

## CLAIMING HOPE

Hebrews 11:1-3; Romans 5:1-11

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Hope is central to Christian faith. One translation of Hebrews describes faith as the assurance of things “hoped for,” and then goes on to describe a series of hopes that faith sustained from the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. Or one might say as well that Hebrews describes a faith sustained by a series of hopes. “By faith,” the writer contends, “we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God....” What we see of the universe was created and is sustained by God. We hope that a fundamental goodness underlies the world in which we live.

Ernst Bloch wrote a two volume work in which he argues that hope is a “driving power” for human beings throughout their lives. Events since the publication of that work in 1918 have led many to suggest that hope amounts to little more than “wishful thinking or utopian fantasy” (Tillich, p.1064). In a sermon preached in March of 1965, Paul Tillich responds: “But nobody can live without hope, even if it were only for the smallest things which give some satisfaction under the worst of conditions, even in poverty, sickness and social failure. Without hope,” he says, “the tension of our life toward the future would vanish, and with it, life itself.”

We live in anxious times, times in which some are giving up hope. We worry about the weather, about disease, about violence, about war and famine and the economy and elections and the future for our children and our grandchildren. The need for hope couldn't be more evident.

That's why we're going to spend the year talking about hope, about “claiming hope.” Not the kind of hope that expects prayer to cure cancer. Nor the kind of hope that believes we will be successful in addressing climate change. Our hope doesn't depend on our candidate winning the election or the right legislation solving gun violence. We won't be dismantling structural racism or ending systemic poverty any time soon. Neither is our kind of hope about escaping to the heavenly choir. I do not imagine that death will improve the quality of my voice.

There are so many things that challenge our ability to sustain hope, but as that has more to do with Janet's sermon next week, let me come back to the beginning. Hope is central to Christian faith. Remember these two things: Christian hope is theological and Christian hope is real.

It is theological in the sense that hope is not rooted in our abilities, but in the recognition that the world in which we live was made and sustained by God. “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,” says the psalmist. John Calvin said that “Faith believes in the

truthful God, and hope expects that he will display his truthfulness when the time and occasion are right" (Moltmann, p.142).

Jurgen Moltmann, who cites Calvin on this point, wrote *The Theology of Hope* early in his career, but unlike Bloch, he wrote his book after his time in a German concentration camp. He experienced and witnessed the power of evil in the world. His experiences shaped his work, so much so, that he insisted that hope rested in the truth that God experienced the very depths of human suffering. "[T]he cross," he wrote "is the very center of the Christian experience of God" (p. 168).

This is what Paul is arguing in Romans: "while we still were sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus is the testimony of what God is doing in the world. We call it the Doctrine of the Incarnation, but to call it a "doctrine" is in today's world to rob it of its power. As Brian McLaren has made clear, people are less interested in beliefs, less interested in orthodoxy, and more interested in orthopraxy, in doing the right thing. But for me, even that is not the most helpful way of framing the problem. Paul isn't talking about a right belief or a right practice. He's describing a relationship and an experience.

We've attached so much theological baggage to this passage that we have trouble hearing what Paul is describing. We particularly hear so much noise around this phrase, "justified by faith," that we miss the point: God's talking to you because you're listening. You are confident that God is present, that God understands and has experienced our pain. Even the tough things can lead to hope. That hope that is rooted in the awareness of God's presence will never disappoint because (now quoting Romans) "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

This is not a doctrine, nor a practice. It's a reality: God's love is in you. Hope is theological because it's rooted in the presence and love of God in you. We hope because this is still God's world and God still loves it. Yes, it is a world with enemies of God and sinners, but as Moltmann wrote, "no human failure will lead God to alter fidelity" (p.145).

Richard Rohr wrote in *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*: "The theological virtue of hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution, and still be content and even happy because our satisfaction is at another level and our source is beyond ourselves."

Hope is real because God is real. In arguing for the immortality of the soul, the Greeks led Christians astray. It wasn't long before Christians began to devalue the body and lift up the idea of the release of the soul from the body in a happy afterlife. But there is no trace of this kind of "anthropology in the Old Testament" where the soul is highly valued because of its relationship to God and the body denigrated for its lack of connection. Indeed, as Romans says, the Spirit is quite content to dwell in our hearts, and Hebrews affirms that our bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit." "Physical life is sanctified and affirmed," says Moltmann (p.113).

Because hope is real, embodied in our lives, it can be difficult to separate genuine hope inspired by the presence and urging of God from false hope or naïve optimism. It's a bit naïve to hope that we can dismantle structural racism, but there is a faithful and hopeful people engaged in the struggle to do so. I like how Tillich puts it. "But there are many things and events in which we can see a reason for genuine hope, namely, the seed-like presence of that which is hoped for. In the seed of a tree, stem and leaves are already present, and this gives us the right to sow the seed in hope for the fruit" (p. 1065). Jesus, of course, uses the image of the sower as a way of thinking about telling the good news.

"Christians are beginners," (p.181) says Moltmann, because we are always looking to the future. Our engagement with the world means that we are not ignorant about the suffering of others. The Spirit of God within us hears the cries of the world and urges us to plant seeds of hope, to speak God's good news, to counter loss with restoration, injustice with restitution, and vengeance with mercy. "Thanks to hope, we do not abandon..." the world to the "powers of death, of disappointment, or of humiliation." Instead, we wake up each morning to the conviction that God's presence continues to transform the world (Moltmann, p. 118).

This hope is real, not other-worldly, but for this life. Moltmann puts it this way: "The Spirit of God makes the earth holy, makes life come alive, and awakens all the senses. The Spirit of the resurrection comes as in waves of 'living water' into hearts, into the society that shatters all the boundaries of races, genders, classes, and peoples, into the emergent energies and forms of the creatures in heaven and on earth. This is the hope we will focus on this year, a hope that is theological, because it is rooted in God's presence and love; and a hope that is real, because it is for this life, for our minds and bodies, for the earth on which we live.

This hope, according to Romans, is built on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, who set us an example. Instead of exercising judgment on his world for its death dealing ways, he extended mercy; replacing vengeance with forgiveness, and death with life. He experienced the painful imperfections of the world, but chose to live in the presence and love of God. And he gave his Spirit to his followers so that they too could live with hope. "This means," as Moltmann says, "that Christians do not live in a hostile world, nor in a paradisiac world; they live in a 'reconciled world'" (pp. 116-7).

There's nothing easy about that, but as I said, Janet will get into that next week. It's important as we begin this journey to and from hope, that we center ourselves in the love of God in the world, the real world in which we live. We will not always be able to tamp down the anxiety thrust upon us, but we must not forget that this God's world and God will neither abandon us nor the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

#### Resources:

Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril*. Westminster John Knox: Louisville KY. 2019.

Tillich, Paul. "The Right to Hope" in *The Christian Century*, November 14, 1990. pp. 1064-1067.