

Welcome to HOPE

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dale Brown
May 29-30, 2010 • First Sunday after Pentecost/Trinity Sunday
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.
The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race."*

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

* * * * *

In the passage from Proverbs we are presented with the voice of Wisdom. Here and in other assorted passages the wisdom of God is personified as a female entity. This provides a counter balance to the traditional understanding of God the Father – a distinctly masculine image of God. As Wisdom speaks she brings in feminine energy and attributes to what is often a masculine concept of God. I for one need to be reminded from time to time that the creation story in Genesis says, "in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them." While I don't believe God has gender as we commonly conceive of it – anatomical features or genetic coding- due to my upbringing and life experience as a man I tend to default to a masculine image of God, so I appreciate being reminded that "in God's image" includes both male and female. But this is not a meditation about gender, rather it is a message about God's Wisdom. The writer of Proverbs makes it clear that Wisdom precedes all other acts of creation. "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." Which certainly makes sense...if I were about to create the universe I would want some wisdom and not just wing it as I go along!

However, at times Wisdom confuses me. For instance, Wisdom describes being present in the whole creative process then says she was “rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” Has anybody seen the news lately...or in the last few millennia?! A blown oil well in the Gulf of Mexico dumping nobody knows how many millions of gallons of crude oil into the sea and nobody knows how to stop it and everybody points the finger of blame at somebody else, ongoing war in Iraq and Afghanistan, growing tension between North and South Korea threaten to reignite open war there, these only the latest in a continuous string of warfare throughout human history, rainforests slashed and burned, mountains leveled for the mineral inside and toxic runoff from the waste polluting groundwater, ecosystems destroyed, violence in families, between neighbors, and complete strangers. And God’s wisdom “rejoices in God’s inhabited world and delights in the human race.” How can that be?! As I look at the damage humanity has done to creation and one another it seems to me that Wisdom should have to admit, “Maybe that human race thing wasn’t such a good idea after all.” Perhaps some of you have had the same thought from time to time.

It is to that very cynical, jaded assessment of the world that the apostle Paul speaks words of hope in his letter to the Romans and these are powerful words Paul writes. In chapter 4, Paul speaks about Abraham, a key Old Testament figure with no shortage of human flaws and failings, yet Abraham believed God and sought to follow where he sensed God leading and Abraham was blessed in spite of this shortcomings. Paul asserts that we too “have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God,” That’s a pretty strong boast...hope of sharing in the glory of God. But Paul doesn’t leave it there. He continues by saying that boast in the hope of sharing in the glory of God is accompanied by boasting “in our sufferings.” I believe Paul is not speaking of a boasting that says, “We’re better than everyone else” or “We understand God better so God loves us more.” Instead it seems to me Paul’s point is “Though we endure pain caused by our own poor choices or the actions of others, still we experience the strength and peace of God at work in our lives in the midst of our sufferings.”

Still you may ask, “Why would anyone boast in their suffering?” Well, good question. Let’s think about that for a minute. Have you ever heard a group of women talk about their pregnancy and birthing experiences; or soldieries and Marines talk about their hard times in the field; or students pulling all nighters writing papers; or recovering addicts sharing their stories of what it was like before recovery. One reason for boasting of our sufferings is that it puts past and current struggles in relation to one another. Being reminded of past hardships endured reinforces hope that current and future sufferings will be endured as well. A second reason for boasting in suffering is that whether we are speaking of birth stories, war stories, academic struggles, or recovery and addiction, or any other kind of suffering, as we share and hear stories, others with similar experiences are able to connect with us. Common struggles inspire empathy and compassion. At first the stories must be very similar for most of us to make such a connection. But as we grow in spiritual maturity and understanding almost any pain or struggle can be related to our own; and our ability to love and care for others different than ourselves grows. That’s the character of which Paul speaks when he says, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

Take a moment now to look at the people around you- to your right and left, in front of and behind you. Go ahead do it. Do you see some characters? We've got some characters with a lot of character! Character developed through suffering and endurance. Last week we celebrated Pentecost, the birth of the Church. The Church as God designed it and Christ calls it to be, includes all kinds of folks. To bring together the kind of diversity God calls us to in one organization requires a sense of connection that transcends our differences and makes us one. In many cases it is our common experience of suffering and struggle that bridges those differences.

I'd like to share with you a dream or a vision (I'm not really sure which would be the best term) that I had about this time in 2006. Now, to quote scripture, "I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet" and I rarely remember dreams after waking...but this was an experience in which I believe I encountered the divine. I was in the midst of my second deployment, serving as the chaplain for a Marine Infantry battalion. We were encamped 5 miles south of the Iraqi border in Kuwait, standing by, just in case they needed us, which we had been told wouldn't happen. It is an exceptionally hot and inhospitable place this time of year. In my personal life my marriage was on the rocks and I needed to make some major life decisions. Through the years I had occasionally tried to develop the spiritual discipline of journaling, but never stayed with it for more than a week. At the time of the dream, I'd been journaling daily for about 3 months, and praying to God for guidance and wisdom. In the dream I got out of my car in a parking lot and walked toward a building. As I looked up the word HOPE was written on the building in large all caps letters. Then I, along with several others, was entering the building and everyone entering was greeted with a hug and the words "welcome to hope". There were people of every shape, size, color, age and background. Everyone was firmly embraced and told "welcome to hope". Then I awoke around 3AM in an air conditioned tent with 30 other officers in the desert of Kuwait. As I rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, the thought occurred to me "write this down so you don't forget it." So I grabbed my flashlight and journal, trying not to disturb anyone else, and began to write down all the details I could remember from the dream. As I was doing that I began to pray, "God, what is hope?" Now I don't go around claiming to "hear the voice of God", but four words came to my mind that didn't seem to be of my own thought process: "Hungry, Oppressed, Prisoners and Exiles." I thought of Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." I also remembered Jesus reading from Isaiah in Luke 4:18, "The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed..." After years of thinking that I had to have it all together myself before I could be of help to others in their spiritual journey, I saw that in one way or another we are all hungry, oppressed, a prisoner or an exile. I saw that it is that very brokenness that makes us real to others. As the hungry, oppressed, prisoners and exiles band together, to share what limited resources they have, to bear one another's burdens, to care for one another and to create a safe place to be vulnerable, healing occurs. God's spirit moves in powerful ways. HOPE is born, and the glory of God is experienced.

This is the inhabited world in which Wisdom rejoices and the human race in which Wisdom delights. This is the Church which Jesus established and empowered with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So if you are hungry, if you are feeling oppressed, if you are imprisoned to forces beyond your strength, or if you are an exile in search of a home and family, "Welcome to HOPE!" As you are strengthened and renewed in the body of Christ, remember to be on the lookout for other hungry, oppressed, prisoners and exiles. Greet them with a warm embrace and share with them the same hope you have received. Welcome to HOPE.