

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/AUGUST 30, 2009
HOPE/2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-5:1

I. THE TEXT: In today's scripture, the Apostle Paul writes beautifully about our hope for what is to come – a hope that allows us not only to celebrate the great and small joys, but especially to endure the difficulties and struggles of life in the here and now. You might think it odd that we appear to be tacking on a verse from another chapter, but in fact the chapter and verse delineations are not found in the original writings, and occasionally seem to split up paragraphs that most likely were initially of one piece, as is today's Scripture lesson. Hear the word of God from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 4, beginning with verse 7...

II. PRAYER: Lord, we come believing that the Word written long ago in a faraway place has the power to speak to us still today. We turn our hearts again your direction to receive from you a word of grace, a word of hope. Amen.

III. DISCOURAGEMENTS

In 1950, Manhattan's Hayden Planetarium, tongue in cheek, began taking reservations for space travel. They wanted to show the public that trips to the moon were no longer comic book fantasies, but a definite possibility – possibly before the end of the century. The planetarium promised to turn the names over to the first interplanetary travel agency that hung out its shingle. Applicants were to check “tour desired” — in the order of their distance: from the moon (240,000 miles, 9½ hours), to Saturn (790 million miles, 1,333 days). The planetarium's “Passenger Briefing” warned that the moon is no such warm romantic place as it might seem over Miami,

but rather a chilly, arid spot, covered with a layer of dust-like pumice several feet thick, where conversation would be impossible, climate problematic, and locomotion difficult.

The planetarium, perhaps astonishingly, received more than 18,000 reservations. Intrigued, a psychologist studied some of the reservation makers. Some had done it just for laughs, but most of the reservations, he learned, came from people who were just tired of it all and thought the chance of escaping this sorry earth was no joke at all. A woman from Massachusetts was typical. “It would be heaven to get away from this busy earth,” she wrote. “I honestly wish God would let me get away . . . and just go somewhere where it’s nice and peaceful, good, safe, and secure.”¹ They were so discouraged they were just hoping to quit this world for a better one.

Ever felt that way? Oh, not enough to want to quit the world altogether (few of us, if given the option to go to heaven this afternoon would line up on the patio to buy tickets.) Yet, we may be discouraged enough to want to quit a marriage or a job or a church. Reading Paul’s letter, I was thinking about some of my discouraging moments over the last month or so. Three Mondays back I took a quick trip to Chicago to meet the movers who would pack our things on a truck and drive them to LA. The Friday before Gary and I had spent the afternoon at the escrow office finally signing loan documents – days later than the scheduled closing. Any of you who have tried to secure a home loan lately know that the process is not for the faint of heart. Where several years ago a pay stub and a blood pressure would secure a loan, these days, it is a long and tedious

process – they now want a mile-high stack of paper and DNA samples. But finally, everything signed, we were set to close. Busy with the movers in Chicago, my cell phone rang with news that the lender would not accept Gary’s and my notarized signatures as both of us had used our middle initial rather than writing out our names in full. We would need to re-sign all of the documents... and I was in Chicago. Suddenly, a space capsule and a moon journey looked pretty attractive.

Well, all’s well that ends well – and that was a minor discouragement compared to the ones present for some of you in our sacred space this morning. Chemo doesn’t seem to be doing the trick... a marriage wobbles... a child struggles... a parent feels powerless to help... the bills mount... faith feels fragile. And beyond these walls... a world at war... a warming planet... poverty and AIDS and an acrimonious health care debate. The moon not being an option at the moment, how do we manage?

If ever anyone had reason to be discouraged it was the Apostle Paul. You do not write the words “⁸*We are afflicted in every way ... perplexed ...* ⁹*persecuted ... struck down...*” without having some things going terribly wrong in your life. Yes, the Corinthian church was in an awful mess – more than enough to have discouraged Paul’s pastoral heart. But there was so much more. When Paul says he was afflicted, persecuted and struck down he wasn’t speaking of hurt feelings or a bad day at the office. No, Paul was talking of being on the receiving end of a whip, of enduring a thorn in his flesh that plagued him every moment of every day, of rocks thrown by angry

mobs, of cold nights spent in prison cells, of betrayal by those he'd come to trust. But remarkably, with every reason to be discouraged, in this morning's text Paul sounds remarkably upbeat... one might even say, hopeful... not a hint of throwing in the towel. In fact, following every devastating assessment is an almost defiant definition of hope: *⁸We are afflicted in every way, **but not crushed**; perplexed, **but not driven to despair**; ⁹persecuted, **but not forsaken**; struck down, **but not destroyed.***" This text begs the question – how on earth did Paul manage to remain hopeful in the face of an overwhelming list of discouragements? How could he keep doing God's work when the progress was slow, the rewards were few and the difficulties enormous – why didn't Paul just sign up for a moon trip?

IV. HOPING

There are a handful of clues in this morning's text – clues about how to be hope-filled when the discouragements are many. It seems there are two ways to think about life's difficulties – the usual way and God's way – and the perspective we choose makes all the difference in our ability to keep hope alive.

Pope Benedict the 16th accurately speaks of a seismic shift in the nature of hope over the last several centuries. For much of the history of the world the human creation's hope was linked with the transcendent, with a divine being who, no matter the calamity, held the world and our lives together and was worthy of our ultimate trust. A hope stated so powerfully in the 1st question of our Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 – “What is thy only comfort in life

and death? Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.” A statement refined in the P.C.(U.S.A.)’s 1983 Brief Statement of faith – “In life and in death we belong to God.”

But, says Benedict, “modern scientific and political revolutions have all but eliminated God from our understanding of hope. The euphoria that has flowed from centuries of ever-more amazing scientific discoveries lead many... to place their hope for the future in scientific progress rather than in God. This ideology of ‘faith in progress’ proclaims that redemption from the problems that plague humanity – from illness, to suffering, to the weather, to corruption, to war – will come through scientific discovery and through political structures based on economic and political science... [that] these worldly sciences are sufficient to bring about a whole new and better world.”²

But here we sit in 2009 and, surrounded by magnificent technology that saves our lives, connects us to our loved ones with the push of a button, protects our crops from pests, it is nonetheless clear that what Benedict calls “scientific discovery and political structures” have not, indeed cannot, fulfilled our greatest hopes. From the nuclear threat to climate change to world governments unable to manage everything from health care to the terrorist threat – our hope in progress has proven to be a false hope. As grand as our discoveries have been, they have failed to sustain the human soul that, in a “life is difficult” world, requires hope for its very survival.

Perhaps we would do well to consider again the nature of Christian hoping. All too often even the faithful misunderstand the substance of hope. Who of us has not blamed God when times are tough. Why did God let my marriage fail? Where was God when I lost my job? Why is God letting global warming happen? There is something deep within us that somehow believes that God and difficult times are mutually exclusive – as if God’s job is to protect us from difficult things. Therefore, when the difficult shows up at my front door, I can come to only one conclusion – God has failed. And what could be more discouraging, more hope-less, than to imagine that at best God has fallen asleep on the job, or is not quite up to the task, or at worst, has simply walked away. Countless of the discouraged have abandoned faith because God didn’t live up to their expectations, their demands.

But there is a different way to see and be in difficult times. Hope happens when we learn to see our difficulties from a divine perspective. That is what Paul helps us sort out in today’s text... the nature of Christian hope.

First, Paul says, from a divine perspective, difficult times are not indications of God’s absence but moments when God is at work behind the hard moments of life doing something new. Paul says, even though our outward reality is a mess, “inwardly, God is renewing our inner being day by day.” When life is tough, says Paul, there is something else going on below the surface. God, who has promised to work all things together for good – is doing just that. Imagine for a moment the back side of a tapestry. From that

perspective a tapestry is always an awful mess – a tangled confusion of seemingly random colors and knots. And if all you could see was the messy, knotty back side, you would never hang a tapestry on your living room wall. But when you see it from the front you realize that the weaver had been creating something beautiful all along. Want to keep hope alive? Learn to trust that even in the worst of messes, even a mess such as a crucifixion on a far-off hill, God is not absent, but is still, as John Calvin would put it, sovereign, and working out something good.

Too, Paul says, if you want to keep hope alive you must come to see that all difficulties, however hard, have an end. Paul has been in prison, he's been beaten, stoned, betrayed – but compared to what God has in store this is just a (to use his words) “slight momentary affliction.” In other words, no matter the difficulty, Paul learned to say and believe, “I am in this hard moment, but by faith I see more than only this.” Nelson Mandela suffered 27 years in a South African prison for the cause of a just South Africa. I picture him in prison keeping hope alive, saying and believing – “this too shall pass, and resurrection shall come.” He emerged without bitterness and hatred and went on to win the Nobel peace prize for dismantling South Africa's apartheid system. This is the divine perspective – keeping hope alive means believing the tough times – hard as they are – will end in resurrection. Affliction is indeed real, but momentary – joy comes in the morning, and stays. As one preacher put it: “It's Friday's, but Sunday's coming.”

Paul says, we keep hope alive by keeping our eyes on the eternal – “*not on things that are seen but on the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*” Paul says the things we see do not last long – we get just a few short years on this planet – as an old hymn says, “we’re just a passing through.” But for those in Christ, it is not a matter of just getting by – God holds out a future. Paul saw well enough the prison bars, his momentary afflictions, but his vision went beyond them to something even more solid, more real. “Call me crazy,” Paul is saying, “but I prefer the hope I have in what – and in whom – I cannot see just now, to the despair inherent in giving my life to things that will not last.”

V. A PLACE CALLED CRAZY

During World War II Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who helped many Jews escape the Nazis during World War II, spent years in the hellish confines of Ravensbrueck – a Nazi concentration camp. In her book *The Hiding Place*, Ten Boom tells how a few of the Christian prisoners in that camp managed to conduct clandestine Bible studies in one of the barracks, in spite of being watched very carefully, and in spite of the retaliation that would come if they were discovered. In referring to the barracks where the Bible study meetings were held, Corrie ten Boom says that the other prisoners called it “The crazy place where they have hope.”

What an apt description of the church – the crazy people, who in the midst of our current difficulties and the world’s despair –

gather in the crazy place where we have hope. Hope that God is at work in spite of evidence to the contrary, hope that difficulties are not the final word, hope in the eternal. Hope happens when we remember to whom we belong – both in life and in death; when we remember with whom we belong – a community of courage and connection; when we remember where we belong – in the eternal embrace of the God who calls us to gather as crazy people of hope and then scatter to do what we can to bring our hopes into being – as the prophet Micah put it... doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.

One day, as Paul put it, our “momentary affliction” will give way to the eternal. In the meantime, let us be – in our hearts, in our homes, in our work and in our community of faith – the crazy people of hope.

Amen and amen.

¹ Time Magazine, Monday, Oct. 16, 1950, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article>

² *Spe Salvi*, by Pope Benedict, as quoted by Fr. Roger J. Landry at www.catholiccity.com/commentary/landry/00605.html