

A New Spirit of Hope

Romans 5:1-5

June 29, 30, 2019

Beargrass Christian Church

INTRODUCTION.

The season of Pentecost began a few weeks ago, and we have been thinking about the theme, "A New Spirit."

We have already considered the gifts of gratitude and peace.

Today we will think about God's gift of hope.

If you have read Romans you remember that hope is an important emphasis—especially beginning in chapters 4 and 5.

We are reminded about Abraham and Sarah's situation.

Do you recall that unlikely couple who started a family?

They are described this way: "As good as dead!"

But "hoping against hope," they became parents!

Then there is an extended look at the spiritual life—what it means to be those who receive God's gift of the Spirit.

We are told that "we have peace with God through Jesus."

We have access to this grace we so desperately need!

And we are not to boast about any of these things as if we earned them—they are graceful, generous gifts from God!

Then we are urged to use the gifts—even when life is tough.

How many of you are crossword puzzle fans?

My mom worked on four every day after she retired, so it's in my genes.

I am a pun-lover—crossword clues are often puns—so I enjoy crossword puzzles—usually.

Have you ever been completely stumped?

At times I get shut out—to the point where I put it down.

But I often come back to it—and something will click.

And then one word leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to another.

That might be a helpful way to think about today's text?

Our struggles and suffering can lead to endurance, which is not a passive victimization by our crises, but courage in the face of them.

Suffering and endurance can encourage Christian character—which carries a literal meaning of being "proved and tested."

Then suffering, endurance, and character can lead us to hope.

Romans tells us that hope has come—and hope is yet to come.

We live with hope—and yet we also pray, work and hope for the time when God's realm will be fully realized.

Hope connects us to the ongoing vitality of God's love, "poured into our hearts" by the Spirit, which sustains us.

FOR WHAT DO YOU HOPE?

Last week I posed the question: "What troubles your heart?"

Perhaps there are a couple of questions for us to consider today?

In what ways do you suffer? For what do you hope?

“Hope” is one of several significant theological words that loses its power by the way we use it in our conversations.

Sometimes we throw good “God-words” around too lightly.

We often hope for things may not be on God’s priority list.

Lucy and Linus talk about hope in a “Peanuts” cartoon.

Lucy says: “Patty and Violet and I are going on a picnic tomorrow. I just hope to goodness it doesn’t rain!”

Linus says: “Hoping to goodness’ is not theologically sound!”

How often do we diminish the meaning of the word “hope?”

We hope it’s sunny for our picnics and parties and ball games and matches, we hope our team wins, we hope to get the correct toppings on our pizza.

We hope to win the lottery, we hope to get liked on Facebook, we hope our tweets go viral, we hope to get what we want.

In the midst of all of that critical stuff, for what does God hope?

For an end to poverty, injustice, and hunger?

For an end to dissension and strife and war?

For an end to ethnic cleansing and global apathy?

For the health and well-being of Mother Earth?

For all children to have food, water, soap, security, love?

There are times when we need to reclaim the language of God, the language of the Spirit, the language of hope.

There are times when we need to lean in a God-ward direction when life presents us with very difficult circumstances.

People cry out: “Give up! It’s hopeless! Where is God now?”

Yet we “hope against hope” that the future is in God’s hands.

You know about those times—those times when we use the “H” word as a gut-wrenching, knee-bruising, heart-aching prayer.

We hope that she will stop drinking and using drugs.

We hope that he will stop suffering so much from depression.

We hope that the marriage will last.

We hope that our family will get along.

We hope that the tests are negative.

We hope that she will not die.

We hope for an end to shootings, terrorist attacks and war.

We hope that God hears our prayers.

Our suffering becomes fertile ground for God’s seeds of hope.

In what ways do you suffer? For what do you hope?

AND WHERE IN THE WORLD DO WE LOOK FOR HOPE?

And I mean hope—not optimism or positive thinking.

Since we are people of the Book, on the basis of the biblical witness, we look first to the places of suffering and of stress.

That means that if we want to see where God is more likely to be found in this world, we look at the difficult places.

We look at places where troubles seem to define normality.

It’s like the line some pilots have used about certain countries.

“We’re about to land. Set your watches back 300 years.”

Peter Gomes said: "Even in the Middle East, hope emerges from suffering, for it is the fear of peace and hope over bitter experience that causes people to kill dreamers and their dreams.

"But it didn't work with Joseph; and it didn't work with Jesus.

"Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present.

"And hope doesn't help us get out of our difficulties.

"Hope doesn't get us out—but it does get us through."

A bank in a large city came up with a terrific marketing idea.

The executives wanted a public relations brochure that would describe the bank's community re-investment program.

So, they displayed posters in the schools, inviting children to submit pictures and essays on the topic, "My Neighborhood."

The bank president said: "The responses stunned us."

They expected bright crayon drawings of trees and houses and funny little stories about the different people on the block."

Gail, 8, wrote: "There is a lot of shooting near my house."

Tim, 12, wrote: "I live in a slum; some call it hell on earth."

Pictures included scenes of drug deals and violence.

Birthdays are noted not by "he turned 10," but "he made 10."

The pictures and essays eventually became a book, a different project.

To read it is profoundly moving and disturbing, but ultimately inspiring, because somehow, these kids are still full of hope.

Tim added: "People say my area is the worst place on earth, but I'm surviving; I have a bed to sleep in, and a nice family."

In what ways do you suffer? For what do you hope?

AND WHAT ARE WE TO DO IN THE MEANTIME?

We must live with hope, yet we cannot live by hope alone.

It is fine to hope for the best—but that is not enough.

We tolerate too much in the hope that things will improve—or that someone will do something.

We have seen a dramatic example of that on the streets of Hong Kong—one million protesters making change happen!

We are seeing it in the people in Europe who are countering growing neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements.

We see it in those who continue to fight for equal rights since the Stonewall riots happened 50 years ago.

So we have to pay attention to our words and actions.

We have to hang on to the Good News—even—and especially—in church.

Someone tuned in to a radio station in eastern Kentucky.

She heard the voice of a "hell-fire and damnation" preacher.

She was about to switch stations when the preacher said: "And finally, sinners, I'd like to say that we're all going to hell..."

But his time ran out—he was cut off mid-sentence.

The announcer came on and commented: "This message of hope and encouragement has been brought to you by..."

Even people of faith get overwhelmed by the weight of the problems in our community and country and world.

But we can't give in to the common heresies of hope—statements like “It's too late—nothing can be done.”

“Get real, give up, what's the use...it's hopeless!”

And we can't give up hope-full mission and ministry efforts—that's one of the reasons I love the summers at Beargrass—because the church leaves the building!

Someone said: “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence—and then eventually watching the evidence change.”

Henri Nouwen expressed it even more eloquently.

“Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness—knowing that there is love.

“Hope is to trust in tomorrow.

“It is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises.

“In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land.

“In the eyes of others, it is to see that they understand you.

“As long as there is still hope, there will also be prayer.

“And in prayer, you will be held in the hands of God.”

In a British museum there is a painting called “Hope.”

There is a woman seated on what appears to be the Earth.

She is holding something unusual—a harp with strings dangling helplessly from the top—and others in her lap.

She is blindfolded— because hope that is seen is not hope—we remember the line from Romans 8.

And the harp has only one string still tautly strung.

A curator of the museum tells about two people who stared at the painting and noted how little of the harp was still intact.

One said to the other: “Hope. Why do they call it hope?”

Perhaps the reason is that from Moses to Mary Magdalene to now, the harp of hope has always been a broken instrument?

Hope is always almost lost—or it would not be hope.

Hope is being aware of that...but still playing that one string.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come! Give us a new spirit of hope!