

“Waiting In Hope”
Psalm 130 Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-53
Year A Fifth Sunday of Lent April 6, 2014
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This sermon is titled "waiting in hope" but lets make sure we understand that we're talking about the quality of hope as a state of reality, and not specifically a geographic place just up the road on the shore of the lake. Hope, Idaho, and East Hope and Beyond Hope are specific places, but the kind of hope we're talking about this morning can follow you anywhere, and is most needed in those times and places when we find life at it's worst, when we feel the most lost and alone, when everything seems to give way.

Psalm 130 is the lectionary Psalm this morning and as it says, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD" those words echo the cries of people for thousands of years; every generation, and most of the time every person at some point in their life gets mired in those depths of pain and struggle. I heard a preacher one time talking about the angels in heaven compared to people. Angels are created beings who live in the heavenly realms with God and the Bible never actually says they sing. The correct English translations always say the angels spoke, or said their praises to God, not sing. Now, angelic voices to us could sound very

musical, like some of the most amazing voices ever heard, but in their way they are speaking. Redeemed sinners sing, transformed people brought through the pit and exalted by God; these are who sing praises because they know suffering first hand and have come out triumphant. That is uniquely human, according to that preacher.

Interesting perspective, and whether or not we totally agree with it is not the point, but it does show that something about being human involves facing difficulties, waiting on God, with all our soul leaning into hope in the midst of darkness, when life is at its worst. Sometimes when life gets like that, its all you can do to wait. And as Israel waits for The Lord, they find hope, even as they trust that "with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem." When we struggle we can come alongside Psalmists like this one who remind us that no matter what happens in life God's love is steadfast, nothing can separate us from the love of God. And we can hope for redemptive outcomes. We may or may not see them ourselves directly, but hope does not disappoint. God is an active player in life, and even in death.

That's the theme of our other scriptures as well. Death. Hope. The power

of God's steadfast love. Resurrection. Redemption. All these big themes rolling around as we read about Ezekiel's vision in the valley of the dry bones and as we hear about Jesus yelling toward the tomb, "Lazarus! Come out! And as Judah is in Exile they catch a glimpse of hope. As Mary and Martha weep, they find joy.

Remember our questions from the last couple of weeks, as we reflect on these long stories during Lent and their shared themes of encounters with Christ? Questions like, "How do you arrive at truth, at recognizing Jesus? What does an encounter or conversation with Jesus look like for you?" (Podcast conversation, Working Preacher online resource through Luther Seminary, Minnesota). "What does it mean to say Jesus is the light of world? What does it mean for you, or for us as a congregation?" Today we might add more questions, such as, "What does it mean, or what does it feel like to be cut off from God? When we are in despair, crying out to the LORD, "What do we expect God to do? What do we need God to do? And what does new life, new hope look like?"

Friday and Saturday I attended a workshop at Whitworth University, along with Judy Labrie and Anna Bates from this church, and we joined over 70 other people from our presbytery around the concept that what church has been doing,

even faithfully, no longer connects with our culture. What we are doing here today, for example, is counter-cultural. Many people in our society don't wake up on a typical weekend day and say, "I think I'll make an effort to get up and out of the house, to go sit on a wooden bench, except when I'm standing up surrounded by people singing hymns." For many people this is an uncomfortable, even unknown practice. One thing we talked about is the typical response of bemoaning that fact, of complaining that people are just falling away from the church, when in fact this has been happening in our culture since at least the 1920s, most noticeably since the late 1960s. The typical response also includes trying to sell ourselves just to get people in the door, but even this has stopped working because they don't come in the door anymore, especially if they don't have a church background to begin with. Maybe people who have church roots might come in, but what is happening is a shift where Christians in churches have to relearn what it means to connect with people in their neighborhoods. That's where the title for the workshop comes in, Moving Back Into the Neighborhood. And they discussed these big cultural shifts that are happening at an alarming rate and it's just getting faster.

Churches that assume they have the truth and just need people to teach it to are tying the noose around their own necks and won't make it very far for much longer. But churches that are able to connect with their communities in order to see what God is already doing in the lives of people and somehow are able to share hospitality rather than judgment, love more than exclusion, and in authentic ways be able to share reconciliation, new life, and hope with people who are struggling, that's when the gospel message grows. Notice I did not say, "That's when our church will grow," or "That's when congregations blossom again," or "That's when institutional survival is guaranteed."

Israel was at a loss. The Northern Kingdom had been swept away by the Assyrians. Now the Southern Kingdom was destroyed and its people carried off to foreign lands. The context of Ezekiel is lament. The church as they knew it was gone, but worse, they assumed the presence of God was gone as well. Yet here is the LORD sharing a vision with the prophet Ezekiel. When all was lost and lament is the context, this vision is the response, and it goes to great lengths to show what the Spirit will do to create life. The Spirit attends to the people, brings them back, and restores them. They were cut off, yet God overcomes the

boundaries and brings redemption.

In John we read the last of the great Signs. Chapters one through twelve are what's called the Book of Signs, and as we shift towards the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Passion narrative as Jesus is crucified, dead, and buried, and rises again; this is the Book of Glory for the remainder of John's gospel. Raising Lazarus, the last of the signs, is what really gets the religious leaders riled up to the point they plot to kill Jesus. So many people had turned to follow Jesus, and Lazarus was living proof that Jesus was the Messiah with the power over life and death, that they were afraid that they would lose their church, lose the people and their influence over them, that Rome would see this unrest and come wipe them all out. The leaders are fearful their world is in danger, and by killing Jesus they feel they could keep things at status quo, keep their power, keep the peace. By sacrificing one they could save the many.

Let's notice one thing about these stories. They are not resuscitations. Lazarus has been in the tomb for days. The bones Ezekiel sees in his vision are very dry and scattered. The power of God involves resurrection, a whole new life. And this is good news because so often we don't just need a fresh start, or a

new attempt, or a restart, or even a second chance. So often we just need new life. What has come before no longer works so more of the same doesn't do much good.

But also notice this new life comes from God. The vision in the valley is orchestrated word for word by God; the raising of Lazarus happens when Jesus cries out. A whole new life, resurrection, and not just resuscitation.

But there is another thing to notice (actually lots of things but we're going to mention one more); we are partners in bringing about new life with God. Even though God's words spoke those bones to life, God used Ezekiel to say them. Even the Spirit of The Lord blown into their bodies to give life only blew from the four corners of the wind when Ezekiel prophesied the command for this to happen.

Martha shows us a misunderstanding. She thinks new life only comes in the next life, eternal life in heaven. But Jesus, as John would have us know, is interested in eternal life starting now, in this moment, right here. This last great sign of Jesus as God's light shining in our world, the incarnation of God with us, the first fruits calling for life to emerge from the tomb confronts the last great

barrier: death.

Death is tragic. Death gives us much to fear and the anxiety rips our world apart as people cling to security and fight for survival. Yet Jesus confronts death head on by going to the place least expected, right into Jerusalem, right towards those crowds of religious leaders who were looking for him so they could arrest him and have him killed. And with these signs and wonders of resurrection, of life that is not held by death, Jesus shows us that death has its place but it does not have the final say.

And this is important when we struggle, when we are in despair, when we are surrounded by decline and fears and anxieties and struggles to survive take our focus off the steadfast, the steadfast love of God. But if we notice seeds of hope, if we claim glimpses of light, or at least trust that light shall dawn some day, then we can look for new life sprouting. We can look for signs of new life, reconciliation, and hope. We can claim a living faith, trusting in the action and activity of the Holy Spirit, and look for ways Jesus is inviting us into something new and glorious, even in our own neighborhood. For John, resurrected life is not an anticipated or delayed reality, it's a present reality. But to find it, we may

need to connect with our neighbors; we may need to listen for the voice of God calling us; we may need to look hard for signs as we cling to hope, not for survival, nor mere existence, but for life in Christ which is full, joyful, loving, and courageous.

God be with us as we seek resurrection life through Christ. And may God be glorified, now and forever. Amen.