

Sermon

May 29, 2022

Hope Against Hope
Pastor Dan Peterson

I haven't forgotten. Those of you who heard or read my message last Sunday had an assignment:

over the week, you were to ponder one of four topics based upon our first reading.

Your first option was to think about the nature of the resurrection. How is Christ among us even now? In what way do you feel his presence in your life?

The second option was to ponder the legacy of Lydia. How might you imitate her example as a homeowner and/or businessperson who welcomed outsiders and who provided for the spiritual needs of those within her care? Your third and fourth options revolved around the experience of grace or God's unconditional love. How might infant baptism confirm such love? Beyond baptism, how else do you experience God's grace in your life, including the gift of faith you are given by the Holy Spirit?

I would love to hear your answers following the service or sometime thereafter.

Feeling Hopeless

Today, we turn from grace to hope – or rather to the hopelessness some of us maybe be feeling in response to this week's news. In Uvalde, Texas, as you know, a lone gunman entered and occupied an elementary school for an hour, killing 19 children and two adults before he was fatally shot by police.

The incident marks the 27th school shooting of the year.

In response, politicians have offered the usual "thoughts and prayers" for the victims and their families while turning a blind eye to even the slightest hint of better gun control.

Parents wept.

Across the world, this week also brought us news that entire regions of India have become uninhabitable due to climate change. Scientists tell us

that the likelihood of reaching a global temperature of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels now has a **50% chance of occurring** over the next five years, an increase that will spell disasters potentially greater any we have already seen.

Here at home, we have our own problems too: the rise of political extremism and domestic terrorism; an aggressive campaign to delegitimize the integrity of our democratically held elections; the complete absence of self-control and decorum in political discourse; a deeply bitter partisan divide that has commentators increasingly voice their fears about an impending civil war.

It feels like we're on the brink, like the center, as the poet W.B. Yeats once wrote, "cannot hold."

How, then, do we as Christians confront threats like these without giving in to fear, anxiety, despair, or hopelessness? How might *our faith* be a resource for confronting the serious problems our world faces today?

Christian Life in the First Century

Mark Twain, in response to a rumor that he was terminally ill while in London, wrote that "report[s] of [his] death had been greatly exaggerated." Today, scholars are saying the same thing about the persecution of Christians in the first century.

Nero is the exception.

Nero reigned as the emperor of Rome from 54-68 CE. According to the New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell, he served as "an exemplary ruler during the first five years," only to become "self-indulgent and violent." By the mid-sixties of the first century, he had become steadfast in his persecution of Christians in Rome which resulted in the crucifixion of Peter and probably the beheading of Paul.

The Book of Revelation, at least in part, stems from this time-period. It condemns Nero as the epitome of excessive Roman force and brutality by identifying him as the Beast and Satan as the source of his power.

Domitian, who reigned as emperor a couple decades after Nero, seems almost tame by comparison! As Mark Wilson of the Biblical Archeology Society says, "No pagan writer of the time ever accused Domitian, as they had Nero, of persecuting the Christians."

The only writings of the time that hint at milder forms of Christian persecution like exile, which Domitian revoked before his death, occur in the letter of a first-century bishop (Clement) as well as in the Book of Revelation, which probably came into its final form during the end of Domitian's reign.

Domitian differs from Nero in another crucial way as well: we have **no evidence** that, unlike his predecessor, he demanded to be worshiped by his subjects as *Dominus et Deus* or "Lord and God." His flatterers in the imperial court more likely gave him that title.

While it seems clear, therefore, that reports of Christians suffering from persecution under Domitian have been somewhat, if not greatly, "exaggerated" by subsequent Christian tradition, we would be wrong to assume their existence was anything close to easy or carefree.

Because of constant changes politically, writes the theologian Paul Tillich, the conquest of West and East by republican Rome, the transformation of republican into imperial Rome through Caesar and Augustus, the tyranny of the post-Augustan emperors, the destruction of the independent city and nation states . . . the individual's feeling of being in the hands of powers, natural as well as political, which [were] completely beyond his control and calculation . . . produced a tremendous anxiety and the quest for courage to meet [it].

Imagine how overwhelming life must have been. Most people had few, if any, "rights" like we do today. They existed at the mercy of circumstances completely outside of their control. Like most people, they lived at the level of subsistence with no hope for economic mobility or financial prosperity. They were helpless.

In response, pagan religions and philosophies of the time offered one of solutions: a person could either learn to accept things the way they are by detaching themselves from the world (Stoicism), or they could live by the promise that after death their soul would escape the world by returning to a better place (Gnosticism). For the latter, the world was rotten, evil, and full of hostilities.

Jews and Christians, on the other hand, affirmed the essential goodness of creation. Why? Because God created it – and God wasn't finished! God

would soon restore the world to its original luster in what would be a *new creation*. God would make all things new. Some Christians even believed that people could share in the power of God's renewal here and now, in this lifetime (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Just imagine!

Hope Against Hope

Beyond the prospect of becoming a "new creation" in Christ in the present, the Apostle Paul also held out hope for the future even when such hope had virtually no reason to exist. Consider Abraham, he tells his listeners in Rome:

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the bareness of Sarah's womb" (Rom. 4:18-20).

In other words, Abraham trusted God no matter what. By "hoping against hope," by believing that with God all things are possible, Abraham became reconciled to God. The two were now in *right relationship*.

Let me pause here for a moment to share a confession about Paul's language. I understand how he reads the Abraham story, but the phrase "hoping against hope" has never made any sense to me. Do you know what it means?

One answer comes from alternative translations of the same verse. The *Good News Bible*, for example, says that "Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping, and so became 'the father of many nations.' Just as the scripture says, 'Your descendants will be as many as the stars.'" Most translations, however, simply say "hoping against hope" without explanation.

Fortunately, the original Greek offers an answer we rarely, if ever, see in English translations. Instead of the term "against," Paul uses the word *παρ'* (*par'*) which means "beyond." Literally, therefore, Abraham hoped *beyond* hope.

Human hope can only take us so far! We hope in the foreseeable, the realistic. Hoping beyond hope means opening ourselves to the seemingly impossible, anticipating outcomes we cannot presently imagine just like Abraham did.

The same was true for Paul.

In spite of beatings and imprisonment, his ministry and the letters that emerged from it would not only make up a considerable portion of our Christian New Testament. They would also make Paul the most widely read author in the history of Western civilization, bringing the gospel he proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

But what basis, apart from God's bare promise, do we have for hope, especially today when school shootings have become the norm; when foreign powers plunge the world into war; when climate change seems irreversible?

On what basis can we, like Abraham, hope beyond hope?

God is Love

The theologian Dorothee Soelle has an answer. She speaks of a **secret power** that persists through history, one that became manifest decisively in Jesus. She writes:

Christ is the mysterious power which was in Jesus and which continues on and sometimes makes us into 'fools for Christ,' who, without hope of success and without an objective, share life with others. Share bread, shelter, anxiety, and joy. Jesus' attitude toward life was that it cannot be possessed, hoarded, safeguarded. What we can do with life is to share it, pass it along, get it as a gift and give it on."

The Christian faith has another name for what it means to "share life with others." The Gospel of John calls it love.

In today's reading, Jesus tells his disciples they should love one another as he first loved them.

Their love, in turn, will stir up the hearts of others, confirming in the words of 1 John 4:12 that while "no one has ever seen God, if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

And there we have it: the “mysterious power which was in Jesus,” the love that spread to his disciples during and beyond his lifetime, is the same power of God living in us when we love one another today!

The basis of our hope is that no matter what, this power, this love, cannot be destroyed, as our presence here this morning confirms. Indeed, this secret power in and of Christ has outlived every single emperor and king, every single tyrant and dictator, every single murderer and thief.

Yes, the world can make us feel helpless and hopeless. It can make us feel overwhelmed and stuck, just as it did to the Christians of the first century who lived in the cross-fire of imperial conflict and against the backdrop of massive political and existential instability. Yet when we love one another as they did, when we care for each other as they did, we give witness to the indestructible power of grace that cannot be stomped out, that cannot be destroyed!

Such love is the foundation of “hoping beyond hope,” hoping beyond what we expect, hoping beyond what seems realistic or probable.

Against all evidence to the contrary, Abraham became the father of many nations.

Against all evidence to the contrary, Paul’s gospel spread to the ends of the earth.

May we, against whatever evidence we have to the contrary, dare to hope as they did for the future of our world, for the safety of its children, for the integrity of our democracy, and for the life of our planet.

Be bold this week.

Hope beyond hope.

Amen.