

Things Hoped For

Rev. John Allen

This passage in the book of Hebrews is like a Hall of Fame of faith. We just heard the part about Abraham, but the author of Hebrews lists person, after person, after person from the stories of the Bible whose faith exemplified the virtue of hope.

But if you look at the verses around these, you will hear about the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Jospheh, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel.

Here we heard about Abraham, who was told when he was 90 years old and childless that he would have as many ancestors as there were stars in the heavens.

And who was sent off by God on a journey with the very vague destination of “the land I will show you.”

And so Abraham set out, becoming an immigrant in a foreign land, never again to live in his own country. He set out by faith, and with hope. With everything stacked against him and nothing but God's promise at his back.

Faith and hope.

These verses in Hebrews are all about faith, and hope.

You might be familiar with the first line of today's reading, it is one of the most frequently cited verses from the book of Hebrews, very quotable, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

I don't know about you, but recently I find hope hard.

I am thinking about two shootings, joining a long litany of horrific acts of violence forever associated with the name of a place: Sandy Hook, Newtown, Columbine, El Paso, Dayton...

I am thinking about children in Mississippi whose parents left for work and didn't come home, swept up, disappeared.

I am thinking about Jimmy Aldaoud, a man from Detroit, a paranoid schizophrenic, diabetic, who was deported to Iraq, a country where he had never been, where he did not speak the language, and where he died in a matter of days because he could not figure out how to get insulin.

And then I think about how these stories that are so close to the top of my heart this morning, may very well be buried in the faint recesses of my memory in a matter of days as new painful stories emerge, as new cruelties unfold.

So what is the place of hope in that?

There is a common way of using that word hope. "I hope it doesn't rain." That kind of hope is a sort of passive expression of a wish.

I hope things get better.

I hope it works out.

Its powerless hope. Wishful hope.

And when we are talking about the weather, or other things beyond our control, that's one thing.

But it seems like that same sort of throw your hands up hope has crept into things that are very much within our collective control. Or at least susceptible to our influence.

But wishful hope is a kind of anesthetic, and I think an often unhelpful one.

It seems like after every high profile mass shooting there are expressions of hope that maybe this one will finally elicit a response commensurate to the crisis we are facing. It never does.

This epidemic of terror and violence is not going to stop on its own.

But there are things that can change, we can change who we vote for, we can change what kind of policies we insist on, we can change where our money is invested. We can change how we teach children, how we connect communities, how we confront hate.

Our reading from Hebrews this morning is making an important point about hope by listing all these heroes of faith.

—

And it is telling us that hope is not mere wishful thinking.

Abraham did indeed become the father of many millions, but in his life he knew 8 children and 2 grandchildren. He died having not seen the fulfillment of that promise.

And Abraham's journey did point toward the land of God's promise, but it would be many, many generations before his descendants would make the Exodus out of Egypt and across the Jordan into the promised land. He did not see the fulfillment of God's promise.

Indeed, this morning's text from the Book of Hebrews points out that all these great heroes of faith: "All of them died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."

This is a different type of hope. The hope that these heroes of faith teach us. It is hope that is not comprised of wishes but rather of two parts: (1) acting today (2) remembering that we are working toward a future beyond our lives.

The reading says: "they understood that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth." That is their time on this planet was but one leg of a much longer race. They knew they were not there when it began, they knew they would not be there when it ended, and yet the

worked diligently and faithfully in their lives to move their communities and the world in the direction God desired.

And their hope was this: they knew that even if they were not there in the future, God would be. God will be a part of the future even when we are not. God's hand will guide the hearts of humanity even when each of our names has been long forgotten.

This kind of hope is not an anesthetic against the pain of living, it is inspiration to live bravely, to do what we can do for the sake of the people God loves, and to find hope not in the belief that we will see the problems solved and pain pass away, but to have hope in things unseen.

I am here for that kind of hope.

Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking US Military prisoner held at the Vietnamese prison camp known as the Hanoi Hilton.

Admiral Stockdale was asked years later how he managed to survive, and he said this: “I never lost faith in the end of the story.” He says that he remained confident that he would somehow prevail.”

He was then asked, and what type of person had the most trouble? Who didn't make it?

His answer: “optimists.”

He described a type of prisoner who would say id, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again...

Those were the type of people who didn't make it through the long ordeal.

His response to these questions has become known as the Stockdale Paradox.

What helped me survive? I never lost faith in the end of the story.”

Who didn’t make it? Optimists.

Of the apparent paradox, Stockdale said.

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

That might not be the kind of message of hope that you would embroider on a throw pillow, or find in a Hallmark card.

But its the kind of honest hope that we all need for the greatest trials of our lives, and our world.

Not the idle hope that things may just work out.

But the active hope, of setting our hearts, and minds, and hands, to the hard task of healing, building, seeking, exploring, and creating along our leg of life's journey.

In hope. In faith. That God will still be working through people like us, even long after we are gone.