

Sermon – 8/9/15
“Come to the Water: Hope in God’s Promise Fulfilled”
Isaiah 65: 17-25 and Revelation 21:1-6; 22:1-5,17
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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Many years ago, before Jenny and I were married but after we had been dating for a little while we decided to have our families meet. We wanted to do something special and memorable to get them together. What could we do to bring this Indiana family and this North Carolina family together, we wondered? We decided to take everyone white water rafting on the Gauley River in West Virginia. Looking back I wonder what we were thinking – but it was a great way to introduce our families to one another and to launch into what has been an amazing adventure. Of course, our hope at that time was that our day on the water would be a bonding experience that would help us all get to know one another better. Our guide took us safely from the calm put in, through the Class IV and Class V rapids all the way to the promised safe ending and a quiet ride home.

Our journey in worship over the past 2 ½ months has had some similarities to this experience. We had a smooth beginning with a familiar but powerful story about the birthing waters of creation. We encountered challenging waters in the call to deeper faith, lives of justice, mercy, and compassion, and heard promises of deliverance, forgiveness, healing, and the quenching of our thirst. Finally we are arriving safely at home by the grace of our faithful guide, our Lord Jesus Christ. Hopefully we have gotten to know ourselves and one another a little bit better along the way. Hopefully we have grown in faith and we have accepted with joy the invitation to drink deeply from the spring of the water of life that is offered to all.

We end this series appropriately with the final chapters and images in scripture. We will not try and decipher the many symbols and codes that seem to be part of the Book of Revelation. That is far too much for any one sermon to tackle. What we will consider is that the final pages of scripture in a sense, bring us full circle to life with God as it has been intended to be lived all along. We find ourselves in a garden-like place within the walls of the New Jerusalem – the City of God. The River of the Water of Life flows from the center of the city and along it the Tree of Life grows freely producing fruit every month of the year and sprouting leaves which are for the healing of the nations. This water from the river is offered to all who are thirsty. The gates of the city remain open. The light is always on - for the light is the very presence of God.

Many have found the images of John of Patmos in Revelation to be confusing to say the least and sometimes horrifying. Some in the Christian community read them as a literal foretelling of what will come to pass. Others see them as symbolic of the ultimate victory of God over sin and evil and death. My hope is that we will find hope in these words which for the church are a promise of God's intention to fulfill God's purpose for the church and for all creation. In the end, we read, that God will make all things new. The broken of creation will be healed and restored. There will no longer be pain, or sadness, or evil, or fear, or death. All life will be transformed and renewed through the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who sits upon the throne.

The Church - you and I – are challenged to live into this hope. Our faith in God's faithfulness encourages us to live this life in a particular way. It isn't as if we can bring about some utopian society on our own, but we are called by the power of the Holy Spirit as it states in the Great Ends of the Church in our Presbyterian Book of Order, *to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*¹

As people of faith we claim to follow the pure revelation of the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. Our Book of Order states that “in affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope, and that the Church, as Christ’s body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.”ⁱⁱ

But even though we believe that Christ has defeated sin and death we still deal with the effects of these things in our lives until the final revelation of God’s New Heaven and New Earth. All of creation is being transformed and is being made new by the grace of God and we are called to live into that as best we can – demonstrating to the world around us what life is meant to be like in God’s Kingdom.

Author and Pastor Danielle Shroyer in a recent interview was asked about “Christian Hope.” She answered... “that’s a tricky question...I think that people hope in a whole lot of things...what makes Christian Hope different is that it is backed up by God’s promises. So we are not just sort of hoping that our team wins and it could happen or not happen – or we are hoping that we may get that job, which we may or may not get, but when we have Christian Hope we are actually saying, we are hoping for something that God has already promised to do and we trust that God will do what God said that God will do. And what God is saying that God will do is make all things new. It is saying – yes – things are terrible right now – life really stinks – but God said “behold I am making all things new,” and we trust that God finishes all the work that God starts. I think Christian Hope is everything. I don’t know how we get up when we feel like the world is just dark and horrible or that we are dark and horrible accept to say that the story isn’t finished yet and we don’t know how it will get to the end and what will happen between now and the end but we know that the ending is going to be this. That’s what hope is – the assured consummation that God will fulfill and make whole all things.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A couple of weeks ago our High School Youth participated in the Montreat Youth Conference. The theme for the week was *This is Your Story* and one of the days focused on the hope that we have as a people loved and blessed by God. Participants were invited to write a prayer or a hope on a strip of cloth which was then tied to a cross that was to be used in the evening worship service. Our hopes and dreams are offered to God in the same way each and every day through our prayers. But as Danielle Shroyer points out, our hope as a people of faith is not in the fleeting things that may simply be based on our own whims and desires. Our deep hope is caught up in the very purpose and vision of God for all creation. When the hope of our life is in harmony with God's desire for us then we find that life makes more sense.

Today is the 70th Anniversary of the dropping of the Atomic Bomb by Allied forces on Nagasaki, Japan in an effort to bring an end to World War II. This past Thursday marked the Anniversary of the bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. Every year I think about these two events that occurred back in 1945 and the many lives that ended on those two days and the days and weeks that followed.

There are many people who want to do what they can to ensure that this never happens again. Years ago, a movement began known as *From Hiroshima to Hope*. Gatherings take place each year on August 6th where people commit themselves to solving conflicts peacefully. The Seattle, Washington event is the oldest and largest anywhere outside Japan. More than a thousand attendees participated this year. People came and experienced the feeling of community, the music and the sight of a thousand lanterns drifting on the lake. It offered the hope to those gathered and to the world that we can resolve international conflicts without violence, and learn the habit of living in peace with all of our neighbors.iv

Hoping that the world will one day be a place of peace is beautiful but it is pointless if we are not willing to be peacemakers. And so our faith and our hope challenge us to live into this hope by practicing peace in the way we live.

Theologian and scholar Walter Brueggemann talks about the importance of the church practicing this kind of counter-cultural life. First, he says, we must be truth-tellers, honestly identifying where the world is out-of-sync with the purposes of God. Second, we must witness to and act out an alternative way in the world. This is to be categorized by Radical Hospitality, Generosity, and Forgiveness. Finally, we must work to shape public attitudes and public policy. By our actions – “seeking to realize God’s vision for the world” - we open the eyes of our neighbors and open our hearts toward them as well. In this we put into practice the commandments to love God with all of our being and to love neighbor as self. These are to be central in our actions and attitudes.

So – in this in-between time – the time between the revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world and the culmination of God’s work in making all things new – we are invited to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and to live into the vision that we have been given. This is when we will find that we are most alive – though it may bring us challenge and struggle and loss and pain – we endure it for the sake of the one who is making all things new and we trust in the one who will bring it to completion. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi – “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement the Presbyterian Church crafted the document known as the Confession of 1967. In it we read the following.

“Biblical visions and images of the rule of Christ, such as a heavenly city, a father’s house, a new heaven and earth, a marriage feast, and an unending day culminate in the image of the kingdom. The kingdom represents the triumph of God over all that resists his will and disrupts his creation. Already God’s reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in humanity and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.

With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.^v

Revelation paints the picture for us and we are invited to live into that, trusting that we are not alone. Scripture is filled with promises that are meant to give us hope for the journey – that we will not be alone...that God’s grace is sufficient...that we need not fear...that faith as small as a mustard seed will be enough...that God will never leave us...that God has a purpose for us and will see it through to completion.

Whether we are heading off to college, or preparing to sending our child to Kindergarten...whether we are overwhelmed by the devastating effects of war or by the actions of terrorists...whether we are burdened by an illness in our own bodies or in our family or discouraged by the effects of poverty and slavery in our world...whatever the reason that we might be tempted to become *hopeless* – let us encourage one another toward hope and good works – living into the image of the pure bride of Christ that is the church.

Friends – our White Water adventure isn't over yet. Sometimes we feel like we are in the midst of the rapids, but Revelation reminds us that our faithful Savior, guide, and companion Jesus Christ will take us safely home.

I close with this Prayer of Hope, written by author and Poet Kelly Ann Hall.

Face-up my beloved,
even at your most vulnerable;
when corruption demands your head—
rest assured: I Am for you!

I will throw open the gates,
even wider the doors of the sanctuary,
to expose where religion plots against a brother,
withholds and starves a sister,
hangs its members on words
spoken against empire;
against building much of nothing.

And still,
I will not turn my back against the mistaken,
even though you have not understood much of me,
I remain who I Am:

Teacher
Shepherd
Liberator!

To the willing ear, I speak truth coupled with love.
The wounded-in-action, I bandage with justice armed with divine perspective.
To the slipped, sunken, and fallen, I restore and even more so,

I love shamelessly!
Righting wrongs, washing hands, purifying hearts!
I am planting seeds of goodness among you,
a new reality is sprouting, in it is more than enough!

My Glory will fill the land.

It
will
fill
the
land.

I'll light the path and will guide you myself—
don't give up—follow me
and your heart will know eternal peace,
Yes, your heart will flow with my eternal peace.^{vi}

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ The Great Ends of the Church, located in the BOO, F-1.0304 was first adopted by the Presbyterian Church in 1910.

ⁱⁱ BOO, Section F-1.0204

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/christian-hope>

^{iv} <http://fromhiroshimatohope.org/>

^v Book of Confessions, Confession of 1967

^{vi} <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/fill-this-land>