



Last Sunday I mentioned that I would this week begin a brief series of messages based on the Protestant Reformation. October 31<sup>st</sup> is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, which was an historical event of immense importance. After the events of the past week in Las Vegas, however, I decided to delay that series of messages by one week. The violence inflicted upon so many people leaves us, once again, wondering what is happening to our country. In spite of the fact that many good things take place, I think that many of us have this disturbing feeling that something deeply wrong is happening to our culture. Wherever people stand in terms of political, social, and religious beliefs, I believe everyone feels this sense of unease.

How many of you listen to less news today than you did a year or two ago? And how many of you, if you listen to less news, do so because it seems as though the news gets continually worse? I heard part of a radio program recently about the psychological effects of hearing such a steady drumbeat of bad news, and I believe it makes a valid point. But it seems more and more that the bad news is inescapable. We receive a constant diet of news that makes us very uneasy about the present and the future. What will happen with North Korea? Is war inevitable? What about the ever-present tensions in the Middle East? What will happen with the economy? It's working very well for some, but not all. Not everyone is benefitting from the stock market boom. Will the opioid epidemic end, or continue to grow? The list of bad news can go on and on. There are so many concerns looming large these days it is easy to feel very hopeless about what is ahead. As people worry about the large events happening in the world there are also those on an individual level – what is going to happen to my family? What kind of future will my children face? Is there any way to find some measure of certainty in a world that seems to grow more and more uncertain?

Political campaigns consistently promise hope but fewer and fewer people seem to have hope. In 1999, 85% of Americans said they were hopeful about their own future and 68% said they were hopeful for the future of the world. About ten year later only 69% were hopeful for their own future and only 51% were hopeful about the future of the world (from a CNN opinion poll). It's probably dropped even more since then. In one poll, taken earlier this year, only 36% of people felt hopeful about the future.

Considering this continual assault on our sense of hope, I felt moved to offer a message about hope, titled, simply, *Hope*. The Scripture text comes from Paul's letter to the church at Rome, where, among other theological matters, he writes about hope. This particular passage might not be one that is overly familiar to many, but it is, nonetheless, a very significant passage. In these verses Paul writes with the same sense of troubled spirit that many of us feel today. He writes of how *the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God* (verse 21) and of how *the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the*

present time (verse 22).

Follow along with me, please, as I read Romans 8:18-25 –

*18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

*19 For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*

*20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope*

*21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

*22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

*23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.*

*24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?*

*25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

Of the many affirmations we can make about hope, the first I will offer this morning is this –

*1. Hope is an affirmation of belief in God's promise of the future.*

Hope, we must note, is much more than wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is to say something such as *I hope the Steelers win the Super Bowl this year. I hope UK wins the NCAA this year. I hope UofL doesn't win anything this year.*

If you're a golfer you understand hope. I am not a very good golfer. I may have 17 terrible holes – and usually do – and on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole I may hit my only good shot, and I think, *I believe I'm starting to get the hang of this.* That is wishful thinking!

What would you consider to be the essentials of life? What are the absolute, essential requirements in order for people to live? There are the tangibles, such as food, water, shelter, and clothing, but there are also intangibles as well, and one of those is hope. Where would we be without hope? Hope has empowered people since the beginning of time. Hope is a belief in the promises of God for the future, and those promises have for millennia compelled people to move forward.

Abraham was told he would be the father of a great nation. Though he never saw that hope fulfilled in his lifetime it was a hope that carried him forward in faith. That promise seemed threatened when his descendents became captives in Egypt, but they continued to have the hope of the Promised Land. For centuries they endured slavery in Egypt, but they had hope in the promise of the future that one day they would not only have freedom but a home as well. That hope is what enabled them to endure through the many years of struggle and despair. Moses was called to lead his people out of captivity in Egypt and to the Promised Land. He never stepped foot into the Promised Land but the hope that his people would enter the land carried him forward.

Job, a towering figure when it comes to hope – perhaps the greatest example of hope in the entire Bible – clung to the promise that God was with him and had not turned against him. I read several passages of Scripture regularly, and one of them is Job 13:15, which says *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.* Nothing could cause Job to lose hope, not even his friends who came to him and encouraged him to give up. They saw no reason for hope, but Job did.

The early church had hope for a future free of persecution. As the mighty Roman Empire put many to death in horrific ways – as fodder for the animals and the gladiators in the Coliseum, as human torches lighting Nero's gardens at night, and in countless other types of persecution – instead of losing

hope their hope grew and with it grew the church.

When Paul writes of hope he is writing from very deep experience. It's not an academic treatise; it's real life. Paul suffered in so many ways, as he details in II Corinthians 11:23-28 – *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* In spite of what he suffered, Paul was able to write in Romans 5:5 that *hope does not disappoint*. After all of his trials, Paul was eventually imprisoned in Rome, where he was eventually executed. Paul was a person who really understood hope. In the midst of his greatest trial – awaiting his execution – he writes the letter to the Philippians and they are beautiful words; they are words of hope.

I believe the first – and perhaps most important – lesson of uncertainty and difficulty is that God can use that uncertainty and difficulty to bring transformation to our lives. How many of you, looking back on difficult times, have said, *I would never want to relive that experience, but having survived it, I can now look back and see how God brought something good and something positive from those circumstances*. That is a triumph of hope, and is one of the great gifts of hope – even our most difficult times can become moments of transformation.

Our circumstances often dictate how we feel about life, and circumstances will often dictate fear and anxiety, but Paul, amazingly, was not controlled by his circumstances in such a way. Paul's circumstances were anything but hopeful. When he was in prison, when his execution was close at hand, he wrote these amazing words – *I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am (Philippians 4:11)*. Paul's hope was built not in changing external circumstances but upon an unchanging God who is an anchor of hope to carry us through the most difficult of circumstances.

Verse 18 of today's Scripture text says *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*. It is Paul, who had such a strong sense of hope, saying to us, *It's going to be better! Don't quit! Don't give up! Hold always to hope!*

2. *Hope is what allows one to look at the terrible circumstances of the world and say things can be better.*

Hope is what allows us to face our struggles, to look them straight in the eye, and say *I can do this; this is possible; the Spirit of God will provide the strength to endure and His promise of a better future is true*.

Verse 21 says, *that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God*.

Victor Frankel learned that hope. He was a prisoner in Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, at the entrance of which was a sign bearing the words *abandon all hope ye who enter here*. Those words are the inscription Dante uses in his classic *The Inferno* as the sign at the entrance of Hell, an apt inscription for Auschwitz. Victor Frankel lost everything in that concentration camp. Every possession was taken from him, and he suffered from cold, hunger, brutality, and the constant fear of death. While in the camp he lost his father, mother, brother, and his wife.

He later wrote of one of his darkest moments. He was digging in a cold, icy trench, and at that moment felt *the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "yes" in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose*.

At that moment a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, and upon seeing that light, hope was kindled in him, and his words at that moment were *et lux in tenebris lucent – and the light shineth in the darkness*. John 1:5 says *the light shines in the darkness*. Hope is the light that shines in the darkness of life. It is a light that illumines this life.

Hope, then, is not just about the future, but is also about the present, which leads me to my final point this morning –

3. *Hope becomes something that moves us to make a difference in this world and in this life.*

Christians have sometimes been accused over the years of concentrating so much on eternal life that the problems of this life are overlooked. But genuine hope never forgets this world. In fact, C. S. Lewis says that it is when Christians have most thought of the next world that they have worked to improve this world.

*(Mere Christianity, p. 118)*

Having hope for the present and the future, searching for certainty, is not just a *pie in the sky* attitude. It does not mean we should ignore difficult circumstances and the call to help others in the midst of their difficulties. Hope changes things in this life. Hope does not ask people to simply endure this life while they are awaiting the next. A hope that sees something beyond this life sees how things should be, and when we see how things should be we work to make them that way. People need hope not just for the future; they need hope now! That is why the church has stood with the hopeless, the homeless, the outcast, the downtrodden, and the victims of injustice. That's why most of the great social movements in history have come out of the church; because the church saw how things could be and should be, and they worked to make it so. It is what compels our church to move out into our community and to work to improve the lives of others through the ministries of Operation Care, Awake Ministries, Arriba Ninos, God's Kitchen, the Diersen Center, and many more.

Yes, where would we be without hope? Hope for the present, hope for the future, and hope that compels us to make a difference in this troubled world.

A few years before the end of my tenure in my previous congregation I was asked to serve as the chaplain for the local nursing home. I was pleased to be able to do so and twice a week I went to the nursing home to visit with the residents. One afternoon I walked into a room and asked one of the residents *are you doing all right today?* It was really more of a rhetorical question, because in my mind she had no reason to be doing all right. At that point in time she had been a resident of the nursing home for ten years, her eyesight was almost completely gone, and she was rarely able to get out of bed. Those are not good circumstances, but you know how she answered my question that day? *Of course, I'm doing all right; why wouldn't I be?* I could have given her a list of reasons why I thought she shouldn't be doing all right, but her perspective was very different.

I often think of her answer to my question. One any given day I can provide a list of reasons why I may not be doing all right. And some of those reasons might be pretty good ones, but I also know my focus is better served by asking *what can I learn through this experience* rather than by asking *why me?* It's not wrong to ask *why me*, but the transformation, brought about by hope, is more important than the answer to *why*.

May hope live in us always.