

The Standard of Hope

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Ephesians 1:11-23

CHILDREN'S TIME

When I was little, I used to have all kinds of toys. Some of my favorites were ones that I could build things with, like legos, and Lincoln Logs. Here are my Lincoln Logs that I received as a gift more than 40 years ago! My brother and I each had a set and we used to play with them all the time. Let's see how tall of a tower we can build before it comes crashing down.

(Build a tower until it crashes down. Then put away the blocks.)

Jesus taught his disciples that whenever people brag about how good they are and about how great are the things that they do, they are headed for a fall.

He told them a story about two men who went to worship one day. One of the men bragged about all of the great things he did and thanked God that he wasn't like others, who did bad things.

The other man, instead of bragging about himself, covered his face,

and very humbly asked God to forgive him for all of the times he failed to be the kind of person that God wanted him to be.

Jesus was not very impressed with all of the boasting of the first man. Most of the things he did, he did to impress other people. Instead, Jesus said that being humble, like the second man, was much better.

SERMON

We are continuing our series on following Jesus for a few more weeks. This topics for this series have been planned for several months. The topic today is "hope."

It just so happens that it is quite timely considering the shooting a week ago yesterday at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Not only that synagogue community, but Jewish people throughout this country, and perhaps the world, are in need of hope.

Perhaps there were some of you who were able to attend a Shabbat service at a local synagogue this past week. I attended the Solidarity Shabbat at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield Friday night.

I experienced an overflowing sanctuary with interfaith participation.

As I entered the doors of the synagogue, I found an interfaith choir singing songs of hope and peace in the lobby. I learned that the choir called the synagogue asking to participate.

During the service, all clergy were invited to come forward together to participate in the service by witnessing the opening of the ark of the covenant and viewing their sacred scrolls. These they honor highly because the scrolls speak of the hope that God offers them.

Multiple people spoke of the trauma from the past week and the difficulty of the aftermath of the attack.

Rabbi Jennifer Lader got up to ask the question if this fear, trauma, loss and pain is now the new normal for the Jewish people? Asking the question is an acknowledgment of the challenge it is to see beyond the trauma of such an attack, which feels so very personal.

It is so personal because the people here locally consider the 11 Jews killed in Pittsburgh as part of their own family. It was very personal to them.

Rabbi Lader's resounding answer to the question was "No! No! No!"

She said, "What happened in Pittsburgh is not the new normal."

She asked the people in attendance from different religions and backgrounds to look around at each other and see the families, the bonds of friendship, the support, the kindness, and love.

She said "This is the new normal — this sense of unity, of oneness, of passion for creating the world in which we want to live. We make what is normal and this is it! This love — and the hatred, the bigotry, and the racism are merely shadows."

I was near tears for the whole 90 minutes of the service.

I sat next to a woman named Jackie, who was there with her twin 11-year-old daughters and her husband. They are long-time members of the synagogue. Molly, one of her daughters, was crying as they arrived at the synagogue that night. Jackie asked her daughter what was the matter and she said she was afraid and did not feel safe in the synagogue. After all there are people out there who hate Jews.

Jackie told her daughter that she was afraid too, but they were going to be together and go in to worship.

Jackie, and many others in attendance, realized that they could not give in to fear and allow an act of hate to be the final resounding word. She and others were there to make a statement that hate was not going to win. Love would win and they needed to hold onto that hope.

This event in Pittsburgh, even now, is requiring Jewish people to reassert who they are and commit themselves to a certain way of life not hinged by fear, but anchored in love while they faced the reality of fear.

This relates to our reading this morning from Ephesians.

The Apostle Paul knew what it meant to be a new creation in Jesus as he traveled around establishing the Church around the Mediterranean Sea. Literally, for decades of doing this he faced threats from those who wanted to hurt and even kill him.

Paul was undeterred as he worked out a theology of God's big picture plan beginning in Genesis with the creation of the world. He worked out the story of how Abraham and Moses and the law fit into God's plan and how Jesus became the pinnacle of all history. Paul worked all of this out in the face of a world

whose agenda stood against God's plan.

My friend and mentor Dr. Harold Ellens used to say that to understand God's work and all of scripture we stand at the event of Jesus and look back to see how all of history fits in relation to Jesus. And then you stand in the same place and turn around and look on toward the future and see how everything since Jesus makes sense in light of what he said and what he did.

It is in light of Jesus and Jesus' work that all of history and all of life make sense.

Following Jesus is a messy business because it has us sorting out how we approach life from the vantage point of faith day by day as things happen in the world around us. This doesn't always fit neatly into the molds that have been created for us either by the world or the church.

However, we continue to hold onto hope in our God.

READ EPHESIANS 1:11-23

It is helpful to remember that the hope of the ancient people of the first century was land. This goes back to the beginning of the Jewish people and the land of

Canaan that was promised to Abraham. And when the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, the hope was to return to their land, a place where God was blessing them with milk and honey.

This hope for land kept them going even amid the most challenging of times when they were separated from their homes.

Their inheritance was the land.

The letter to the Ephesians is calling us to imagine a new exodus, a new wilderness and a new inheritance like that from ages past. This was central to Paul's theology. The new church is being encouraged on, is moving on to a new promised land.

The new land that is promised is not a particular place, like the land of Israel, but actually the whole world. It is as if this whole place, the whole world, is now the sacred promised land, that is being renewed by God's love, power and grace.

We, as people of faith, have hope that God is moving us toward a renewed life, a renewed world, Heaven on earth.

Looking at it from yet another perspective, it seems as though God's plan is for us, you and me, is

to be the signs to the world that God is here and God's realm is being established here.

You, my friends, are in fact the sign of God's hope to the world. Have you ever thought of yourself as being that important?

However, it does, does it not, feel like we are in a wilderness these days? Like the world around us is getting more troublesome, more evil, more distressed? After all, we are now seeing the worst of humanity in the middle of a hotly contested election cycle, and with threats of violence all around us. We know something is messed up! It is prominently on display.

So, how do we find our place? Perhaps we need a new lens to to see what God is up to in the world. Through what lens do we see God's work? How do we see what people normally don't see?

Has God opened your eyes, as this passage says, to find hope in the new land that God has given us? Can you find hope?

I saw it on Friday night outside the walls of our sanctuary, beyond the boundaries of the Christian faith, at Temple Israel.

Near the end of the Solidarity Shabbat service, Rabbi Harold

Loss shared that a week ago Saturday after 11 of their Jewish family were murdered in Pittsburgh, he conducted a wedding at Temple Israel in the evening. He spoke about how beautiful it was and how proud everyone was at the uniting of two beautiful souls.

May we do likewise.

The wedding was a different world from the news of the morning.

Then he said “This is the story of the Jewish people. We mourn our dead and we celebrate our future and we as a people have never done this alone. There have always been righteous gentiles, members of the community who stood by our side, who supported us, as you are doing this evening.”

Rabbi Loss reaffirmed what had been said over and over: “Love is stronger than hate.” That sentiment was palpable in that sanctuary Friday night.

The community of Temple Israel, like so many communities of Jews and Christians in the past who have faced dark days, have taken a stand to demonstrate, in the face of fear, the substance of hope.

They have chosen hope as the standard for life, as their current reality, especially when it matters most in times like these.