

## Living Hope

Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 16, Acts 2:14a, 22-32, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

This morning we are going to consider the significance of Hope. As Christians we should be among the most hopeful people on earth and with good reason. From a worldly perspective the social and medical sciences recognise the importance of hope. A recent *Psychology Today* article observes... *"Hope often gets a bad rap. For some, it conjures up images of a blissfully naïve chump pushing up against a wall with a big smile. That's a shame. Cutting-edge science shows that hope, at least as defined by psychologists, matters a lot."* The article goes on to make a couple of perceptive observations: firstly, that *"The person who has hope has the will and determination that goals will be achieved, and a set of different strategies at their disposal to reach their goals"*. Secondly, and so true from a Christian perspective, is the recognition that hope generates optimism and *"Optimism involves a positive expectancy for future outcomes without regard for one's personal control over the outcome."* With added spiritual dimension and insight Christians should be even more hopeful.

We carry within us a hope in us that gives us both determination and new strategies. We have access to a greater resource than the world knows. And yes, we do have an expectation of success beyond what we can control ourselves. While the education system encourages the belief that with enough work we can achieve any goal by our own efforts we have the encouragement that in the Lord there is no failure.

The life of faith is a life of hope. The knowledge that God is involved in our lives should be mind-transforming. Let's consider for a moment the account of Joseph. I see that a new version of Joseph's Technicolour Coat is on stage currently. It's one of my favourite musicals. Remember Joseph, such a keen and probably spoilt young man. Genesis 37 tells us of the dreams that Joseph had and his understanding that one day his entire family would bow down before him. He considered himself clearly his father's favourite as the gift of the wonderful multi-coloured cloak demonstrated. But Joseph also clearly got up his brothers' noses to the extent they plotted to get rid of him. Only one of them, unknown to Joseph, had his goodwill in mind and planned to save him. While Joseph's brothers couldn't bring themselves to kill him outright, though it must have been touch and go, they did decide to throw him down an old cistern in the desert and leave him there to his fate. Imagine being Joseph. All your hopes and dreams might have seemed to come to a rather dismal end. Betrayed by your own family. Thrown in a dried up well miles from anywhere and left to die. Body getting weaker and more dehydrated by the moment, maybe injured by the fall. Hardly makes for a good day does it? How often have we figuratively been thrown in the well by life? Dropped into situations we didn't want or need, let down by others we thought we could trust, others we expected and deserved good from? How often have circumstances seem to conspire against us and our dreams and hopes for future happiness been destroyed? Those we loved ripped from us? One might think that Joseph had every reason in the world to fall into despair and depression, to give up on life. I love the song in the musical that appropriates the mindset of the dreamer, the visionary that Joseph was. The lines go ... *"do what you want to me, hate me and laugh at me, bar all my windows and shut out the light, for a I know I can find, my own peace of mind, for I know the answers lie far from this world."* It reflects the Christian aspect of hope that places faith in God's choices for us and His eternal plan of good for our lives. It's not something that comes easily to us but it is an attribute and perspective of faith that we can work on through-out life. The expectation that

whatever happens, yes whatever, God will work good into our lives and for His purposes through it.

The apostle Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples and friends. He was with Jesus from the earliest days of Jesus ministry. Peter gave up his work, time with his family and friends to follow Jesus for three years on the road. A big and enthusiastic man Peter jumped from a boat to walk on water to meet Jesus (until he got frightened and sank and Jesus had to pull him up). Peter had the courage to follow Jesus into the Sanhedrin courtyard after Jesus was arrested, even though his courage failed him there as well and he famously denied he even knew Jesus. Peter was distraught when Jesus was crucified and died so horribly. All his thought and dreams for the future were completely wrecked and dismembered in a few short days. What Jesus had warned him would happen was far from Peter's mind – at least in the first instance. But then Peter was electrified when news of Jesus' absence from the tomb reached him. We recalled last week how Peter ran to the garden and straight into the tomb past the frightened young John. Peter was so keen to verify Jesus was not there. Had hope and faith started to rekindle? Then, when Peter was so famously personally forgiven and restored to his role by Jesus one quiet morning on the beach his life is again transformed and hope rekindled. He is told to get on with the work He is meant to be doing. He is effectively told to stop wallowing in self-pity and practically get on with it. The man destroyed by his failure and denial was so energised by Jesus that he would become the foremost disciple of the early church witnessing for Jesus in Rome and on the mission field. Even arrested and crucified upside down in Rome Peter had an unshaken and confident faith in Jesus and what was to come.

What sort of hope is this? Peter tells us in his epistle that we heard this morning that we have been given a “***new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.***” This is not just about the overcoming of physical death and decay although that is true and significant. For Peter, the real triumph of the Cross is that evil and its consequence has been overcome. Not in the abstract but in the concrete reality of life now and in the surety that evil would be completely overcome in the future. In other words, for Peter, Jesus resurrection means that we can live lives now and going forward we can be victorious over sin in our own lives and in the world. How is this possible?

Our **new birth** into this **living hope** that we can now experience is exactly what Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus about in John's gospel chapter 3. You may recall that Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher and senior Pharisee who would later become Jesus' disciple, had come to Jesus by night to ask Jesus about His miracles and teaching. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again to see the kingdom of God and that the new life would be by the Spirit. Intellectually and conceptually this was difficult to comprehend. Nicodemus clearly wrestled with what Jesus was on about. But in the light of resurrection and later Pentecost Jesus' words took on a whole new light. Filled by the Spirit we see the world differently, through new eyes, through spiritual glasses as it were. It's like we had been going through life with glasses that only let us see everything in black and white and now we have been given full colour lens. Everything is the same but very different – more detail, more colour, more depth, more significance. In the movie Pleasantville the teenage couple transported back to the 1950's arrive in a black and white, colourless town and knowing its lack set about bringing colour to life. When we truly see and experience life through the eyes of the Spirit nothing can ever be the same and we know that others who do not see the world the same are seriously missing out. Filled with faith and the Holy Spirit we experience and know only a part of the power of God that brings transformation. This *first-fruits* as it were is a deposit, an assurance, of what God is working out. It is sufficient to give us a sense of the power of

God and how His will is more than sufficient to achieve His own ends. We might liken this to standing in the water at a surf beach on a sunny day. The surf looks calm and relaxed and we can wander out. We feel the pull of the current and the strength of the rip but we are content and safe. But go out a bit further on a rough day and one can see and feel the power of the water that can lift you up and dump you into the sand like a rag or grab you and pull you under and out to sea kilometres under water with no chance of survival. You know your inability to do anything, even to save your own life. God is in both the storm and the calm. He carries us through both and keep us safe but we can see and feel His power even if at times the storm around us might seem overwhelming.

If is this aspect of optimism that the psychologists identify for us. Our optimism recognises that the positive outcomes we anticipate are not under our control and in fact may not be quite what we have envisaged. As Christians we know this to be true. Old Testament writers recognised this both in the general and the specific. In Psalm 33:11 the psalmist writes, **“But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.”** This is big picture stuff. God’s plans will be worked out in His time but these plans have immediate impact for us. The psalmist points to God’s heart, God’s character as the key for us here. God is faithful to His own character, He cannot be otherwise. He actively loves and cares for us. He knows and shares in our pain and suffering when things go wrong. He also knows what it is that we need to experience in life so that we can be fully useful and fully equipped for what He has ahead of us. In Psalm 138:8 we are told... **“The Lord will perfect that which concerns me; Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever.”** In the New Testament this is picked up for us personally in Philippians 1:6 where the apostle Paul states that, **“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”**. It is not us who are controlling ultimate outcomes but God. Our task is to remain faithful to the calling that God puts upon our lives.

Part of what God is doing in this is working on developing the character that He wants us to have and demonstrate. The image of the potter and the clay from Jeremiah 18 is a common Christian motif. God is moulding us. What did Joseph have to learn in Potiphar’s household and then in prison? He learnt patience and then how to manage the affairs of an elite household and of the prison. He had to learn how to manage very different people. This would prepare him for later leading all of Egypt. What must have been a horrible experience worked for good in the long term.

Let’s close today by reflecting on Jesus. As Jesus came to the Garden of Gethsemane He knew that before Him we a few days from hell. Literally. Everything the world could throw at Him was about to come at once – stripped physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually He would be subject to abuse, ridicule, torture, deprivation, public humiliation and shaming. And He’d die in agony abandoned by most of His closest friends. Why? Because He had hope, He had an optimism that God had purpose and plan in all of this. And He was right. His resurrection proves that beyond all doubt.

Hebrews 12 tells us to **“throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** Our hope as Christians is not a desperate wish. Our hope is founded on nothing less than Jesus Christ and His faithfulness, His integrity and His love for us. He will bring about good in our lives and help us to live out His purpose in our lives.

We will succeed, we will see His goodness in our lives, in our families and in our futures because He is bringing it about and He has more than adequately proved He can do so. We have hope, great hope, because of His character, His faithfulness, and His love for us. We persevere because we know this.

We are His people who hope with a Living Hope! And even when we are discouraged and things haven't gone the way we expect we too, like Peter, can be lifted up to great new things because Jesus knows us and calls us by name. He tells us to get on with His work and He will sort the rest! As Matthew 6:33 reminds us ... ***“seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*** Are we a people of living hope? To right! Jesus lives!

Amen