

- Pastor Keith Madsen  
Sunday, 11/29/15

## **“Five Encouragements: We’ve Been Promised the Victory”**

Romans 8: 31-39

When we talk about what is essential to sustain life, people will point to different things. Nutritionists will talk about vitamins and minerals, water, the four food groups, and the avoidance of things like salt and fat. Others will refer to proper exercise and the need to maintain our bodies from a cardiovascular perspective. But for those who want to get beyond the physical, there is nothing more essential to life than hope. Psychologist Maurice Farber in his book *Theory of Suicide* claims that of all the possible concepts that have been or might be related to suicide, hope is the most powerful. When even a vigorous young person, a person who goes to the gym every day, a person who eats only healthy food; when that person loses hope, then the loss of their life is frequently not far behind. In an article in *Psychology Today* a number of years ago, the authors stated, “A hopeful recognition of the future’s promise may be as important to a community’s welfare as yeast is to rising bread.”

It’s not officially Advent yet, but Christmas is just around the corner and hope is what Christmas is all about. It is the star on the horizon of our world, the belief that a child can thwart a powerful king, and that peace on earth is possible. But what is “hope” in a more concrete sense, and how can we maintain it? To find that out, we need to look at our Scripture for today.

One point our Scripture makes clearly is that hope comes from not limiting our self to what we can see ahead of us. “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already sees?” Hope is going beyond what you see because you know that your perception is limited. There is an oft-told story that bears repeating of a drunk who was walking along a sidewalk when suddenly he ran into a telephone pole. He pushed up against the pole, and then he began to circle it, all the time pushing up against it. After a while he began to circle faster and push with a greater sense of desperation, until finally he sank to the sidewalk in despair, crying out, “It’s hopeless. I’m hemmed in!”

The obstacles which we come up against in life are doubtlessly more complicated than the drunk’s telephone pole, but even so the problems which we sometimes see as hopeless are most often matters of a similarly-limited perception. It never ceases to amaze me how big Mount Rainier is, but how small a hill can wipe it from view completely if you are too near the hill! You’ve seen it too. On clear days (which are admittedly few this time of year!) you can see Rainier from various places around Issaquah. But for most people around here, we are blocked from seeing that mountain by much smaller hills and mountains. I remember the first time I saw Mount Rainier from close up. Cathy and I and the family drove in from the Yakima side, and it was a really winding road. I kept expecting to see the mountain every time I rounded a corner, but time and again there were only more hills. Then finally, it happened! We rounded a corner and the size of the mountain before me made me fall back in my seat and gasp. I had seen many mountains in Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho, but I had never seen anything so massive.

But, here is the thing – when you have even a small hill right in front of you, *you cannot see even Mt. Rainier!*

Scripture makes it clear: a huge God holds our future! But the reality of this life is that the hills that stand right in front of us can block our vision of what that huge God holds. There is the hill of this month's bills. For parents or grandparents, there is the hill of those behavior problems you've had with your child or grandchild. For the high school or college student, there is the hill of that test you don't feel prepared for. At any given point in time any of these hills can loom so large that you can see nothing else. Hope is believing there is something beyond them, something big, even though you cannot see it. "But if we hope for something we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Our Scripture also helps us to see hope in today's pain. Paul compares it to when a woman is in the labor of childbirth. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." To describe the pains of the present as childbirth pains is to give a hopeful description. I'm sure most of you who have born children would agree that labor involves pain. Cathy claims men don't even know what pain is! A number of years ago I broke my toe. We were hauling some chairs in a hatchback in preparation for a wedding I was performing for one of Cathy's family members. And as things sometimes happen, the chairs all shifted toward the tailgate. So when I opened that back gate, the chairs were all linked together, and they fell directly on my big toe. Let me tell you, it really hurt. But the guy who was with me was little help. His main concern was, what kind of interesting words do preachers say when a whole car-full of chairs fall on their big toe? Cathy was a little more sympathetic, but her bottom line was still, come to me when you've had a baby, and then we'll talk about pain!

Well, I do have to admit that I am glad I don't have to go around pregnant for nine months and then go through childbirth. All my admiration – and sympathy – goes to women who are willing to take that on. But even as great as the pain is, the mother goes through the pain because she looks forward in hope to the child who will result. As difficult as it is, the mother knows the pain will be productive.

That's what Paul is saying about the pain of this world. The pain of separation gives birth to new relationships. The pain of failure gives birth to a new life direction. The pain of death is merely the labor that forces one from the womb of this life into the arms of our eternal Parent. This is true of all of creation. There is a new world coming! There may be labor pains along the way, but at the end of those pains, a new creation will come to birth. We do not know what it will look like exactly, any more than a mother knows what her child will look like before he or she is born. But the assurance of our God is that it will be a better world, a world more in line with his own love and goodness.

As we think about this as we approach Christmas time, how significant it is that Christmas focuses on a birth, a Holy Child who came into the world by the same painful process we have been describing. The Baby who came at Bethlehem is the first born of a new creation, a new world already emerging from the pain around us.

One final point to be gleaned from our Scripture is that the basis for our hope is not our own natural ability, but rather our confidence in that which is beyond us, the Spirit which God gives. We are the "firstfruits of the Spirit," not the "firstfruits of human optimism", or the "firstfruits of self-realization." Those who rely on their own strength alone for hope will most often put that hope on

shaky ground. Psychologist Maurice Farber, again in his book, *Theory of Suicide*, writes these words of Earnest Hemingway in his latter years: “Hemingway had always been proud of his competence, quelling any doubts he may have had by his work, by his lovemaking, and by those ultra-masculine activities: boxing, going to war, deep-sea fishing. Now he was old, sick, depressed—none of these available to him. His conversations toward the end reveal the tremendous diminution of his sense of competence, and thus, his hope.” In the end, Hemingway committed suicide.

I am told that you can do an experiment with rats. You take one rat and hold it as tight as you can so that no matter how hard it struggles, it can't get free. After a while the rat will stop struggling. Then if you drop that rat into a barrel of water, it won't even try to swim. It will sink to the bottom and drown. But if you take another rat, a rat who has not been taught the hopelessness of struggle, and you drop it into that same barrel of water, it will swim to the side and escape. Life requires that we hold onto hope.

But where does a life-sustaining hope come from? Those who rely on their own strength alone for hope will most often put that hope on shaky ground. That doesn't mean a person shouldn't reach for a sense of competence, or that such a sense of competence doesn't give one hope. It means you cannot rely on it alone. Author Kurt Vonnegut was one who once put his hope in human scientific learning. He told a graduating class a number of years ago: “I used to be an optimist. This was during my boyhood in Indianapolis. My brother Bernard was on his way to becoming an important scientist...He made me very enthusiastic about science for a while. I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist, maybe my brother, would have taken a color photograph of God – and sold it to *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us so happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there. And I had just come from being a prisoner of war in Dresden, which I'd seen burned to the ground. And the world was just learning how ghastly the German extermination camps had been.” Vonnegut went on to write that the experience turned him into a pessimist. That's unfortunate. Because the problem was not in being hopeful; the problem was in basing his hope on the wrong foundation. Science is a wonderful tool. Human learning and intelligence is a great gift that God has given us to use. But, unaided, it cannot be the basis for our hope.

Poet Maya Angelou tells of her grandmother who grew up in the depression. Her grandmother's source of hope, which inspired Maya Angelou's hope, was in God. She writes, “The depression, which was difficult for everyone, especially so for a single black woman in the South tending her crippled son and two grandchildren, caused her to make [a] statement of faith often. She would look up as if she could will herself into the heavens, and tell her family in particular and the world in general, ‘I will step out on the word of God. I will step out on the word of God.’ Immediately I could see her flung into space, moons at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her. Naturally, since Mamma stood out on the word of God, and Mamma was over six feet tall, it wasn't difficult for me to have faith. I grew up knowing the word of God had power.”

Psalm 25:3 tells us, “No one whose hope is in the Lord will ever be put to shame.” Christmas is a time to experience anew the truth of that promise. Christmas hope does not depend on the limitations of what you see. It does not depend on human fallibility. It reaches beyond them. It

gives us a new birth, even as we proclaim the Christ-child's birth. Isn't that the kind of hope you need in your life?