



Our Best Yet!

JUBILEE & THE HOPE OF A HOLY PARTNERSHIP

Rev. Michael Anthony Howard
Brookside Community Church
Pentecost 25B - November 11, 2018

Leviticus 25:1-26:33;
Hebrews 11:1-3; 12:1-3



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The Spirit of our Creator has empowered us to enter into holy partnerships. Partnerships are relationships with a shared stake in the outcome. Rather than pessimism or optimism, the hope of the gospel is the hope of a holy, covenant partnership with creation, each other, and God.

Hope Against Hope

I think it is time we had a serious conversation about something that is at the heart of the Christian tradition—hope. So I want to start us out with part of a stanza from a poem by Percy Shelley.

*“To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From it's own wreck the thing it contemplates;
This...is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This alone is Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.”¹*

I have a crucial question for us to consider, a question I think should really shape who we are as a community here at Brookside Community Church. What is it that gives us hope?

When Peter wrote his first letter to the persecuted Christian communities in the first century, they were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They were living in a world experiencing a sense of utter hopelessness. Peter knew they had every reason to give up hope. Yet, he urged them to remember the sacred beauty they had experienced as a community in Jesus. He pressed them to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asked why they still had hope (1 Peter 3:15). People are living in fear, Peter explained, but “We do not fear what they fear.” In a world filled with fear, hope looks different. A **hopeful people** will live differently. People who live out of an inner core of hope will do odd things. A hopeful people is a peculiar people. People will ask: Why do you have hope? Why is your way of life so different? Be ready, then, Peter instructed them, to tell others about the hope that propels you forward. In the face of utter hopelessness, he called them to be a people of hope. And I think that is our calling too.

Here at Brookside, I believe all of us have a yearning within us to encounter that same sacred beauty, that healing, life-giving love for the world deep in the heart of God. I believe, in spite of the hopelessness that people around us are experiencing, that we might be experiencing, God is empowering us to be faithful to that same call Peter gave to the early church. Are we ready to give an answer to anyone who asks why we are so peculiar. Why are we so different? Why do we continue to be a **hopeful people**?

When I think about this question, I think of a number of Christian heroes throughout history, people who had hope in spite of what seemed like hopeless situations. These are peculiar people like those in Hebrews 11—that “great cloud of witnesses” that fills the Hall of Faith we’ve been talking about for the past few weeks. People like Abraham, who—as the Apostle Paul put it—was considered righteous because he had “hope against hope” (Romans 4:18).

In the face of hopelessness, what is it that gives us hope?

I think of people like Dorothy Day who, against all hope, still had hope enough to care for the hungry and homeless, though she often had no idea where her next meal would come from. If we asked her what gave her hope, I imagine she might answer by rephrasing of one of Peter Maurin’s aphorisms, like “the only way the future can be different is if we make the present different.”²

¹ Percy Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (London, 1820) IV. 573-4, 576-8.

² Peter Maurin, *Catholic Radicalism: Phrased Essays for the Green Revolution* (New York : Catholic Worker Books, 1949), p. 45.

When a world filled with darkness, what is it that gives us hope?

I think of people like Dr. King, who against all hope, had hope enough to believe in a world he could not see. I think that if we asked him what gave him hope, he would say something like “I had a dream.” Once he had the dream—and he knew the truth at the heart of his dream—he couldn’t undream it. He would probably say something like “Only in the darkness can you see the stars.”³

In a world riddled with violence, what is it that gives us hope?

I think of people like Mahatma Gandhi, who against all hope said, “In a gentle way, you can shake the world.”

In a world that can be so inhumane, what is it that gives us hope?

I think of André Trocmé, the pastor from Le Chambon, who in winter of 1940 opened the door to a hungry and cold woman and, in that simple act of kindness, became a beacon of hope for thousands of people fleeing the Vichy government and Nazis during World War II. Against all hope, when he was asked by the authorities if he was harboring Jews, he answered, “I don’t know what a Jew is. I only know human beings.”

Hope Against Illusion

Sometimes, when people talk about hope, they don’t really mean hope. Too often, what they are referring to is a false sense of optimism. In a world that seems hopeless, pessimism comes all too easy, and false optimism can feel like the right alternative. I think we should get this right, so let me explain.

“The glass is half-empty,” We say. (Well yes, that may be accurate. But is that what Truth sounds like?) We all know Murphy’s Law: Anything that can go wrong is going to go wrong, so prepare for the worst. (Well yes, that may be correct. But is that what Truth sounds like?) Pessimism creates anxiety and negativity. In a world where hope seems illusive, pessimism sounds like truthfulness. But can you be a pessimistic people and a people that live by faith? Is it possible to be a pessimistic people *and* a hopeful people? We are people called to live and believe in the promises of God, and believe that grace is more operative in the world than any other power. But we should be careful. Instead of pessimism, we might be easily tempted to think that optimism is the right alternative. But optimism can be dangerous, too.

As one social critic puts it, illusions function like a drug. They can make you feel good about yourself. You can quickly become unwelcome by asking critical questions—because questioning the illusion threatens to burst those good feelings. Those who critique who we are and where we are going, they are dismissed as cynics, pessimists. But optimism can be a kind of disease. In the

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” Address Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, April 3, 1968. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple> (Accessed November 10, 2018).

face of utter catastrophe, one can plow forward with a cheerful optimism that is no longer rooted in reality. “If hope becomes something you express through illusion, then it’s not hope, it’s fantasy.”⁴

But we are talking about hope. And hope must be something other than fantasy—if we are talking about the kind of holy, righteous, life-giving hope that comes from faith, the hope against hope that Abraham had. When we talk about hope, we must be talking about something other than the illusion of false optimism. Hope, the kind of holy hope Peter was calling the early Christians to, involves the willingness to look at the challenges squarely before us, to be honest about them, and then have the courage—believe in the grace of God—and move forward with creative and inspired action to change things. What does that kind of hope look like?

It is easy for faith communities, when they are faced with challenges to go one of two directions: either they lose hope and slide into pessimism, mistaking cynicism for Truth, or they can slide off into the sunset and trade reality for illusion. What we need, what Brookside needs, what Christian faith calls for is real hope, the “hope against hope” of that faithful “great cloud of witnesses” that surround us. This is the kind of “hope against hope” of people like Dorothy Day or Dr. King or Mahatma Gandhi or André Trocmé. To paraphrase Peter’s call to the early Christians, are we able to give even for ourselves an answer to the question, “What is it that gives us hope?”

Jubilee: A Holy Partnership

As I mentioned earlier, André Trocmé served as a moral compass for his village and is credited with an inspiring rescue effort that saved some 5,000 refugees during the Holocaust. In his little book, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, Trocmé made clear that his moral courage didn’t come out of nowhere. It was rooted in hope, and in his understanding of the teachings of Jesus, hope takes shape in a kind of holy partnership, an engagement with the world that gives birth to what scripture called Jubilee. In particular, it was rooted in his understanding that when Jesus proclaimed the good news, he was putting into effect the year of Jubilee. As he put it, “Jubilee was a preeminent sign of God’s justice and salvation on earth.”⁵ Now that is something worth hoping for.

The notion of Jubilee is rooted in the story of the liberating God that rescued Israel from Egypt and promised to lead them to “Promised Land.” Most Christians are somewhat familiar with the notion of a “promised land.” But what Jubilee teaches us is that the promises of God are not one-directional—from God to us. The land was not “the promised land” because the land was magically different than any other land. And the people were not the promised people because they were more beloved, or because they had happened to stumble onto a God that was bigger and better than the other gods. The Jubilee promise teaches us that the land was to become a place of promise because they worshiped its Creator, the Creator of all land and all people. This Creator had rescued them from slavery, empowered them to live in to a full sense of freedom, and invited them into a holy partnership with God, with the land, and with each other. Jubilee, then, would celebrate the promise that would result from their faithfulness to that holy partnership. Their hope was that in their faithfulness to each other, the land, and to God, this is would be what made them a people of God’s promise. The promise that God had invited them to was not a promise by God to

⁴ Chris Hedges, “American Psychosis.” <https://vimeo.com/293802639?ref=tw-v-share> (Accessed November 10, 2018).

⁵ André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2003), p. 42.

merely be consumed. The hope of the jubilee promise was the hope a holy partnership. And that was what gave André Trocmé the kind of hope that inspired him—almost without thinking—to lead an entire village to save thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.

Despite the hopelessness of the world around us, and it might feel more honest at times to be pessimistic, I believe God is inviting us to be a **hope-filled people**. I don't believe the kind of hope we are called to is based on illusion, a false sense of optimism that allows us to ignore the challenges around us. It is not the kind of hope that believes that our relationship with God is one directional. The hope we are being called to is the kind of "hope against hope" that the people of faith before us have had, people like André Trocmé. It is the jubilee hope of a holy partnership. God is calling us to deeply engage in God's love together, and by doing that, we will learn to love in such a way that it will change the world—even set the world free.

In a world where it can seem so easy to be hopeless, what is it that continues to give us hope?

What gives me hope is that I believe that the Spirit of our Creator has empowered us to enter into a holy partnership. Partnerships are relationships with a shared stake in the outcome. It is my prayer that the folks here at Brookside Community Church, here in the heart of Morris County, New Jersey are able to get a glimpse at the hope of the gospel, this hope of a holy, covenant partnership with creation, each other, and God. It is my prayer that we can experience together the fullness of the love that brought us into being. My hope is rooted in the belief that if we fully enter in to this holy partnership together, we can experience a Jubilee-love so profound that the deep yearning within to encounter God can burst free, and that wholeness and goodness and peace and life will pour out naturally for the world around us. I believe this kind of Jubilee promise will cause the world around us to look and say—ah yes, that's what I've been looking for all my life.

May it be so...

AMEN.