



First United Church of Oak Park

Holding Hope and Patience

Romans 8:12-25

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July 23

I spend a lot of time with people who are thinking about hope. I serve as a chaplain: a spiritual care provider in a healthcare setting. I've served on inpatient units where people are admitted with more acute concerns. Now I serve in an outpatient cancer clinic. Both are places filled with people thinking about hope.

People hoping for things they do not see, things they are assured they won't see. Things they have wanted to see for their whole lives. Things they only got glimpses of before it all threatened to disappear. I spend a lot of time with people who are thinking about hope when all the best clinical, scientific, medical knowledge we have appears to point to no hope at all. People want to talk with somebody about hope.

That's when they call in the chaplain. Heartbroken nurses and physicians who shield their hurt with frustration call me and say, "They just don't get it! They're in total denial. The situation is not going to go well. Will you go talk with them and try to make them get it?"

"Sure," I say. "I'll go talk with them." (Spoiler alert: my job is never to make someone "get it.")

I enter the room. Introduce myself - "Hi, my name's Ally... I'm the chaplain. I hear you got some tough news today."

“Oh yeah.. I did. But, Chaplain, I’m staying hopeful.” This is when I listen more closely.

“I hope that while I’m in this round of chemo, another clinical trial will open.”

Or they’ll say, “Chaplain, I hope that my sister will get here in time to visit our mom.”

“Chaplain, I’m hopeful for the world... I’ve seen so much change in my time and it just has to get better from here.”

“Chaplain, when it’s my time, I hope it will be peaceful.”

I leave the room to the expectant look of the healthcare team. “Well? Do they get it?”

Between you and me: I think they understand perfectly. They dwell in longing... a desperate longing for the promises of new life to come true. Promises they can only imagine. I think my patients get it.

Unfortunately, that’s not what the healthcare team often means. I will spare you my soapbox on the ways I think society has failed by putting God and medicine on opposite sides of the healing spectrum. That’s a conversation for another day.

Today, we encounter Paul, who writes, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Hope and patience.

Getting this message across clearly is really important to Paul. He’s writing to a group of people he has never met - by and large, scholars aren’t convinced that Paul founded the church in Rome like he did in Corinth and other places. He’s writing to them because his next mission is

to spread the gospel to Spain and he needs some money to get himself there. He'll do a pit stop in Rome, meet the believers there and then carry on. Paul is trying to convince these strangers in Rome that his mission is a worthwhile investment.

The Romans are a bit skeptical of Paul - they aren't clear about a couple of Paul's key points - and he knows it. This letter he writes to the Romans is one where he chooses every word carefully. He explains himself with articulate detail. This whole letter is, more or less, Paul trying to convince the Romans that they are, in fact, all on the same page. He does this because it *matters*. The truth of the Gospel (that God's power brings salvation to all) compels him so and he asks the church in Rome to support him. He has hope for what he has only had a glimpse: God's promises of new life for all creation.

Beautifully, Paul paints a picture in his letter for the church in Rome- a church he had never met. Could he be painting a picture for us, too? A picture of what it might look like to live in hope and in patience? A picture about creation's capacity to withstand inevitable difficulty? An invitation to not root ourselves in exasperation, but an invitation to commit ourselves to hope? Patience... committing ourselves to hope. Patience and hope... at the same time.

Creation, we are told, is groaning - is longing: it is bearing the weight of time passing. Creation is enduring, persevering, persisting, agonizing.. creation is in the process of changing, of becoming. If patience is a way to describe how we endure the passing of time, Creation has some things to teach us. I think this is something we can get wrong about patience: that it's a passive status as the world goes by around us. That patience means we simply tolerate what's unfolding with an easeful grin on our face. Perhaps Creation can teach us something about patience: how we endure the passing of time.

Creation - with which humankind is intricately woven- is subject to the passing of time, the process of change and growth. Cataclysmic change

can happen quickly, yes, but restoring an equilibrium... that takes time. Even a stone tossed gently into a pond still sends ripples... evidence of the disruption. The water takes time to calm. Time passes, life continues, and creation - none of us - stagnates or stays still. It "waits with eager longing." Creation - all of us- the earth, the trees and crawling things and human-animals - all of us hope for what we can't see because we - by definition- must. Perhaps that's what it means to be created by a living God. Sustained. Redeemed. It's a process. It's living in patience... and hope... at the same time.

Creation can't *help* but move itself forward, sometimes inch by agonizing inch, toward an end that is promised but unseen. We are set free not to fall back into fear but to be unified in hope for the coming of God's kin-dom.

This striving we are doing, First United, we are not doing it alone. We are not groaning and enduring by our own stamina. Humankind is aligned like a constellation with all of creation. We have things we can learn from the world around us:

When you see flowers that grow in cracks in sidewalks, what might you see about your own strength?

When you see the clip on the news of seals that jump up on surfboards in the ocean to ride the shallow waves, what might you notice about your own capacity for joy and delight?

Stuck in relentless rain, might you learn something about being inundated? How might you, then, help bear someone else's burdens?

From fire that brings us to tears, will you choose to fan the flame for justice within your very heart?

Creation - all of it- knows what it's like - in every way - to seek the promises of the kin-dom of God. The promises of redemption. New life.

Sustenance. Unity. Peace. Clarity. An end to suffering. Never are we without resource. Without reference. Without companionship in our striving. In times when isolation and disconnection loom, THERE is our hope, Church. God will never leave us without markers of new life.

It is for *this hope* that we have been adopted by the death and resurrection of Christ. It is for *this hope* that we have been liberated by the redemption of suffering and brokenness and injustice. God has given creation a taste of this promise in Christ's death and resurrection.

The point of our *hope* isn't that we know where we're going; the point of our hope is that we place our trust in the good news of Jesus Christ: All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. We are in communion with all creation, in our longing to -assuredly- be set free and made new. Beloved children of God, follow the Spirit of God ... with eager patience on the unfolding path, saturated with hope