

So That We Might Have Hope

Martin and I had our annual tax appointment on Thursday. Every year, the first week of December, we make our way to Bluffton to address this required task. Every year, as we come into town from the south, we pass the “closed for the winter” Bummy’s Drive-In. At this season it is filled, not with cars and carhops, but with Christmas trees, instead. The trees are lovely and green, but we aren’t deceived; this isn’t a newly planted park or business with “instant landscaping!” No, we can see by the sight of the bright, sharp cut trunks that growing for these trees *is over*. No doubt, somewhere in Michigan there is a field bare of foliage, filled now...only with stumps. (I know... I know... it’s like planting a crop, but chopped-down trees are always hard for a prairie person to see...)

It’s many years ago, now – 20 or so thankfully – that I remember driving past Bummy’s on another December day. It wasn’t a good time in my life and the worst part was that I couldn’t figure out why. I had many blessings – family and home, friends, a life on the farm, yet everything seemed hard and hopeless. These weren’t just a few blue days, but instead, something very foreign to anything that I had ever experienced before. I was actually on my way to the Caylor-Nickel Clinic to a doctor as I passed Bummy’s with its display of trees...on that December day...

...Then came one of those very poignant moments of insight that don’t happen very often in our lives. As I went around the curve up to the stoplight it *hit* me with a jolt – I, a woman in her early thirties, like those young trees, felt toppled. We- the trees and I -were just coming into the prime of our lives and yet we were cut off at the root...cut off from the source of life. We didn’t look like it yet...but we were dead... I continued on to my doctor’s appointment and remember using this word picture to describe – more ably than in any other way than I had thought I could – what I was feeling. I was just beginning to understand that what had a hold of me was depression.

What to do now? For these trees, there was no hope of future growth; would that also be true for me? What hope did I have in the late 1980’s for a fruitful future?

Our personal stories of hopelessness can also mirror the story of entire peoples. The situation in Judah at the time of King Ahaz had become perilous. The “good old days” of King Uzziah were past and the strength and promise of the house of David was in decline. Into this dismal situation, came Isaiah’s words of promise, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots...”

Isaiah is speaking words of hope to a storm- splintered Judah. In direct contrast to the reality of terror and brutality, Isaiah proclaims, that even though the house of David had been felled – from its “stump” new life will sprout. And this isn’t just “another” life

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simply to fuel the injustices of the past. No, this is *new* branch birthed in the spirit of the Lord. This leader will be equipped with “wisdom and understanding,” “counsel and might,” and with “knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
...and the wicked of the earth will be laid low by the mouth and lips of his word.”
- Isaiah 11:3a-4

As a result of the presence of this “new branch,” we read that the “wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...they will not hurt or destroy; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Into the midst of political divisions and patterns of war, come these incredible – perhaps almost *incredulous*, words of hope and hope for harmony. Paul, in his own way, relates a similar message...800 years later. “May the steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures give you hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another.” Hardly have these words “dried on the page” when Paul offers this benediction, “May the God of hope *fill you* with all joy and peace in believing, *so that you may abound in hope* by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

There are times in our lives when we can't imagine being filled with hope, joy and peace. There are times in our lives when we don't know what we are to believe. There are days in our lives when we look at broken dreams and can't begin to imagine that newness of life will ever sprout again. There are “those times.” Two weeks ago, in our study hour, we discussed together that ageless mystery of the how to understand “the ways of God.” (Psalm 91.) We read words that proclaim that “pestilence won't come near...or that even though a thousand others fall, the Psalmist would be spared...” We marveled. For in our circle – in every circle- there is the real experience of illness in the prime of life, of meaningless accidents and death. As Carmen Andes wrote in a recent MWR, “our lives are made up of entering, living in the midst of and leaving wildernesses.”

Our understanding of the Psalm changed as we realized that these were words spoken to a badly beaten people. Just as Isaiah in his day, the Psalmist *needed* to proclaim words of hope – not to a conquering people - but to a despairing, hope-less people. Even in lives filled with cut-off opportunities and bulldozed possibilities, even when pestilence and the prowling angel of death are part of life they can not overcome the resurrection promises of God. In spite of the realities of life, in the Spirit of God, *hope prevails*. “God calls us by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow...so that God's healing and hope can flow through us to the world!” (almost sounds like Paul's closing prayer!)

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Thankfully, for me, many years have passed since I found myself identifying with a parking lot filled with dead trees. Those trees have been composted long ago...and so in their own way have been given new life. I give thanks for the healing that by the mysterious power of God came through medication and therapy, supportive family and friends. I can't get over the grace of my seminary experience and the invitation to a work at Swiss Village as chaplain, and now to be part of this dear church family...who would have ever thought that possible on the day that December day so long ago!

Dear brothers and sisters. Sometimes it is as individuals; sometimes it is as a people that the thought of a future seems hopeless. No matter the circumstance, we don't have to sugar coat the realities of our lives **so that** we might have hope. Instead, we are invited to share our "cut-down, cut-off" places with one another. Do we feel deadened, or hollow? Do we feel like we've been felled by an ax? Let us welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us – that is... just as we are. Isaiah is clear that we are not the ones who usher in this new era; it is God who brings it forth. God's gift of Hope (God with us) has the power to overturn old assumptions and cynicism, to open our eyes and to quiet our fear-filled hearts...hope has the power to birth us into newness of life!

Even when we reach dead-ends in our lives, God's resurrection power – stirs within us so that we "may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Dorothy...you have a fresh stump in your yard following this fall's wind storm...what will it become? What will you do with this new place in your garden? For those of you - who like Martin - seek to "manage" the woods along the fields, may you marvel at the tenacity of the growth which springs from pruned trees. May these living expressions around us beckon to us in seasons of inner darkness...in dark times...what is one to do...?

Go slowly
Consent to it
But don't wallow in it
Know it as a place of germination
And growth
Remember the light
Take an outstretched hand if you need one
Exercise unused senses
Find the path by walking it
Practice trust
Watch for the dawn....

-from "What to do in the Darkness"

- Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

Emmaus Road Mennonite
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AMEN

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13