

Sermon 120416 Advent II
Scripture Gen 12:1-5a, Mk 4:30-32
Sermon Title- The Courage to Hope

I always preview my sermons to my wife, Meg, prior to delivery here in the church. Sometimes she says to me, of course in a kind and loving way, “You need to listen to your own sermons!” Well, I try to but sometimes I forget the message. I gave a sermon around five years ago. I frankly don’t recall if I gave it here or not. I remembered the sermon and how I forgot the message in the last six weeks. I will repeat some of that sermon this morning because, I believe, it is a message that we all need to hear, including and especially, me.

The last month and a half has been pretty tough. Here at West Church, we have lost loved ones and had more than our usual share of illness and difficulty. Personally for me, the last six weeks has been a traumatic time. The day of Mac Borden’s son David’s funeral, I learned that a man that I have been close to since high school, a man whom I lived with and called me brother, Jim Moloney, had a massive heart attack at age 57. Jim is three years younger than me and in much better physical condition.

When I arrived at the hospital, Jimmy was in a chill bed. They lower the body temperature so to preserve the organs, particularly the brain. Jim had the heart attack while riding a bicycle. They had reason to believe that he might have brain damage

from lack of oxygen to the brain. We thought he would die, or even worse, we thought he might live but have brain damage and little or no quality of life.

Well, they warmed Jimmy up, did triple bypass surgery on him, and now he's doing extremely well. He has a little scrambled eggs in his memory possibly from a concussion in the fall, but he's very much Jimmy. He is far better than I was allowing myself to hope for. Sometimes we do not hope enough. That's what I needed to remember at the time but didn't. Sometimes we do not hope enough.

Sometimes hope seems somewhat shabby, miserable and inadequate in a world filled with sham, drudgery, and broken dreams. I was at different hospital on a pastoral visit by a bedside when someone else at bedside said, "I hope this will all end well." It was a heartfelt wish that the person that we were viewing would not long continue in the direction that he was going. The word 'hope' was used, but it was really a wish with some weak optimism that the suffering of a loved one would end sooner rather than later. Hope should not be what we say when we want less.

Hope is an act of courage and imagination. Hope allows us with our inner eye to see beyond what is, and see what might and what ought to be. Emily Dickenson opened a poem with the line; "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul."

We say that hope triumphs over experience, which is true. When we are left alone to life's experience, looking at nothing but the facts, using only the tangible, the material, the really real, we are doomed to just that. Experience only tells us where we have been. It is like driving forward while only looking in the rear view mirror. Our bitter experience of the past has taught us to expect little of the present and even less of the future, so we replace a deep hope with a shallow optimism.

We like to be optimistic, but optimism is an inadequate response to life's hard realities. We like to walk on the sunny side of the street and wear a sunny face and to wish each other a happy and nice day. We want our movies to have happy endings because we have so few happy endings in our lives. When Jimmy was at his worse, I could have had hope for a 100% recovery, even without much optimism. I did the exact opposite. I had little hope but showed to the family big optimism. We all needed to hope and hope big.

When I didn't allow myself to hope, I landed in despair. Loss of hope leads to despair. Despair is a place to avoid at all costs. Have your grief, your sorrow, your worry, your concern, but despair is one dangerous place. That is why Jimmy's situation was so hard for me. Loss of hope leads to despair. It

was Jimmy's devoted wife, Cheryl, who predicted a 100% recovery. She had enough hope for the rest of us. Cheryl was a hero in all of that. She gave us all hope and she was right.

Hope not only trumps knowledge and experience, but it is participatory. We, with the help of God, can turn hope into reality. The truth is that our hope may not be realized in our time but in God's time.

Our lessons today deal with hope. They also all deal with faith. I'm learning that faith and hope are so closely tied that you couldn't separate them with a pocketknife. The Hebrew Bible reading today is from Genesis; when Abraham at age 75 fixes his heart on God. Genesis is full of firsts; Abraham is the first one in our tradition to see that there is one God. He is the first one whose destiny contains our destiny. Before Abraham, it was thought that there were many, many Gods who needed to be constantly fed and satisfied through human and animal sacrifices. God tells Abraham to pick up and leave his comfortable world and wander in the desert. If he does that, plus removes a certain portion of his skin, Abraham will be the forefather of more children than there are stars in the sky. Abraham doesn't believe in God; he believes God. Abraham doesn't ask for proof that there is one God; he provides the proof. You want an example of hope being imaginative and courageous? Look at this

story about Abraham and his call to God. He's 75, and so is his wife Sarah. They've never had a child, yet to fulfill the covenant, he follows God's instructions exactly. This is big hope, folks. There is nothing in Abraham's experience that would point toward this being a good idea. When Sarah hears that she is to have her first child in her seventies, she laughs. I suppose that the only sensible alternative would be to cry. It is about newly found faith in God and hope for a wildly different and much better future. Hope prevents us from clinging to what we have understood. It frees us to move away from the safe place and enter unknown and fearful territory.

In today's Gospel, the familiar seed parable, Jesus in his simple eloquence, captures the notion of hope. Look at a seed sometime and imagine the potential. It is a leap of the imagination. Especially in the winter. It's hard to remember the burst of color, warmth and new life in the spring. In order for that seed to be the best plant it can be, it takes not only human effort, but also faith and hope that the effort will bring the astounding and glorious results.

Christian faith is, and always has been, prophetic; speaking of the time to come, of things that are not yet, of places that we have not yet been to, of people we have not yet become. None of us, no place, and no time is good

enough, not yet. No past, no present is superior to the future that is yet to be. It is not just any old future, not just the future at the end of worship today, or the anticipated vacation, or even the retirement. It is God's particular future. Jesus instructs us to be alert to the fulfillment of God's promise. Through the example of Scripture, we have hope.

We are in a war. It is a war for our souls. The facts and drudgery of the past are at war with the hope and promise of God's future for us. What is at stake is the present; our state of mind as we live each moment of our lives. We can stare in the rear view mirror or look forward into a future of God's promise with imagination and courage. God blesses us. Hope makes God's promise and glory available to us. Let us move together into the future with the imagination and the courage to hope. If we hope to live in God's promise and future, we will live in God's promise and future. We will. We will. AMEN