SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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"Invest in Hope: Hope in Christ"

Romans 8:18-25

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Introduction:

Today's sermon marks the first in a series centered on the theme "Hope in Christ." As you read our passage from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, I invite you to listen for hope and consider what Paul may mean when he speaks of it.

> Romans 8:18-25. 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that 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. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

In his 2023 essay called "People of Hope in an Age of Despair," Christopher Ganski writes that "we live in an age of increasing despair."[i] This despite the fact that the world is a far safer place than it's ever been, poverty rates around the world are at their lowest level in history, life spans have increased, and our technologies have gotten more powerful and sophisticated. Yes, violence, disease, poverty, and inequality continue to exist, but within the larger perspective of history we see incredible progress.

Harvard professor Steven Pinker makes the argument that we have reason to hope. He argues that if we look at the big picture, never have we had so many reasons to be hopeful about the possibilities of human progress. Despite all this, however, for most people it does not *feel* better. We do not experience it as better.[ii] All of this progress we've experienced in the last hundred years or so does not translate into an increased sense of broader hope.

In 2019, the Joint Economic Committee of Congress published a report titled "Long Term Trends of Death and Despair." The report tracks the dramatic rise over a 20-year period (1999-2019) of "deaths by despair," which they define as deaths by suicide, drug and alcohol poisoning, and alcoholic liver disease and cirrhosis.

These "deaths by despair" are not limited to certain groups of people, but distributed broadly across social classes. Pinker's book makes a compelling case that the world is a better place by most measures, but he cannot make sense of the despair problem. Perhaps that's because despair is not merely a material problem, an economic problem, a social problem, or a freedom problem. It is a *meaning* problem. Despair cannot be simply solved through social action, congressional committee, policy making, or a stronger economy. At its heart, despair is a spiritual condition. It has to do with where we find ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

If hope is the opposite of despair, then the big question is… in what do we hope? Where do we find our hope?

Given the high rate of despair, one could make the argument that we, as Americans, aren't placing our hope in the right things. In fact, one could argue that the problem is that we are placing our hope in *things*. The Apostle Paul might say we are placing our hope in the kinds of people or things that are in fact perishable, subject to corruption, and depreciation of value – when what we really need is a hope that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

What we need, is the kind of hope that is grounded on something beyond this present world and time. What we need is a living hope, grounded on the grace of our triune God.

Paul is writing to a group of Christians worshiping together in Rome. The church was made up of Jewish and non-Jewish converts, and their community was wrestling with a lot of disagreements – how should non-Jewish Christians observe the Sabbath, should they eat kosher? should they be circumcised? and so on. Paul wrote this letter we call Romans to accomplish a couple of things. He wanted this divided community to become unified again, and he wanted to use this church and its location to spread the Gospel farther west.

Paul says that the hope they have for this life in the here and now and the hope they have for their future beyond this life is found in Jesus Christ. The human condition? Brokenness and sin. The grace of Christ Jesus? The rescue and renewal of not only our own selves but all creation. Hope, Paul argues, won't be found when you look around you or within – but when grounded only on the one far greater than you and I.

Hope is a universal experience. Every person, regardless of culture, race, or creed, hopes in something. Hope is the heart's orientation toward the future. We hope for lots of things: a bright career, a life with someone we love, a planned retirement, a great vacation, the gift of children or grandchildren, the end of injustice. On a small or grand scale, we all hope. We can't live without hope. When life seems to offer no future worth living, that's when despair rushes in to fill the gap.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl expresses the necessity of hope reflecting on his time as a prisoner in various concentration camps during WWII. He supplied one particularly poignant example: between Christmas 1944 and New Year's 1945 the camp's sick ward experienced a death rate "beyond all previous experience," not due to a food shortage or worse living conditions, but because, "the majority of the prisoners had lived in the naïve hope that they would be home again by Christmas." When this hope was unrealized, these prisoners found no reason to hold on, nothing to look forward to.[iii]

To hope is to imagine something more. To hope is to envision, not just the future, but what we love most. In hope, we have the capacity to see something greater than the suffering or despair that feels so heavy.

If we are honest, I bet that most of us do not tie our hope very deeply to God. Instead, it's so often tied to this-worldly blessings. While these may be very good things and worthy of deep gratitude – like family, relationships, career, a home, a community, citizenship, service to country, to community and neighbors – they cannot give us the fullest, deepest meaning for which we were created.

Shirley Guthrie asks us to consider this fact: you are going to die. So is everyone you love – your husband or wife, your children, your parents, your friends. It may happen tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or not for several years. Every institution, political party, or community you hold dear and have given your life to, is subject to defilement, corruption, and moral failure. Over a century ago, our nation fought the war that was supposed to once and for all "make the world safe for democracy." Is the world better off now than it was then? Is there any less hatred, greed, brutality, or equally cruel indifference among human beings now than there was then or a thousand years ago, for that matter? Is it madness to expect that human beings will ever really change? (You feel despair creeping in yet?)

Let's consider what we, as Christians, ought to have to say about these brutal facts of life and death. It is the good news of hope for the future even when personal experience and world history seem to say there is no hope. Christian hope is different from all other hopes and simple optimism in that it promises a future – an inheritance, an adoption, to use Paul's phrase – that we do not deserve. Most hopes we have are things we can work towards, things we fight for or believe we deserve or have as a right. But not Christian hope. You cannot earn this hope. It's not yours because you are good or because you have prayed the right prayer or made the right choices. Biblical hope is grounded in the great mercy, love, and grace of God.

Like many folks, I enjoy listening to the soothing voice and kind wisdom of Krista Tippett on her radio show and podcast called On Being. A few years ago, On Being hosted a series of conversations between two people called "The Future of Hope." In the first of such conversations, journalist Wajahat Ali spoke with theologian Kate Bowler. They spoke of the friendship they found on the edge of life and death that is cancer — Wajahat through his young daughter; and Kate with a stage 4 diagnosis at the age of 35.

They shared about what it was like to live in this strange new land, kind of like living in a house at the edge of a cliff. They're still living in a proper building, but the drop-off is eerily near. They live on this knife's edge between now and the what-ifs of the future. Both people of faith, Wajahat asks Kate, "How can you still be a person of faith and an incurable optimist, with all this?" Meaning, in other words, how can you still trust in God and be optimistic about your future, given your great illness?

Kate responds that it's really not a story about optimism – but hers is "a story about hope." She says, "And it's hope for me, it's hope for you, that hope is a story about all of us that God puts in the future, ever before us and always with us and always behind us. But it moves in kind of that

beautiful way that we will someday be wrapped up in a story about love that is beyond time and beyond our dumb bodies and beyond finitude and beyond tears. And that will be really beautiful." She continues on, "But in the meantime, it was always about all of us; that we belong to each other in a way that makes hope not really just about whether I get a cure and my life works out. It's about whether you feel yourself as part of this wild project about love. Yeah, it's never really fully here. It's always just a little bit not yet."[iv]

As Paul says, we hope for what we cannot see – a future beyond our bodies, a future beyond time, a future beyond tears. At the same time, we hope for a present possibility, the power of God's loving presence here and with us now.

If hope is the opposite of despair, may we dare hope and have the imagination to consider a better future. May we dare to strive to live in the world as it will one day yet be. To hope means to work toward that better day here and now – not to wait passively, but to actively be a part of something bigger than our individual selves, to be a part of this wild project of love.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, as the Body of Christ, we are called to participate in the truth of our hope here and now, and yet to come. We testify to it each time we gather, week after week, and point to the empty cross, the empty tomb, the promise of presence where two or more are gathered.

As I close, I invite you to receive this reading of Jan Richardson's "Blessing of Hope…"

Jan Richardson's "Blessing of Hope"[v]

So may we know

the hope
that is not just
for someday
but for this day—
here, now,
in this moment
that opens to us:
hope not made
of wishes
but of substance,

hope made of sinew
and muscle
and bone,
hope that has breath
and a beating heart,
hope that will not
keep quiet
and be polite,
hope that knows
how to holler
when it is called for,
hope that knows
how to sing
when there seems
little cause,
hope that raises us
from the dead—
not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.

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[i] Christopher Ganski, "People of Hope in an Age of Despair: How Eternity and History Ground the Christian's Future," Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology, 10 no 2 2023, p 45-52.
[ii] *Ibid.*
[iii] Robert Kishaba, "Hope: A Paradox" for the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, April 24, 2017, https://mjhnyc.org/blog/hope-a-paradox/.
[iv] Wahajat Ali and Kate Bowler in "On Being with Krista Tippett: The Future of Hope," Sept 16, 2021 https://onbeing.org/programs/kate-bowler-and-wajahat-ali-the-future-of-hope/#transcript.
[v] Jan Richardson, "Blessing of Hope," Painted Prayerbook, https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/11/19/so-that-you-may-know-the-hope/.