

This Sunday's texts:

Ruth 1:9-22

Romans 15:12-17

John 17:10-21

Out of Hibernation: Hope

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The Holy Gospel today comes from John, the 17th chapter:

Jesus said, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of this world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake, I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The gospel of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, there are so many circumstances in our lives, so many things that happen in and around and to us that discourage us. It makes it difficult for us to remain hopeful and so we ask you, Lord Jesus strengthen our faith, strengthen our confident trust in you that you hold us and that you hold the future and that we can entrust all that we have and all that we are into your never-failing love and care. Guide us and send us with confidence that we too might share that word and that hope with the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue our series "Out of Hibernation." Today, we focus on how we can move out into the world in these days with hope. How the hope that we have in Jesus can sustain us, can call us beyond the circumstances of our lives, and fill us with confidence that we might walk

beyond our feelings and our circumstances to carry the hope of the Gospel in our relationships and in our world.

Over the last few weeks, I've often used or referred to biblical stories that come out of despairing places. A few weeks ago, it was the valley of dry bones where God's army had been defeated and their bones had dried up long ago. God is able through the word of the prophet and the movement of the spirit to bring life into those dry bones and raise those people up again. Then more recently, it was about the exiles. Jeremiah wrote a letter to the people of Israel who had been exiled into Babylon. They had been defeated and taken captive and enslaved in Babylon. God was calling them to live in the fullness of life and trust in the coming promise of restoration for them as a people and as a nation.

Hope isn't about circumstances. Hope is about promise and faith in the promise-giver. God promises that he loves and takes care of us. So we can move into this future, in spite of all the unknowns around us, with a confident hope, knowing that we live out our lives in his never-failing love and care.

We look today to the book of Ruth. Several of our Grow Groups studied Ruth back earlier in this year and were able to learn about this amazing story that exists here in the book of Ruth. The story of Ruth actually begins with Elimelech, the husband of Naomi. They have two sons. They live in Israel in a time of famine that they determine is unbearable. So they leave God's land of Israel and they go to the foreign nation of Moab. There they settle and their two sons marry two Moabite women.

But not too long later, Elimelech dies and Naomi's two sons die, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah all widows. Naomi is in utter and complete grief and despair. She decides that there's nothing for her to do, but go back to Israel. Even though she doesn't really see anything there for her, she decides to go back. She tells Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab, stay in their own country where they'll at least have a chance. Orpah agrees and, while reluctantly, she goes back to her people. Ruth, however, is incredibly loyal to Naomi. And there's that beautiful verse in the Bible where she says, "Wherever you go, I will go and your people will be my people and your God will be my God and where you die, I will die."¹

¹ Ruth 1:16-17

They begin the journey. They begin the *hopeless* journey back to Israel. Now, why do I say hopeless? Well, even though the people of Israel are excited to see Naomi and they greet her with a warm welcome, she says, "Don't call me Naomi. I am cursed. God is against me. Call me Mara because God has made my life bitter."

It's interesting that her daughter-in-law, Ruth seems to have a confidence in this new God she has inherited from her marriage and she begins to trust in that God.

As they go back to Israel, they are poor again. They're in despair. They're hopeless. It's the beginning of the harvest season and Naomi sends Ruth out into the field. Well, not out *into* the field, but *around* the field, where she is permitted to glean that which the harvesters have left in the field. It was a pattern in Israel where those who were poor and out-of-work could pick up the scraps around the edges of the field and have enough food. Well, as it turns out, the field that Ruth goes to is the field of Boaz.

Boaz is what is known as their kinsman-redeemer. Now a kinsman-redeemer isn't anything we know about, but it's important to understand, in the context of the story, that widows really had no hope whatsoever, other than the charity and the generosity of those around them. They didn't have land. They didn't have jobs. They didn't have anything. They were completely destitute. So all that they could do would be to pick up these scraps. But Boaz as a kinsman-redeemer, it means that he's one of the relatives. So when a woman was widowed in Israel, her husband's brothers would take her in, make her a part of their family, often marry and have children in the brother's name, so that would be how they would be cared for and lived. If it wasn't a brother, then it was the next person in line.

Boaz happens to be related and, therefore, took Ruth as a wife. The story unfolds in a beautiful way. Even though Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite woman, she becomes a part of this journey of redemption and hope, that is the story of faith we have throughout the scripture. As it turns out, this Moabite woman and her kinsman-redeemer husband, Boaz have a child who ends up being the grandfather of King David and the line of Jesus, the redeemer of the world.

It's hard when we look out and don't see things we can count on. It's hard when we look at the days ahead and they seem to hold hopelessness. They seem to be without promise. We can't in our minds' eye sort of put together the course of events that we can see coming and think the things are going to be better. So we begin to live with a sense of fear, a sense of

foreboding, a sense of despair. Sometimes it isn't circumstances. Sometimes it's our own emotional health. Often we've heard in this pandemic time, the disconnection that has existed between people, the extra distance that has been called for and lived out in these last fifteen months, has brought us down emotionally. Many people have entered into periods of depression, sometimes severe depression. Especially when you're in that place, it's hard to hope.

So I say to you that our hope can't be rooted in our circumstances or in our emotions, in our feelings, or even in our body chemistry. Rather, we have to put our hope in a God who is at work, even in ways we cannot see. So we hear the promise of scripture. We see over and over and over again the faithfulness of God to his people and we say, "Lord, include me! Lord, I can't see it, but I put my trust in you and I ask you to give me the courage to walk into that future."

I saw a symbol recently and at first, I could barely understand what it meant, but it really means God is greater than my highs and lows. God for the symbol G, the greater than sign, and then the up arrow and the down arrow:



God is greater than my highs and lows. I proclaim to you that God is greater than your highs and your lows. God is greater than your difficult circumstances and even greater than your great circumstances. He is trustworthy. *And* He. Loves. You! He calls you out of hibernation and into a life that makes a difference, for you and for the people around you, as you live beyond your circumstances, as you live beyond your emotions, and live in the hope based on the promise of the loving faithful God.

Jesus, as he heads to the cross, in these final words with his apostles, his disciples, knows that hard times are ahead. He knows that there will be infighting between them, as there already has been. He knows that there will be forces arrayed against them and they will be scattered to the far ends of the Earth. So he prays for them in their presence and he says Father keep them in your name, the name of God. The name represents the character and the fullness of a person. Keep them in you, Father, your family, your chosen ones, your sent ones, the ones you provide for. And as they journey through these difficult days ahead, seeing my crucifixion and death, and as I depart and leave them to do the work of the church, keep them,

as Luther might say, in the one true faith, in the trust and hope of what it means to be a child, a disciple, a sent one of God.

When you can't feel God, trust his name. Trust his character. Have any of you have the experience, maybe even in the last fifteen months, of what the holy fathers called the dark night of the soul, a time when it felt like God wasn't hearing your prayers or certainly wasn't answering them, or if he was, that the answers were just disappointing. The truth of the matter is being a Christian doesn't mean life will always go the way we want it to go. As a matter of fact, often it will not. The promise we have is a promise from God that he will journey with us. He will lead us into the life that he intends for us. As we submit to him, entrust our lives to him, and follow him, he will give us purpose even in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances. We can be a people of hope, even in the midst of darkness because we can trust in God. Even we can't sense him because he's faithful to his promises. It is in the very character of God.

I happen to be a person who is often encouraged by K-LOVE, a network of encouraging contemporary Christian music. I was listening this week to a great song by Mercy Me. The song is called "Say I Won't." It's a song that calls you to a greater life than you maybe are currently living in. It has this amazing line. "I will be dancing when circumstances drown out the music." It's a wonderful image of things that can suck the joy out of our lives and distract us from what God is doing. It's a faith statement. I am going to keep dancing. Even when the music is drowned out, I am going to trust that the music plays on and I can keep on dancing. I can keep on going forward into the life that God intends. Circumstances will not drown out the music.

As Paul writes to the church in Rome in Romans 15, he's reminding the Christians there that they can have hope even in the midst of persecution. Romans 15:13 says "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him." Paul, as he writes this, goes on to say I know you know this. As a matter of fact, you know this so well you could even teach this, but nonetheless, I'm going to remind you. I have been bold enough to write about some of these points, knowing that all you need, verse 15 says, is this reminder.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let this be *your* reminder. God is for you, not against you. God has a plan, a hope, and a future for you and that you and I can stand on the promises of God. We can trust in them. We don't have to cower. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have

to hide. We can stand in the promises of God. It's a good idea to get the reminder. Pastor Jonna had a beautiful sermon last week that talked about the importance of being a community of faith together, where we can find encouragement from one another to stand, to trust, to hope, to share, to love, and be encouraged.

I love standing on the promises of God as a statement of perseverance. But as I thought about it for this sermon, I realized that there's still another step. It's not enough to just stand here. Here in this place, in this place and time of worship, we get replenished. We get rejuvenated. We get filled up with the presence and power of God. And then we don't just keep standing. We live in the promises of Christ. We take what we believe, what we hear, and what we pray and we translate it into lives that make a difference. Jesus referred to that in the gospel of Matthew when he's talking about a building house. He says in Matthew 7:24, in the Sermon on the Mount, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock." We trust, we believe, and then we go and obey and live in the fullness of God's promise.

He said, in another way, in Mark 9:24, as he was talking to a desperate father, a desperate father who brought his son to be healed by Jesus. He's run out of options and he says to Jesus *if* you can, heal my son. And Jesus says *if?! What do you mean if? Of course, I can, if you believe.* The man has this amazing statement to Jesus which I encourage you to make your daily prayer. He says "I do believe but help me overcome my unbelief."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it's not that we won't be discouraged along the way. It's not that we won't have doubts or that we won't have stumbles, when we seek to try to do something that's a blessing to others and fall on our face. We all make those kinds of mistakes. We all go through those highs and lows. It's a wonderful time to say to Jesus, after you pray and ask him to help you, to guide you, and to lead you in life, to say "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. Don't let my doubts take me down, but rather, let my faith and confidence in you lead me out." Brothers and sisters in Christ, the time of hibernation is over. The time of engagement has come, as we live out the hope that is ours in the promise and faithfulness of God and as we share that hope with our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.