

"WE RADIATE HOPE DESPITE ADVERSITY"

Sermon Series, #5: Great Texts, Core Truths

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A blind, illiterate woman, 99 years of age lived two hours outside of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Pastor John Ortberg of Chicago went far out of his way to meet her. She'd become a Christian in middle age. She lived in a hut and kept two Bibles on her table, one in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language and the other in English.

As pilgrims visited, she asked them to read the Bible to her. Over time her favorite verses grew so familiar she memorized them. And if her visitors couldn't read, then she recited those verses back to them as a gift... Why journey so far to be with a blind, illiterate, and wrinkled widow? Because when she said, "The Lord is my shepherd" or "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that's to be revealed to us", it resonated very differently.

People flocked to hear because despite her seemingly insurmountable obstacles of poverty, disability, ignorance, and age, she willed one thing in purity of heart. People flocked to hear her because they couldn't listen to her without hoping that someday the holy words from her mouth would come to mean as much to them.

Ethiopia is a long way from Fairfield Co. But the same holds true here. Part of being Jesus' disciples is our willingness to be like lighthouses on a stormy night. At the heart of our calling, we radiate hope even in the face of adversity and suffering. The Christians I admire most are those who burn brighter, the darker the night, the fiercer the storm. Those spiritually gifted with hope only seem to shine more vividly as life tests them. Doubtless you've met "lighthouse Christians" also.

Hope is the ultimate achievement. St Augustine believed that of the three virtues, faith, hope and love, hope is the best. Faith tells us that God is, yes. Love tells us our God is good, yes. But hope tells us that *God will get God's way*. But trusting all that in face of life's darkest evidence is at the heart of living a fully faithful life.

Jesus came to fling open windows and unlock doors into this spiritual reality. To impart hope, we best start at the gospels' end, the fulfillment of God's purposes at Good Friday and Easter. For as story of Jesus' ends in death and resurrection, only then do all of his miracles, teachings and challenges clarify and begin to fully make sense. Only Good Friday and Easter teach us: evil may try to lynch good from a tree, but good finally wins out. Evil shall be banished. God's dream, what Jesus called God's kingdom or God's reign, will be realized for all of creation.

This world will never lack the doubting, the defeated, and the despairing. Every day we meet people who say, "Nothing can be done about it...Why even bother? ...You can't change the world...What's the use?...Face reality and give up." Let's be honest, we all have days that tempt us to settle with so little as that. On those

dark dreary days, it is especially difficult to make lofty sacrifices, to be the people we know God wants us to become. But Jesus assures us that *any* sacrifice we make in the cause of God's coming reign will be more than compensated as it all shakes out. Hope is trusting that in the end all loving sacrifices will be vindicated.

That's the sweet spot of hope. Paul the Apostle knew a lot about hope, with his many sacrifices, his attacks, his jailings, his rejection and then his martyrdom. As a pastor, I like nothing better than to read his words from Romans ch. 8 at memorial services of lighthouse Christians, shining through life's dreary haze.

"We know that all things work together for good with those who love God, who are called according to his purpose...If God is for us, who is against us? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord." This luminous poetry radiating from Paul's dark days is our theme song of hope.

I saved an article from my alumni magazine about a professor of computer science at Yale University. On the morning of June 24, 1993 he opened a package. It exploded and nearly killed him. Professor David Gelernter was the 23rd victim of the Unabomber. He dragged himself to the same university clinic where I had them shape orthotics for my shin splints. But Gelernter had lost part of his right hand, broken his left hand, shattered his wrist, damaged his eye, chest, and legs.

Gelernter is an observant Jew. Like many of us, he grew up on Bible stories that recount how God delivers the faithful who suffer. The source of his courage is an unwavering trust in the God able to overcome and reverse the darkest scenarios.

"So what's the scoop on surviving a mail bomb?" Gelernter writes. "What do you learn? You learn that, at first, the past will seem only like a cause for mourning, but your job is to twist it around and make it a cause for joy. At the end of Sabbath meals, observant Jews sing Ps. 126, 'Those that sow in tears will reap shouting with joy. Weeping as he goes, he carries the seed bag—and returns with shouts of joy'. If you focus on the big sweep of history on a single lifetime, the Psalms say, you see life as a stubborn return from sorrow again and again."

After a tsunami hit Indonesia a decade ago killing tens of thousands, David Bentley Hart wrote his book, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* He presented at the Craigville Colluquy on Cape Cod while I was serving there. Hart is a brilliant theological scholar, but they asked me to be his theological reflector. That is, as \$1,000 concepts came out of his mouth, they asked me in ten minutes to break them down into twenties, tens, fives and ones people could use.

Usually, that theological colloquy was snoring material so far as the media went. But that year garnered extensive coverage in the Boston Globe and the Christian Science Monitor. What made us newsworthy? Our theme was: how can God be just and loving in a world of suffering and sorrow. That question never gets old. And what is that about except hope? How can we hope in the face of tsunamis?

One unexpected feature about being human is how surprised we find hardship, tribulation, and suffering as it visits us. The truth is these darker realities aren't at all surprising. They're virtually life's only certainties. How goes the old aphorism? The only thing we can count on are death and taxes. Or how goes the T Bone Walker blues ditty? They call me stormy Monday. But Tuesday is just as bad.

Cognitively, of course, that makes sense, and we know that. Experientially, as ill tidings befall us, we're shocked and surprised. At least, I know that I am. I mean, I never expected that I would have migraine headaches a few times a month for 22 years. Migraines were for other people, not me. I never expected my college roommate would be murdered. Those are far off and distant headlines. I never expected to be a divorced person. No one who marries expecting to be divorced. If hardship, tribulation, and suffering are not so surprising, let me tell you what is.

What is surprising is that we have not been abandoned to our own dark devices. What is surprising is how God has intruded on and even entered human history. What is surprising is the power of love that started it all in the beginning is the same power that won't let us go, won't give up on us, and wants the best for us. Such surprises of grace are for me the reality even more certain than suffering.

Peter Gomes wrote, hope doesn't deny present circumstances, and hope doesn't get us out of our difficulties...but it gets us through." Jim Wallis writes, "hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change." Henri Nouwen wrote, "hope means to keep living amid desperation, to keep humming in the darkness. Hoping is knowing there is love; it is trust in tomorrow; it is falling asleep and waking again when the sun rises. In the midst of a gale at sea, it is to discover land. In the eyes of another, it is to see the other understands you. As long as there is hope, there will be prayer. And God will hold you in his hands."

I like the famous carving in the west door of the church at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire, England. "In the yeare 1653 when all things sacred were throughout ye nation either demolist or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Barronet, founded this church; whose singular praise it is, to haue done the best things in ye worst time, and hoped them in the most callamitous." I don't know how far Leicestershire is from the sea. But that is a "lighthouse church". And so are we. Amen.

O Christ, many are the desert seasons of our lives. Many are the dark nights, the stark silences, when we neither hear your voice nor feel your presence. In these times we need to know that you are with us. If you cannot take away all of our doubts, then give us courage enough to ride across them, like a boat skims the waves. Give us a surface in living that can become our platform for undying hope. In the winter of our spirit, O Lord, teach us to trust in you as we are asked to make sacrifices. As the earth in winter does not die, but prepares for the return of spring and growth, so you do not leave us alone, but work within us as much when we are unaware as when we are aware of your presence. You loved us first, Lord God, long before we had ever heard your voice. We can lean on your love and there find strength. O Christ, draw us into the light of your mercy. Heal us of our fears, plant the seed of hope, and harvest in us the rich fruit of your love