

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

December 9, 2007

“Abound in Hope”

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 1-13

Near the end of the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the character named Andy Dufrenes tells the character named Red these words, “Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best thing, and no good thing ever dies.” Andy is truly innocent of the crime for which he was imprisoned. On the surface it seems as if he has learned to adapt to prison life with all its cruelty and corruption. But there is a part of him that never adapts, and a part of him that never gives up the hope for his freedom. Red is much more cynical, but by the movie’s end, he too is touched by Andy’s promise of hope, and he undergoes a powerful transformation of the spirit. To people with no reason and no right to hope, Andy says, ‘Remember hope is a good thing, maybe the best thing.’

Hope is a good thing. Yes it is. And one of the messages we declare in Advent is that we are people of hope. Hope is a powerful word. Hope is a word that pulls us into the future with assurance and conviction. Hope gives us a reason to wait for tomorrow. Hope directs and affirms our lives.

So imagine with me the stump of Jesse that the prophet Isaiah refers to. What does Isaiah mean – the stump of Jesse? He means the whole Davidic line, doesn’t he? Jesse was David’s father, and David was Israel’s best and most loved king, and Israel’s line of kings was descended from David. But what happened? In 726 BCE the northern ten tribes of Israel were captured by the Assyrians. And in 586 BCE the two southern tribes of Judah were conquered by the Babylonians. There was no more independent nation of Israel. There was no Davidic king on the throne. Jerusalem was in shambles. The Temple was destroyed. All that remained was a memory of past glory, a memory of a former day of grandeur and honor, a memory of how things once were. The family tree was cut off. All that was left was the stump.

What do you see when you see a tree stump? Something dead or something alive? What do you see when you see a vanquished nation? Do you see winners or losers? What do you see when you see people living in squalor and depravation and violence and injustice? Do you see a dead end or do you see possibility?

The word from God to Israel is a surprising, unexpected and undeserved word of hope: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him...." (Isaiah 11: 1-2a).

So the stump is not dead. The future is not cut off. The spirit of the Lord is stronger than all evidence to the contrary. Dead trees. Destroyed cities. Despairing people. Ruined lives. Broken relationships. Shattered dreams. Whatever the evidence, the spirit of the Lord blows like a fresh wind, breathing new life into dead wood, creating new possibilities for restoring the worn out, and rejuvenating the tired and the weary.

This is good news, friends, for us here in the second week of December, and for all people in every time and place. Advent is the season of hope. We say it -- but how do we do it? How do we abound in hope? How do we keep waiting for the light when all we see is darkness? How do we keep holding out for a better tomorrow when all our todays are filled with trouble?

Perhaps Paul's words to the Romans can give us some direction. Verse 4 of chapter 15 reads: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

The scriptures, then, give us reason to hope. When we are discouraged, we find encouragement. When we are ready to give up, the scriptures tell us to hold on. Over and over again the scriptures tell of God making and fulfilling promises. God is truthful. God is faithful. We can hope because we know and depend on God's word.

But God's word is steady only because God is reliable. In verse 5 Paul describes God as "the God of steadfastness and encouragement," and in verse 13 Paul names God as "the God of hope." It is God's nature to encourage God's people. It is God's nature to give God's people hope. And God's actions fit God's nature. That's why Paul says the Gentiles are included in God's plan of salvation. Because God has always wanted all people on earth to know him and God has always been at work in the world drawing the world to him. So our hope is rooted not only in who God is but also in what God has done. God's involvement in human history gives substance to our hope. God has not kept silent. God has not been hidden. Ever since God created the world, God has been active and present in the world. Including now. For we too are part of God's story and plan of salvation. You know, the story of salvation doesn't end with the final Amen in the Book of Revelation. The last word in the Bible is not God's last word. For God is still speaking, and still changing lives and still loving and still drawing us to him. We are living proof that God is still at work in the world. We are witnesses of God's presence. With Paul, we can testify to God's truthfulness. And therefore we can hope. Because the God of hope has been with us in the past and because the God of hope works and lives among us today.

Well, is that all there is to it? Depending on God's word and witnessing to God's presence – is doing that enough to make us people of hope? Not quite. Paul does have one more piece of advice. And it has to do with being the church. Christian hope, in Paul's view, is not just a private feeling or attitude. It is something that unites us. Hoping together joins us together. And the unity we experience in the church is a foretaste of the very kingdom of God that we hope for.

So how do we do that? Paul is practical. Be like Christ, he says. Do as Christ would do. In verses 1-2, that means that "we who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor," and in verse 7 it means that we are to "welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you."

Bear with the failings of the weak, for not everyone is strong. Not everyone is sure in their faith. Be patient with each other. Don't leave anyone out. Don't condemn. Don't put up with dividing walls. Welcome one another. Greet each other in Christ's name. For remember that Christ is God's gift of love to all the world. Not just to some people in certain places at certain times, but all people everywhere and all the time. So welcome each other. Be forgiving and patient and kind. Keep the church doors wide open. Don't let differences distract and harm you. "Live in such harmony," writes Paul in verse 5, "in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It takes all of us together to hope for the coming of the Messiah, to hope for the triumph of God's love, to hope for the day when the wolf and the lamb shall dwell together in peace, for that day when all the hungry will be fed, and all the lonely will be comforted, and all the oppressed will be set free, and all tears will be dried, and all children will be loved, and all hurts will be healed. That day when all the lost are found and the blind see and all the world is saved.

I can't carry this big of a hope on my own, can you? This kind of hoping is something we do together. Here in church. Around our tables in our homes. In our prayers. On our own it is easy to drift into despair and to let that despair take hold of our minds and hearts. For the burdens we carry are many and great. But with God's word and with God's presence and with the company of the community of God's people, we can dare to hope.

In Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, a story is told of Dutch and Polish Jews in Bergen Belsen. A stone was thrown across the barbed wire separating the Dutch from the Polish. A note was wrapped around the stone. Wolf Fischelberg and his 12-year old son were walking among the barracks and saw the stone. Wolf picked it up, and when he was at a safe distance from the others, he read the note. It was written in Hebrew by a Dutch Jew named Hayyim Borack who had Argentinean papers. Hayyim wrote that he had shofar in his possession, and that if the Hasidic Jews in the Polish sector wanted to use the shofar for Rosh Hashanah services, Borack could smuggle the shofar in the one of the coffee cauldrons in the morning distribution. The Polish Jews voted to give up their morning coffee ration on the first day of Rosh Hashanah so they could

receive the shofar. Although the *mitzvah* required a clear blowing of the shofar so that all could hear, for safety reasons the Polish Jews agreed to blow the shofar quietly, deciding that God would surely accept the muffled sounds of the shofar and the prayers of his sons and daughters. Wolf's daughter, Miriam, listened to the shofar and hoped that the barbed wire fences of Bergen Belsen would come tumbling down, like the walls of Jericho did in earlier times. But as the story concludes, "Nothing changed. The barbed wires remained fixed in their places. Only in the heart did something stir -- knowledge and hope; knowledge that the muffled voice of a shofar had made a dent in the Nazi wall of humiliation and slavery, and hope that someday freedom would bring down the barbed-wire fences of Bergen Belsen and of humanity."

"The barbed wires remained fixed in their places. Only in the heart did something stir....knowledge and hope."

The stirring of hope in the human heart. A shofar passed from one side of the barbed wire to another, from the Dutch prisoner to the Polish, from people who would ever know each other but who shared a common faith. A community of faith daring to hope despite all evidence to the contrary.

Friends, hope really is a good thing. Maybe even the very best thing.

Sources:

Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust by Yaffa Eliach. Reprinted with permission as "A Shofar in a Coffee Cauldron", *alive now!*, November/December 1993. Published by The Upper Room, Nashville, TN.