

SERMON: "PREPARE YE ... For Hope" Blue Christmas Service: 2021
Rev. Geoff Ross, Wednesday, December, 15, 2021 St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church,

[As a people in darkness we suffer in many ways – but God's love and grace offers to us the light of hope that there is a better place and life available to us in/through Jesus Christ. But it's hard to even have hope when what we truly need is hope! This is why, as I said in my letter, we look to the promises of God – especially the promises made to the God's People when they were enduring the hardships of exile/defeat/despair: dark periods in the life of God's people as a people/individually when, like Abraham, they hoped against hope that God's promises were real/true/for them.]

If there is one place where I see this "hope against hope" has to be when I've sat at someone's bedside. I've been by many bedsides – some forgotten/unforgettable. My first, I was 14, was my Grandfather's hospital bed – a man/giant/lived larger than life/nor ravaged by cancer – a day before he died. The next was my grandmother's – my father's mother – Margaret Ross, who, to me was a small budgie of a woman, only now, smaller because of cancer: I spent hours literally lying on the bed beside/holding her as she wrestled with what was before her. Since, I've been blessed to be at the bedside of people who've been to death/back, who've been shaken to the core – blindsided – by an accident that changed their lives forever/fought death for every breath/welcomed death knowing that their pain would cease and that a better place was waiting for them; confident in the hope that God's promises are about to be fulfilled/revealed.

*["Hope against hope" Paul/Romans 4:18 – section entitled: **"God's Promise Realized through Faith"** – writing about Abraham: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said/God said..." Now, this hope is to hope very strongly that something will happen, although you know it is not likely/not confident it will. Luckily/Paul also writes that Abraham was justified/made righteous/saved by faith – a faith based on his hope.]*

We are to live in hope – Paul says, the suffering of this life is contrasted with the glory, as yet unrevealed, that is in store for us through Christ. Life as a Christian is not easy – life is hard/brutish/seemingly unfair; unpredictable at best. Life is full of suffering/splendor, pain/glory – the poles of experience known to us as Christ's followers: They correspond to Christ's death/resurrection. Christ suffered death but God raised him to new life – a life of glory – and this, Paul tells us, Jesus' fate/destiny, charts a course for everyone who enters into His/Jesus' story, lives in/by it. What keeps Paul's statements from sounding hollow is his recollection that Christ suffered not in vain but in hope.

[As post-Easter Christians we forget/assume that Christ died knowing what was to come/that this diminished the suffering that he endured. But Gospels tell a different story – Christ's passion/death – different story: depict fear/suffering/facing death – tested physically/spiritually: faith/refined his hope. As God with us/As us/For us Christ suffered in the same hope we have that the steadfast God of promises kept would deliver him/suffering part of a larger plan. This hope: the divine plan – not just for us/creation/universe: hope for redemption/salvation – the end of pain/sorrow/suffering.]

Seen this way, the whole of creation is understood as living in hope: a hope that despite its shackles of pain/suffering, looks forward to a better day/faces the future with hope rather than despair. Paul uses the vivid image of the universe “groaning in labour pains” to express the idea of how hope is the enticement – the inducement if you will – that enables us to move through suffering to new life. Paul’s metaphor serves to encourage us on a personal level to live in hope. Suffering is not the end – enduring pain/loss/grief is not the sum total of our existence in faith: hope of new life is/in this world or in God’s kingdom.

[Most vivid bedtimes: Bed in the TGH/father lying down/doctor breezed in/confirmed he had had a heart attack but said that there wasn't anything they could do. next: 18 months later, a week before my 34th birthday, my father died of a second heart attack – alone. Hours later, after a chaotic whirlwind of events I've talked about before – I stood at the bed that held his body. I miss him dearly everyday/wish he was here: but I know he's with me: I have hope – one day....]

Advent is a time of hope – a hope that offers to us salvation, a hope that reassures us of God’s promises made and kept through Jesus Christ, a hope that has sustained millions through the past two thousand years – a hope that what might be will be through Christ. It is hard when we live in darkness/pain/with suffer to find hope – but we are an Easter People called to believe in the hope for a better day/way – but we know that it is a hard-won day/way. As a Christian I live by hope – hope founded in the promises made and kept; hope in the grace of a God who sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world; hope that one day we will all be the best of ourselves, together, forever, in God’s glorious presence. Amen.