

Sermon for Sunday, May 21, 2023
Seventh Sunday of Easter - Celebration of the Ascension of our Lord
“Practicing Hope”
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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Hope is woven in and peeking out of our readings today, hidden but so very present. The stories of Jesus’ ascension into heaven are wondrous, yet strange and troubling for us and for the first disciples. As Jesus ascends, they’re left asking, **are we on our own here?** Will Jesus ever bring in God’s kingdom of mercy and justice? For a while, they’re **paralyzed by his absence**. They stand staring up into the sky. Jesus has promised the Holy Spirit and has told them to wait. They are to wait with hope. **Yet, what is hope? What does it do? Is it helpful, or does it leave us just gazing into heaven, rather than tending to the here and now?**

This week I got a text message from a friend whose son is struggling with school and life, as are so many kids these days. He’s whip smart. also, while not a great student. A year of online school was brutal for him. This school year is ending with more worries for his future. My friend shared the newest concerns and then wrote, **“We are trying so hard, but it feels hopeless, we are so weary.”** Her text came in as I was sitting in a conference with the theme of “Preaching Hope for a Wary World”. Her message colored everything I learned this week.

What does hope look like for this family, for so many families these days? What does hope look like for you, you who are weary for whatever reason? **Will things get better? Will Jesus ever bring in God’s kingdom of mercy and justice?** Thanks to that text and to what I learned in the conference, I’ve started noticing how often I say, “I hope *that* ... “I hope that he will graduate.” “I hope that this treatment works.” “I hope that you get the job.” My sense of hope is often tied to the **“that”** of a particular outcome: hoping that life will improve, that things will work out. Yet several of the conference preachers, especially those from marginalized communities, encourage us to **untangle hope and outcome**, to unlink hope from our expectations.

If our hopes are tied to things working out, then when things are hard, we may start to worry that something is wrong with us. Did I just not hope enough, did I not pray hard enough? Or, maybe the problem is God. Doesn’t God hear? Doesn’t God care? When we entwine hope with expectations, we so often feel abandoned by God. We stand gazing into a seemingly empty sky, paralyzed by apathy.

Hope that does not disappoint is less about expectation and more an orientation - a way of being in the world. Hope is living in God’s kingdom ways as we wait, practicing courage, kindness, love and joy. Hope is playing our part, doing what is ours to do - continuing to show up with and for others, loving God and people no matter the circumstance. “We are trying so hard, but it feels hopeless,” my friend texted. Even when she doesn’t feel hopeful, I see my friend practicing hope. Hope looks like parents who keep on trying with and for their kid, even when the outcome is not what they would prefer.

We see this kind of hope in the biblical story of three guys with funny names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, told in the apocalyptic book of Daniel, chapter 3. They're living under a brutal dictator who has ordered them to bow down and worship one of his gods, a golden statue. They refuse; they will only worship the living God. The dictator says they'll be thrown into a fiery furnace. He taunts them, asking "Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" They answer, "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us ... let him deliver us. But if not ... we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." If God delivers us, so be it! **But if not**, we will not bow down to false gods. These three men can't topple a dictator, but they can act according to God's kingdom values: refusing to bow to brutality, refusing to let evil define and control them. Their hope is less expectation and more orientation.

The disciples in our readings today are focused on their expectations. After 40 days with the risen Jesus, they ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?" They are fixated on things beyond them, things they cannot control. Jesus turns their attention to what they've experienced with him and to work that is theirs to do. Jesus does the same for us today, You are witnesses, Jesus says, and you will be my witnesses.

We are witnesses of how God's kingdom is breaking into this world. The kingdom is often hidden in unexpected things, yet it is everywhere present. We see it in bread and wine, in new life coming through water and the word, in the beautiful and broken church on earth, in congregations that pray and hope for us during the times we can't, in a humble, suffering savior who cannot be stopped from loving the world. We see it in families and communities continuing to show up for kids and elders, in people refusing to bow to the gods of consumerism, in meals shared, burdens lifted, when joy arises within us even while all looks bleak.

"You are witnesses of these things", Jesus says. And, "You will be my witnesses", he continues. By the power of the Spirit, you all will bear witness to this kingdom by how you live in these kingdom ways, by how you practice hope together. Jesus assures those first disciples that even when he is no longer with them in the ways they've come to expect, they will receive power from the Spirit. Together, they will have all that they need to practice hope.

That Spirit is poured out upon the church, upon all of us at Pentecost, which we'll celebrate next week. It is poured out upon us every day because of our baptism into the risen Christ who fills all creation.

Together, we have what we need to sustain one another, to practice hope together, to live as witnesses of God's kingdom.