

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Christian Hope
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Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8

Well, can it get any worse?!! Wars around the world, governments that everyone has a different reason for distrusting, completely senseless violence ... I'm looking next for frogs and locusts, just like those that fell upon the ancient Egyptians!! I sure hope not ...

I am pleased to be with you this morning to worship our God in spirit and truth. And, as I begin this sermon, just a reminder ... when I preach, I am preaching to myself. If something in what I say helps in your faith journey, and I hope it does, just know that I am preaching to all of us this morning ... myself included. May it be a blessing to us all.

Moses and the Hebrew people were looking to the future as they camped in the Sinai. The Pharaoh in Egypt had not asked for their consent to be his slaves. But now God was asking those newly freed slaves to agree to a covenant with God and to commit to a future with God.

In Romans Paul was also looking forward to the future.

The Emperor, Claudius had exiled the Jews from Rome, so the followers of Jesus temporarily lost many of their church leaders. Those leaders were able to return when Claudius died. Now however they faced the problem of integrating those returned leaders with newer Gentile leaders who had developed in the interim. There was internal tension in the church and fear of external oppression from the Roman Empire.

Paul sought to comfort the congregations in Rome. He famously told them that suffering produces endurance which produces character which contains hope ... hope for a future with God. [What I share in this sermon draws greatly on Daniel Migliore's text on Christian theology, Faith Seeking Understanding (3rd Edition, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI: 2014 ... specifically Chapter 14, "Christian Hope.")]

Just like those Hebrew slaves ... just like the followers of Jesus in Rome ... we also can look forward with hope. We look forward to a future with a God.

Let me say three things about that future.

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First, we can be hopeful. We need not be fearful. We do have a future. That future is not based on an idea. It is not based on a thing. It is based on and in the person of our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

I grew up in a fundamentalist church down in Georgia. Every Sunday for the twenty-one years I was in that church the preacher preached to me about the dangers of Jesus judging me as an unfit sinner and sending me to hell after I died. The aim was to so scare me (and other listeners) into the church, into being “saved.”

I have not preached a single, one of those hellfire and damnation sermons since being ordained. Nor do I intend to start now.

We need not be afraid of our Savior. The Gospel according to John tells us that God so loved the world that he sent us his only begotten Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. Not to condemn the world, but to save it.

The exact wording can be found at John 3:16-17: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

In case you are wondering about what it means to be “saved,” I define it as being in right relationship with God. We are saved, the word also means “healed,” when we are obedient to God’s will for our lives and live in right relationship with God, our neighbor, and God’s creation.

I believe, as a famous theologian once said, “We have been saved, and we are being saved, and we will be saved.” We have been saved [by what Jesus has done], we are being saved [by the work of the Holy Spirit right now], and we will be saved [when God’s Kingdom is established in its fullness]. Being saved is not always a one-time event, it is a process affecting what has happened, what is happening right now, and what will happen in the future.

Jesus was a human being, specifically a Jewish human being in the first century at the far edge of a violent and oppressive Empire. Because Jesus was Jewish, he knew what it meant to face discrimination, to be powerless (as measured by the political and religious authorities), and to face suffering. He knew what it meant to die a violent and painful death. Death on the cross was meant to be slow and to result in an awful death because his body could not get the air he needed to live.

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Jesus knows the suffering that human beings endure. Jesus knows us in the entirety of our lived experience. And he did not come to bring us death. He came to bring us life ... eternal life.

Despite all those sermons I heard growing up, there is no cause to fear the One who knows us and loves us and wants only the best for us.

We can be hopeful ... we need not fear.

The second thing I want to tell you about our hope in the future is that it is all-inclusive. It includes everybody ... all human beings.

I grew up in the small town of Clarkston, GA, about 20 miles east of Atlanta. [There is no reason for you to have heard of my hometown unless you have read a book written by a New York Times reporter about a soccer team in Clarkston, a team made up of immigrants to America, and their struggles to establish their right to play and compete on the soccer fields of Georgia. (See Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team That Changed a Town by Warren St. John.)]

The Baptist Church in Clarkston was the biggest building in town. And, in my growing up, it was all-white. When those immigrants began to arrive from Asia and Africa, a lot of the white folks left the church. A few remained and they complained about all of the non-white congregants using the church for worship services, ministry, and mission.

One Sunday when the preacher looked out over the congregation, he saw peoples from all nations with skins of all colors. He spoke specifically to the whites. He said, "Look around. Do you see all the peoples of the world? Do you see all the skin colors? Have you noticed all the different languages now spoken in this church? If you are feeling uncomfortable about that, just know that this is what heaven looks like!"

God is no respecter of persons. God loves all of us ... all of us! And heaven is going to be multi-colored!

Let me say one more thing about this point before I leave it. Many of us are used to thinking about our individual relationships with God. But God has expectations of us when we act collectively as well as in our individual lives.

God expected the Jewish people as a people to be a light to the nations. God wanted through them to draw all nations to him. Paul was an observant Jew, and he knew that and believed that. He extended that responsibility to the early followers of Jesus and thus it also falls to us.

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In my optimistic moments I like to think the human race is making progress in learning to love one another. I like to think we are moving away from racism and materialism and violence towards justice. I grant you ... sometimes we move in fits and starts, and sometimes we slip back a little ... it isn't pretty! But as we move along that path, we are moving in accord with God's will for his people and, I hope, drawing the nations closer to him.

A third thing I want to share about our future is that the future includes not just human creatures, but all of creation. God loves human creatures, but God also loves the cornfields and fields of soybeans in Ohio, the rivers of Ohio, and the sheep and cattle.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:19-22: For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now ...

God's creation is waiting eagerly for us, the body of Christ, to get our act together. Paul was telling the followers of Jesus in Rome that our salvation involves not only our own personal salvation but the salvation of the entire body politic and the very universe in which we live. We were made stewards of God's creation. In Jesus, acting together, we have a responsibility not only to our neighbors, our fellow human beings, but to all of creation.

In the United States we have made some considerable progress in cleaning up the land and the water. It used to be that people could not swim or fish or drink the water in our rivers. The environment has improved ... and yet there is room for more improvement.

And our responsibility is not limited to our beloved home country. As daunting as it sounds, we have a responsibility to help all the peoples of the world be better stewards of the land and waters. We have a responsibility to include everyone in the abundance of that creation that we all too often take for granted.

In the United Church of Christ, we believe in covenants. Covenants are not formal legal documents. They are a commitment to consensus. That consensus is developed by living and working and waiting for the Word of God to come to the community. Covenants happen by our being open, by our listening, and when we speak, speaking in love. They require patience and faith for their formation. As we labor and as we live and as we minister, we turn towards the Christ, and we say, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

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I have a good friend, a wonderful minister, who pastors in a great church devoted to living out of Matthew 25, especially responding to Jesus' proclamation, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me." (Mt 25:34-36)

Let me sum up what I am saying about Christian hope. It is that hope-filled vision of the future that Jesus promised to us that causes us not to settle into the routine of everyday life. It calls us into action to help all of God's creation move towards that Kingdom. Christian hope calls us to ministry in the name of Jesus and with the help of the Holy Spirit right here and right now.

Let us pray: Abba, we have a lot of awful stuff going on in our nation and in our world right now. Strengthen us so that we are not afraid. Fill us with your hope so that we can do the work to which you call us. Keep us energized, keep us prayerful, keep us in your care so that we can be the creatures you created us to be.

Amen.