

Message
Palm Sunday March 27-28, 2010
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56
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Hope

You'll hear the story in just a few minutes. It's the ultimate story of dread, suspicion, mistrust, fear and failure. It's a brutal story; in fact, it wears us out to hear it; to take upon ourselves the degradation and abuse. And, for some of us, this year has been such a trial that we could well be dreading this week. We can all too easily forget the holiness of Holy Week. It's a story of such trauma, that, parents, you may want to cover the ears of your children in this truth telling.

All four gospels give us the story. They hold some basic truths in common: 1. Jesus grandly entering Jerusalem. 2. He is betrayed and denied by those closest to him. 3. He's is arrested, tried and sentenced. 4. He dies on the cross at an ugly place called, "The Skull." 5. And, finally, in his death he births for us, hope.

This week, we'll share in the story with Jesus. Anytime, throughout the week, you're welcome to walk the road to the cross through the Stations located throughout the worship space. Come Thursday night and share in his Last Supper and foot washing. Friday morning and evening come worship as we stand at the foot of the cross. We may well, as the week goes along, have to ask, where is the Good News? And somehow, there is Jesus, in the middle of it all, transforming this last week of his life into our story of hope.

The story begins with Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem; palms waving and hosannas shouting. The mighty king is come. The hope comes quite simply. It's how Jesus gives himself to us, just as in his birth; beginning in a primitive manger and now, finishing riding on a work animal, a donkey. And yet, he is the usher of glorious hope: a kingdom of love, peace, compassion and understanding.

Governor Pilate has a big job keeping order and maintaining peace as everyone crowds into Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Jesus and his faithful steal away to celebrate in an upper room. He institutes hope in the holy meal, promising a new covenant with signs of Kingdom living where the disciples will serve as the victors; even the wishy washy Simon Peter. Jesus assures him, his faith will not fail. He will be the one to strengthen his brothers.

Then, he makes the trek to the Mount of Olives; that place where the prophet Zechariah prophesies, that God will rest his feet. Hopeful, and determined, he instructs the disciples to pray not for help *during* the times of trial. Rather, that they pray to have strength and courage to *resist* the tests. Mark's writer tells us that Jesus is terrified and full of anguish. But, Luke's writer portrays a Jesus of resolute and determination. The disciples fall asleep. Jesus rather than diminishing their hope and dismissing them in their weakness, he reassures. "Get up. Let's go," he says.

Where is the hope in acts of betrayal? Judas leads the Roman soldiers to Jesus, with the kiss of death. But, scripture tells us that a kiss is a sign of a warm greeting, a sign of forgiveness, reconciliation, hospitality, a sign of respect; a promise of hope.

Jesus is led away and Peter creeps along in the shadows, relying on what is our most basic human instinct, self preservation. Once again, hope wins out. It won't be

long before Peter knows in his heart that denying Jesus will call him to repentance and response to a higher call, of discipleship.

Before the Sanhedrin, his identity questioned, Jesus is mocked and beaten. Violence, degradation, and humiliation are not actions of hope. Or is Jesus' act of suffering made so that we will be redeemed to a life of non-violence; a life of compassion and love? He is, after all, the one who conquers, and will come to sit at the right hand of the power of God.

He's brought to trial. First he's accused of blasphemy against the church. He refuses to deny that he is the Son of God. Second, the state accuses him of treason. He's being claimed King! He's brought before Pilate. Jesus is not a Roman citizen; and Roman government does not employ trial by jury and judge. Pilate is free to do with Jesus whatever he wishes. Pilate, charged with securing peace and collecting taxes, already in disfavor with the citizens, is not interested in stirring up more tension. He finds Jesus innocent and wants to get him off his hands. He overhears that Jesus is a Galilean. So he sends him on up the road to Herod, governor of Galilee, who also finds no reason to charge him. Jesus is returned to Pilate. Hope springs as Pilate desires to set Jesus free.

There's power in numbers. Relentless, the crowd demands crucifixion. What about these crowds? Aren't these the same crowds who just days before were singing praises to their savior? Where are the faithful disciples? Why aren't they stepping up to the plate? When times get tough, who do we choose to follow? Pilate can't compete. He hands him over. Hope is lost.

In hope there's always room for turning. A crowd follows as the cross is carried to Calvary. It seems that it's the same crowd who just moments ago called for Jesus' death. And yet, now, they are lamenting, and mourning over their decision.

Death by crucifixion is the normal course for public offenders under Roman government. Jesus hangs in the middle between two other criminals. Matthew and Mark call them bandits; implying that there Jesus is positioned in the center of danger.

Hanging from the cross, Jesus grants absolution. "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." Forgive, arrogant, ignorance; forgive weakness and apathy; forgive infidelity and disloyalty. Hope is regained.

Promises made and broken, betrayal and denial, indifference all lead to Jesus' death. At his crucifixion, leaders scoff, soldiers mock, and the bitter, non-repentant criminal hanging next to Jesus deride him. At the same time, the taunts draw us to the saving hope in Christ. Leaders name him: the Christ, the one who saves, the Chosen One. Soldiers identify him as King of the Jews who comes to save. Even the criminal, ridiculing Jesus, remembers as the Christ he saves, even himself.

Again there's hope. The penitent criminal rebukes the other. Recognizing the glory of God, hanging right there on the cross with him, he begs to be welcomed into his saving kingdom. Paradise is promised.

Hope blossoms when we're in those places of mistrust, pain and suffering; those thin places where the light begins to fade and darkness creeps in; where protection and security are ripped in two. For three hours Jesus breathes his last, not forsaking, but returning to God all that he has and all that he is. Jesus commends himself to God, "into your hands I commit my spirit."

In the Law of Moses, the book of Deuteronomy tells us that “if a man guilty of a capital offence is to be put to death, and you hang him from a tree, his body must not remain on the tree overnight; you must bury him the same day, since anyone hanged is a curse of God, and you must not bring pollution on the soil which Yahweh your God is giving you as your heritage.” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). So, faithful Joseph, a good and upright man, a man of hope, wishing to honor the code, requests the body and lays it in a tomb.

Jesus, may we always be cursed by your redemptive powers, may we always be cursed by your eternal love, bought for us in his acceptance of the humiliation of the cross, to die, for us, so that we may be made free; free to live with hope.

This week I asked some friends what hope means to them. One said, “it’s what gets me to the next day when this day isn’t going so well. I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. But, with hope I believe tomorrow will be better.

Another said, “hope is what the darkness is not. I don’t have to stay in the darkness. With hope, I can choose to come into the light and the light is always brighter than the dark.”

Another said, “I can’t get out of bed in the morning if I don’t have hope. Hope is what tells me something new will come.”

The apostle reminds us that in Christ, we hope, not for what we can already see. We hope is for what we cannot see. (Romans 8:25). So, another friend spoke of hope as faith, that which we cannot see, but trusting that because of Jesus Christ, all will be well.

The opposite of hope is despair. Hope is a conscience decision, a choice we make to live with a certain attitude of the heart. Hope is what happens when the bottom drops out of discouragement and despair. There’s no where else to go but the experience of hope.

Also, this week, a faithful advisor sent me this quote from Michael Jordan:
Overcoming Failure I have missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot... and missed. And I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why... I succeed.

As we travel through Holy Week this week, to the empty tomb that awaits us at Easter, may we move through the sufferings and trials of Christ, knowing that hope is his promise within us; that this passion story of Jesus Christ is a story of sacrifice for the love Christ has for us; that despite any of our trials or troubles, Jesus’ passion is far outweighs. His story of hope is our story of hope. What one author calls a passion for the possible.

The possible that in his death, we embrace the cross because we are Easter people, resurrected people; a people of hope. Our story in Christ does not end at the cross. Our story is made new, changed forever at the empty tomb. We live in Christ who embraces our very being and fills us with his Spirit; a Spirit of life giving hope.

Now, let’s hear the story of hope... (The reading of Luke22:14-23:56)

