

Reborn in Hope
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 21-22
November 29, 2009

Rev. John Burns
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740
Website: www.weareubc.org

Every teenager who has waited on a parent understands hope. Schools out, your classmates are scrambling into mini-vans and compact cars and there you are, waiting. Your friend's mom rolls down her car window and asks if you need a ride home, and you reply, "No my dad said he'd be here." A teacher invites you to wait inside, but you answer, "No, I don't want to miss him, I'm sure he'll be here any minute."

Anybody who ever confessed his or her love in a letter knows about hope. Back in the day, boys and girls, before email and cell phones, men and women wrote letters to one another, sharing their experiences, expressing their feelings, signaling the depth of their interest in one another. At some point, one or the other would take a chance and admit being in love with the recipient of the letter. Once the confession was made, the sender had nothing to do but wait. A close friend might ask, "Has he replied?" or "What did she say?" "Haven't heard yet, but I'm sure I will soon" is the response of hope.

If you have been a groom, you've acted on hope. There is always that point in a wedding when the pastor and groom enter the sanctuary and stand, looking down the aisle in anticipation. One by one, the other members of the wedding party enter the sanctuary and take their places. The groom remains resolute, waiting for the music to swell, the doors to open and his beloved to begin her promenade to his side. It is a stance of hope.

Employees who have worked a couple of weeks before drawing their first paycheck have had experience with hope. Monday through Friday, they show up and put in an eight hour day without receiving a dime. Then they do it all over again without seeing a penny for their effort. When payday finally arrives, they get in line to collect their first wages and wait in hope.

If the parent never shows up to get the child, if the love letter is never acknowledged, if the bride never enters the room, if the boss never writes the check, the one who waits is embarrassed. Other emotions arise as well, but one of the most potent feelings of being letdown is shame for looking like a fool.

I have trouble watching "It's The Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown" for just this reason. Linus sits in the pumpkin patch, sincerely waiting on the Great Pumpkin to arrive and when, once again, the pumpkin does not show, everyone calls him stupid. The embarrassment is more than I can bear.

M. Craig Barnes says the opposite of hope is shame. Hope says, "I am waiting on one who will show up, true to her word." Shame says, "I was a fool again, waiting on someone who will never appear." The writer of the 25th Psalm sings, "Unto you O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in you. Let me not be ashamed, don't let my enemies exult over me." Then the writer broadens his plea and says, "Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame." What he's really saying is, "Lord I've put my hope in you and everybody knows it. If you don't show up, I'll look like a fool. Don't give my enemies more reasons to mock me." The Message put it this way, "I've thrown in my lot with you; You won't embarrass me, will you?"

Those words could have come from the prophet Jeremiah for if anyone had a right to say them, he did. The man known as the weeping prophet was thrown in jail for protesting the war his King, Zedekiah, felt pressured to continue. While languishing in jail, Jeremiah could hear the armies of Babylon as they surrounded the walls of

Jerusalem. Through the night, the army laid siege to the city, preparing to surmount the walls and crush the armies of Judah. God had told Jeremiah that without question, Nebuchadrezzar, King of Babylon, would destroy Jerusalem and take her residents captive, leaving nothing but rubble in his wake.

The next morning, the dawn of the day of destruction and defeat, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel came to visit him while he waited under house arrest. After bringing greetings from the family, Hanamel made an absurd offer to the political prisoner. He said, "Jeremiah, I really need some cash to make it through the coming days, so I would like to sell you the lovely field I own near Jerusalem for the bargain basement price of seventeen shekels."

Imagine standing on the streets of New York City on September 11, 2001. The planes have already exploded the twin towers and you are watching in horror as they collapse, floor by floor. As you stand aghast, your cousin runs up to you and says, "Would you like to buy the condo I own on the fortieth floor of the north tower. I'll make you a great deal?"

The proposal made by Jeremiah's cousin was no less ludicrous. And yet, Jeremiah stuns the reader by saying, "sure." Why? Because God had told him that his cousin was going to visit him with such an opportunity and that Jeremiah was to buy the land. The purpose of the purchase, according to God, was to provide an act of hope for the community. "After the people have learned the lessons I have for them," said the Lord, "I will restore their land to them. Your purchase will demonstrate your hope that I will keep my word."

When the Lord gave Jeremiah these instructions, he naturally questioned them. "How do you expect me to believe, as the city is falling down around me, that you will one day bring us home and rebuild our community?" God replied, "I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?" When Jeremiah heard the words of the Lord, he laid his money down.

What a recipe for humiliation. How long do you think it took for news of Jeremiah's purchase to spread through the crumbling city? He was already considered a fool for telling the King he was fighting a useless war in which he had no chance of winning. Now, he added an greater reason for folks to laugh at him. He bought land in a city soon to be owned by his nation's enemies. If God did not keep his promise, if God was not true to his word, Jeremiah and every one of his descendants would be a laughingstock to the entire nation.

That's the risk we run as people who hope in God. We who wait upon the Lord will look like fools if God does not show up. And yet we keep hoping. I've been thinking about why we do all we do in the season of Christmas: the decorations, the gifts, the feasts, the music, the travel, the guests, the pageants. I suppose a cynic would answer, "We do it because it is expected of us. We don't want our kids to be disappointed, our families to feel left out, our traditions to die." Yet I think there is more to it than that. I believe we engage in all the events of this holy time of year out of hope. Hope that if we all gather in the right place, on the right night, with the right attitude, surrounded by the right things, we will feel God's presence with us. We may not put it that way. Instead, we may talk about Christmas cheer and the spirit of the season and the warmth of the holidays, but I really think what we are hoping for is an experience of the holy. We do all of this, hoping God will show up.

In fact, I believe that when we stop hoping for the Spirit of Christ to bless our Christmas, we're left with nothing more than a busy holiday. Maybe you've lived through a Christmas when something wasn't quite right. The decorations were in place, the gifts were all purchased and wrapped, the family gathered, the favorite dishes prepared, but something was amiss. Everybody went through the motions and it wasn't a horrible time, but yet an

emptiness reigned where a fulness should have been. I think such Christmases unfold when we forget to hope for Christ's arrival. When we play it safe and look only for the parts of Christmas we provide: good food and drink, gifts galore and every ornament and candle in its place, that's all we get. Not bad, but not holy.

A couple of years ago, my family gathered at our home after the Christmas Eve service. All the gifts were under the tree, Karen had prepared her Christmas specialties, I had cooked my traditional donkey tails (I'll give you my recipe) the kids arrived from various places and we gathered around the table for a quick prayer and then on to the feast and the exchange of gifts. My mind was filled with details and obligations and thoughts about the service that had just ended. Everyone else was dealing with various issues that always swirl around families when they are together. In the midst of the chaos, my grandson Cyrus blurted out, "Christmas Eve is the best night of the year."

The depth of sincerity in the little guy's voice conveyed that he was encountering far more than food, family and festivities. In the midst of holiday hub bub, he felt the presence of God. Of course Cyrus came to the night hoping for miracles, so that is what he found. By pointing out the wonder of the moment, Cyrus offered all of us what our hearts hungered for most, the evidence that God was with us.

Sometimes I'm tuned into such moments. Moments when I look for God in sacred conversations, beauty, love, truth, openness, wonder, justice, even sorrow, hoping God will appear. In such times, I invariably sense the touch of God. I think our Maker takes us through these cycles of hope and fulfillment in hundreds of small ways throughout our lives to prove to us that we can trust God to keep the big promises, the Lord has made to us.

Some of these cycles are more important than others. Our missionaries are people who work and live by hope. Now, more than ever. Denominationally, the support of our mission work is at an all time low. General gifts to the denomination have fallen dramatically and contributions to the World Mission Offering diminish every year. Part of the shortfall is due to the economy, but since the decline has been going on for years, we have to conclude that Christians are simply stingier these days.

Our missionaries are engaged in life-saving work bringing fresh water to people in Thailand, treating AIDS in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rescuing battered women in Tijuana, Mexico, preaching the Gospel in Zambia, hoping that God will show up with the funds they need to continue their work. Last week, I and the other members of the Board for International Ministry gathered in a meeting room to sing two Christmas carols. The carols were filmed, along with a greeting from our board president and the DVD will be sent to all the missionaries for Christmas. I have tried to imagine what it will feel like for men and women around the world to slip the DVD into their laptops and watch us sing. I trust it will feel like hope. Hope that God will show up in the regions, conventions and churches we represent and move us to supply the money needed to carry on their work. If God doesn't inspire us to do so, the missionaries will end up waiting on nothing. They will look like fools. They are willing to take that chance, however, because their experience with God has confirmed that the Lord is true to His promises. People whose entire lives balance on God's faithfulness have lived through hundreds, maybe thousands of cycles in which they waited on the God who invariably shows up. This is just one more occasion in which they must put their hope in God and wait for the promise to be fulfilled.

We play a part in the fulfillment of that promise. I believe with all my heart God wants us to give more generously to the World Mission Offering than ever before. If we each ask the Lord, I believe we will hear the Spirit say, "this is the most important gift you will give this year, for this gift helps me keep my promise to those who provide life-saving work day after day." If indeed the Lord says something like that to you, take the offering envelope in the pew rack or in your box of envelopes at home and give as much as you can to this offering this Christmas. Allow God to use us to honor the hope of God's servants around the world.

It's a wonderful experience when the parent you have been waiting on rolls up in the car just as he promised or when a letter arrives confirming the one you love, loves you back. Something approximating glee bubbles up in our hearts when the cashier hands us our paycheck as promised and nothing short of bliss takes over when the sanctuary doors open and our bride enters in all her resplendent glory. But as wondrous as such experiences are, nothing compares to the joy that arises when our hope in God is rewarded. Jeremiah never made it back to that field he purchased, but his descendants did. I am sure that as they planted new crops in the field and built their homestead upon that land, they talked about the incredible hope of their ancestor Jeremiah and the God who, against all odds, kept his promise.

Jeremiah spent the remainder of his days in exile in Egypt. When it became clear to him that he would never set foot again on his home soil, Jeremiah prayed and the Lord inspired him with one more vision of hope. God said that he would indeed return Jeremiah's people to his land as he had promised. Then the Lord made his most magnificent promise of all. God said one day, he would raise up a leader from the lineage of David who would bring salvation to all people and establish an eternal reign of justice and righteousness. This leader, promised the Lord, would be called "The Lord is our Righteousness" for he would cleanse the people of all their sins and make them blameless before God.

When Jeremiah received this vision of hope, he did a very courageous thing. He called his scribe Baruch and said, "Write this promise down and share it with our people when you see them again. Put it in a scroll so all the generations after me will read it."

If God failed to keep that promise, then Jeremiah would have been known for thousands of years as the fool who believed God would send a savior for all creation. As it was, God showed up in a field near Bethlehem, some six hundred years later and ignited the sky with the news that "today in the city of Bethlehem is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

Jeremiah's hope was well founded. He was not put to shame, his enemies did not exult over him. Because God always keeps holy promises, both little and big, we too can be people of hope. May this season renew our hope in all the promises of God.