

11/12/23

Psalm 70 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

“Needing Help Finding Hope”

Where are you finding hope in these difficult times across our world?

Are you able to hear a message of hopeful encouragement from God’s word?

Two Sundays ago, The Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana author of the book, Hope: A User’s Manual, taught the adult education class on the topic, “Hope All the Way Down.” She shared some of the themes that she highlights in her “user’s manual.”¹

She started the class with a 2-minute video of 40 inspirational clips from movies and asked us to reflect on what we saw. The clips were taken from all different genres—from the Muppets to The Lord of the Rings to Mr. Smith Goes to Washington to Braveheart to Charlie Brown. It was a feel-good, motivational, uplifting exercise. As we were watching the clips, we could recall the moments we recognized from the movies we knew.

Personally, I got all excited that included in the supercut was a scene from Peter Pan when Tinkerbell’s light fades because no one believes in fairies and Peter Pan rallies everyone **action**, to clap if they believe in fairies, so that the **relationship** will not be severed, and Tinkerbell’s light or **beauty** can endure. It gives hope to everyone.

¹ Hope A User’s Manual by MaryAnn McKibben Dana. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.

Through this exercise Pastor MaryAnn was helping us recognize there are certain cultural catchphrases and moments that bring hope. These are often portrayed and curated in film and literature. She also conveyed that hope is different from optimism and it's more than just staying positive.

She then shared the story of a Lutheran Pastor in Bethlehem who lives by the adage, "hope is what we do." The Rev. Mitri Raheb is a self-described prisoner of hope because since age 5 he has lived under occupation. As a Palestinian Christian he could have left the region but has stayed and is the founder and president of Dar Al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture. His life testifies to the understanding that "hope is wrapped up in what we make real. It isn't what we think or what we feel or what we imagine is possible. Hope is what we do in the face of suffering, pain, and injustice."²

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In response to the 2nd question perhaps you heard resonance of hope in what Pat read from 1st Thessalonians 4.

The theme of hope permeates 1st Thessalonians with a hope-filled word for the community of early Christians to whom the letter was written as well as for us today. New Testament

² Ibid, p. 39

Professor Kristofer Phan Coffman writes this in his commentary on 1st Thessalonians. I'm going to quote Professor Coffman extensively:

“There’s an important detail about 1 Thessalonians that every reader should keep in mind . . . : 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament. It is the first of Paul’s letters, written before any of his other letters and even before the Gospels. This letter gives us a glimpse into the concerns of one of the first communities outside of Syria-Palestine to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. It is an under-appreciated treasure. . . .

This letter is not Paul’s personal opinion, but an expression of communal faith as it’s written by three authors, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Paul and his companions wrote their letters to address specific issues in the communities they founded. In [1 Thess. 4:13-18], . . . Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy speak to a concern that the Thessalonians had regarding the believers in their community who had died. Put simply, they worry that dead believers will not get to share in the glory of Jesus’ second coming.

The Thessalonians’ worry is the result of a problem faced by missionaries across the world [even today. It is this], . . . tension between existing cultural categories and the message that the missionaries then and today wish to [convey].

The Thessalonians seem to be operating under traditional Greek religious conceptions (the city of Thessaloniki is in modern day Greece). For many ancient Greeks, the dead were thought of as doomed to separation from the living in the underworld. They were shades of their former selves without thoughts or feelings. This separation from the living was not a punishment, but it was permanent. Though Greek myth contained stories of people who attempted to cheat this fate (for example Orpheus and Eurydice, Sisyphus), the conclusion of all of the stories was that [separation] could not be avoided.

Put in conversation with Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy’s preaching about Jesus, the Thessalonians’ preexisting beliefs cause them [heartache and] headaches. They look forward to Jesus’ triumphant return, but many of them are grieving because they believe death has permanently separated them from their loved ones. These are the people whom the senders of the letter describe as having no hope.”³

Let me pause from Professor Coffman’s commentary and say, this idea recalls last Sunday when we celebrated All-Saints and remembered and lit candles for those we have loved and lost. Our

³ Kristopher Phan Coffman, “Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.” 11/12/23, workingpreacher.org

passage from 1st Thessalonians reminds us of the hope that's made manifest for all—living and dead. Coffman continues in his commentary writing that,

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, begin their work of introducing a new way of thinking about death to the Thessalonians. Their new way begins with their bedrock belief: Jesus died and rose again (4:14).

Notice that this is our bedrock belief as well. A belief that we return to repeatedly as a source of hope, Jesus died and rose again. Coffman continues in his commentary,

This strikes at the heart of the Thessalonians' understanding of death. Unlike Greek heroes, Jesus was not held down by the power of death. Unlike the Greek underworld, death has no permanence for those who die in Christ. Death and the world, though they seem eternal, will one day pass away.

Though the Thessalonians' concern was specific to their culture and time, the issue of the resurrection of the dead pops up throughout history. Each time it pops up, it reveals how a particular culture relates to what the first letter to the Corinthians called 'the foolishness of the cross' (1 Corinthians 1:23). People continually to this day show discomfort at the idea that Jesus, God incarnate, died on the cross.

In the early church, this discomfort showed up in a movement called Docetism. The Docetists were concerned with guarding the divinity of Christ. If Jesus was God, they argued, he could not die, thus he only seemed to die (the name docetism comes from the Greek word for "seems"). But the Docetists ran into a problem: all humans die, and if Jesus did not die, then he could not be a real human.

In opposition to this stance, the Apostles Creed was formulated. Following the faith of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, The Apostles' Creed confesses that Jesus Christ 'was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried. He descended to the dead.' The Apostles Creed shouts out: Jesus was a human, Jesus died, and don't you forget it!

The focus on Jesus' death emerges out of a pastoral focus. If Jesus does not die, then the resurrection is simply a magic show. And if Jesus does not die and rise again, then we continue to be held in the permanent grasp of death.

This discomfort with Jesus' death and resurrection shows up in other places in history. . . . Some branches of . . . Christianity emphasize Jesus' **teachings** to the point that his death and resurrection become mere footnotes to theology. Denying or deemphasizing Jesus' death and resurrection leaves Christians in the same place as the Thessalonians: as those without hope or hopeless.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy ground their faith in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection because they are fighting for hope. In the face of a cruel and desperate world, they preach the 'foolishness of the cross' and proclaim there is hope, even for those who have died.

This [good news] goes out to all of those whose loved ones have died before their hope is fulfilled. It is a word meant for those who have lost children and siblings and spouses and even, elderly parents [in the many myriad ways loved ones have left us].

God has not forgotten those who came before us. God has not abandoned them. God will raise them up and we will see them again. This is the scandal of the Gospel and the foolish hope that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy preach to the Thessalonians, and it rings true two millennia later on this Sunday after All Saints'.⁴

Where are you finding hope in these difficult times across our world?

Are you able to hear a message of hopeful encouragement from God's word?

In Hope: A User's Manual, Pastor MaryAnn gives suggestions for those who may feel disconnected from hope especially for those who follow the news. In the section of her book on, the *practice of hope* she offers 3 essential elements to borrow or adapt, she calls them "the big 3": Beauty, Relationships, Action.

I call them *the Peter Pan effect*. When Tinkerbell's light begins to fade because no one believes in fairies Peter Pan rallies everyone **action**, clap if they believe in fairies, so the **relationship** will not be severed, and the pixie's light or **beauty** can endure. It gives hope to everyone.

⁴ Ibid

The 1st essential element for the practice of hope is **Beauty**. Search it out in nature, in others, in art, literature, and poetry. Surround yourself with beauty.

The 2nd essential element for the practice of hope is **Relationships**. Stay connected with others in worship, small groups, through a phone call, or a lunch date.

The 3rd essential element for the practice of hope is **Action**. When we avoid this, we forget our own power. Start small. Help with a mission project, turn in your pledge card, jot a quick note off to someone, or attend the Thanksgiving Interfaith, "Harvesting Peace" service on Wednesday night.

As we read in 1 Thess. 4:18, "Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

Thanks be to God.

Amen