one of us makes a choice everyday as to how we will face the day and what kind of attitude we will bring to that day, no matter what kind of day it is, no matter what kind of challenges we face.

And so too did the people of the Bible. Naomi chose to face her grief and love her daughters-in-law when she lost her husband and her sons. She urged them to go home to their families. Job chose to trust God through the midst of his wasting disease. He went so far as to say, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in Him." (13:15) The Psalmist promised that no one who puts their hope in God will ever be put to shame for doing that. (Psalm 25:3) In the midst of a downcast feeling and the disturbing realities he faced, the Psalmist hoped in God. (42:11) Isaiah wrote that those who put their hope in the Lord, will gain new strength, will ride the hardy winds with sturdy wings like eagles. (Is. 40:31) I remember seeing eagles in BC where we used to live. There was a place called Eagle Rock where bald eagles nested and they would soar from there, sometimes over our home. They would ride the

currents and swoop when needed. That strength, that ability to thrive in adverse winds is a picture of hope that Isaiah used. Or take Jeremiah who is called the weeping prophet, who wrote during a time of devastation. If you've already read his work, you know how difficult it is to read. And yet he too in the midst of destruction and deportation was able to say:

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you **hope** and a future." (Jer. 29:11)

And we also see in the apostle Paul's teaching a powerful place for hope. Romans 5:1-5

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.** 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Paul himself knew that hope was at the pinnacle of a process that starts with suffering. So if we are undergoing suffering or other adversity, we don't have to let that crush us. Because we can let it crush us. But we don't have to let it. Suffering points us in the direction of God.

Did you notice throughout the Bible passages above that when hope is talked about, it is always in the context of hope in someone? It is not just an abstract hope, or a blind hope, nor is it simply some kind of positive thinking that we muster by having happy thoughts. It is because we meet with the One who can give hope in the midst of adversity. Jesus becomes the beacon of hope, the giver of life, the one who experienced suffering who can lead us through ours. That's why Paul talks about faith, hope and love as the three biggies of life. (1 Cor. 13: 13) Faith is trusting Christ, love is commitment to Christ and hope is our attitudes turned over to Christ.

Hope comes as we encounter the God of hope. He does things that we do not expect. In Genesis 18, he brings a message to two elderly senior citizens that they will have a child, and that child will be the hope of the world, and that nations will come from that child who will follow God. Now I'm not really sure how Abraham felt when that message was received. We know

Sarah laughed. But Abraham was just trusting and waiting. I'm not sure how you would feel in that situation. It's complicated. But what it was, was the fulfilling of a promise God made decades before. It was the fulfillment of a hope, a hope that he, that they had given up on. Is there some hope in your life that you have asked from God that you have given up on? Perhaps now is the time to ask again.

Doing what is right, having a standard of ethics, caring about what happens to other people all comes from hopeful persons. If you despair, you generally go into yourself for protection. But when you are hopeful, you can give away your life to others, as the Psalmist encourages us to do in Psalm 15.

Hope in God gives us the strength to meet any challenge. When we know we have a relationship with Jesus Christ, that he is mine and I am his, then we can receive hope. We can expect that he will meet our needs and give us power to speak in every circumstance with a wisdom that comes from above.

Paul's sufferings, the ones he mentions in Colossians 1, are cause for rejoicing. Now it's not that he enjoyed pain or had secret sadomasochist tendencies. He knew that because he was on a mission to spread the good news about Christ, he would have the strength and the stick-to-it-ness necessary for doing what he was asked to do. We can know that strength as well. The One who causes the universe to stick together is the one who helps keep it together when we feel like we are falling apart.

By the way, I am told that physicists don't really know why things stick together the way they do. They have identified many particles and waves, but still don't know how the universe sticks together. In fact, I am told that they are still working on this and even though they have used the word "gluon" to express some of the tiny glue between elementary particles, nevertheless they still don't understand why things hold together as they do as opposed to some other way. I'm sure some of you with more science background can enlighten me on this one. I read that gluons "are [vector gauge bosons](#) that mediate [strong color charge](#) interactions of [quarks](#) in [quantum chromodynamics](#) (QCD)" in a Wikipedia article on "gluons." But that didn't help much.

Colossians, on the other hand, notes that "in Him (Jesus Christ) all things hold together." (1:17) which suggests to me that Jesus has something to do

with the physical universe holding together. This is just speculation on my part, but it would be interesting to have a discussion sometime on the interaction between the physical world and God. How “hand off” or “hands on” is God?

Finally, the Gospel takes us back to Martha and Mary. Martha usually comes across as the whining, complaining one and Mary the spiritual one. Some people have become upset over this, saying that Mary gets too much praise and Martha too much discipline. In fact, this sounds a lot to me like what happens in many families where the older is being responsible and practical and the younger is just off in some other room doing something else and the younger gets off with it and the older doesn't. Well, we don't absolutely know the birth order of the sisters although the Bible does say that it was Martha's house. We do know from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, that Martha was the one who proclaimed her faith very strongly in noting that she knew she would see her brother Lazarus again in the day of the resurrection. (11:25) and then again, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world.” (11:27) So let's not be too hard on Martha too quickly. But what was Jesus trying to tell us through Luke's account? He wanted to put a very high priority on what Mary was doing, and encourage us to do likewise.

So what was Mary doing? She was sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to what he had to say. (Lk. 10:29) In that time, it was the place of respect and receiving that was commended. We live in an age which increasingly seems to have little respect and little desire to receive from others. Perhaps this can be explained by past abuses, but nevertheless Jesus commends having an attitude of listening and receiving what he has to say. So what do you do in your daily schedule to show an attitude, or express a desire to listen and receive what Jesus has to say? Many people have daily devotions, a daily worship time, a time set apart for praying, for reading Scripture and listening to what God has to say to you.

Given the fast pace of life, and what I said last week about how we spend our time revealing what is most valuable to us, taking the time for prayer, Scripture reading and listening, becomes all the more imperative. Our lives are full of noise. Sometimes we use music and the news and the television to blot out the silence. But we all need silence because that is often the place where God can get through to us. The times of quiet become the places of hope. Because God is a God of hope and life, these brief times can become

our lifelines in the storms of life. I encourage you, especially during the summer where we sometimes have more flexibility in what we do, to take the time to pray, to read Scripture and to listen. Some of you already have done this for a long time. For others this will be new and experimental. Whatever the case may be, the place of hope is the eye of the storm. The calm place is where we give over to our God our future, our present and our past.

And yes, I still want to hear from you about your dreams and hopes for this church and this community. I know it is summer, but don't hesitate to talk to me, or invite me over, or make an appointment. I know I won't get around to see everyone, but I'd like to try and get around to see many. So give me a call and let's share together the hope that God gives abundantly and surprisingly.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray.