

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“The Direct Object of Your Hope” (1 Peter 1:18-21)
April 26, 2020
Dave Johnson

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today I am preaching about something we all need, especially right now, something more important than your health, more important than your money, more important than your social standing—something that God gives us in Jesus Christ, something that can help you persevere through the hardest times: hope.

In the Meriam-Webster dictionary the word *hope* is both an intransitive verb that does not have a direct object and a transitive verb that does have a direct object. In the first sense the word *hope* means “to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or to be true”—and in the second sense it means “to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment: to expect with confidence.”

All of us hope in both senses of the word. We all cherish desires with anticipation and want some things to happen or be true. We all have this general intransitive hope that things will get better, that things will work out. We also have the transitive kind of hope in which we indeed desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment and expect with confidence by placing our hope on a direct object, a specific person or thing—I hope I get that job, I hope my child gets into that college, I hope my new significant other will not break my heart, I hope that next medical treatment will actually work, I hope that draft pick will resurrect our team (NFL fans know what I’m talking about). This kind of hope is more than a general desire that things will get better; it is hope placed on someone or something to come through for us—hope with a direct object.

Hope is hardwired into us—as Paul Simon put it in his song “Train in the Distance”—“The thought that life could be better is woven indelibly into our hearts and our brains” (on his 1983 album *Hearts and Bones*). But when our hope is suspended, or dashed altogether, it really hurts, and it takes the wind out of our sails—as scripture tells us, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12).

If you place your hope in your own health, what happens when you get really ill, when you fall and can't get up, when the diagnosis you never thought you would have to face is *your* diagnosis? If you place your hope in your money, what happens when you get furloughed, or your IRA begins to wither, or the housing market drops and you find yourself unexpectedly trapped in an underwater mortgage? If you place your hope in your social standing, what happens when that person lets you down or doesn't follow through or drops the ball—or what happens if you move from a place where everyone knows and cares who you are to a place where people neither know nor care who you are? If we make any of these things the direct object of our hope, and that hope is deferred or dashed it really hurts.

Perhaps that is right where some of you are today—in one way or another your hope has been deferred and your heart is sick, and the wind has been taken out of your sails. But that is where the gospel meets us with real hope in a real God who really loves us and really cares. Several years ago the gifted Alison Sudol wrote a gorgeous song called “Hope for the Hopeless” in which she sings:

Stitch in your knitted brow
And you don't know how you're gonna get it out
Crushed under heavy chest, trying to catch your breath
But it always beats you by a step, all right now
Making the best of it, playing the hand you get
Well, you're not alone in this
There's hope for the hopeless, there's hope for the hopeless
There's hope

She is exactly right—whatever you are going through, however your hope has been deferred or dashed, “you're not alone in this...there's hope for the hopeless.” On the long running television hit *Grey's Anatomy* Ellen Pompeo plays Dr. Meredith Grey, who said this at the end of an episode:

When do you throw in the towel, admit that a lost cause is sometimes just that? There comes a point when it all becomes too much, when we get too tired to fight it anymore. So we give up. That's when the real work begins, to find hope when there absolutely seems to be none at all” (Season 8, Episode 12).

When your hope is deferred and you throw in the towel and reach the point when it all becomes too much and you give up, that's when the real work of the gospel begins. Except with this kind of hope it is not something you find; it's something—or rather Someone—who finds you.

We worship “the God of hope” (Romans 15:13), Jesus Christ who is “our hope” (1 Timothy 1:1). Our hope in God is not a myth or a psychological crutch or mere positive thinking but “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Hebrews 6:19). In today's high octane gospel passage from the First Letter of Peter we see why it is safe to place our hope—not just some of our hope, all our hope—in Jesus Christ:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Peter 1:18-21).

Again, our hope is set on Jesus Christ who loves us so much he died for us to ransom us, to buy us back. Jesus, “a lamb without defect or blemish,” is the One, the only One, “through whom you have come to trust in God.” In other words, there is hope for the hopeless. There is hope for those whose hope has been deferred or dashed, hope for those whose heart is sick. There is hope.

In *The Return of the King*, the third and final volume of J. R. R. Tolkien's masterpiece trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam are deep in the Land of Mordor and nearing Mount Doom on their quest to destroy the One Ring. Although they have come through many apparently hopeless circumstances they both have intense cumulative fatigue at this point, both external and internal fatigue. Their food and water is about gone, there is no one to help them, and even the resilient Sam is losing hope, as Tolkien writes:

Never for long had hope died in his staunch heart, and always until now he had taken some thought for their return. But the bitter truth came home to him at last: at best their provision would take them to their goal; and when the task was done, there they would come to an end, alone, houseless,

foodless in the midst of a terrible desert. There could be no return... ‘So that was the job I felt I had to do when I started,’ thought Sam: ‘to help Mr. Frodo to the last step and then die with him? Well, if that is the job then I must do it.’

But then Tolkien continues:

But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. Sam’s plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue (225).

In that moment when all hope seemed lost Sam’s dying hope was turned into “a new strength.” And that is what Jesus Christ, the God of hope, Jesus Christ your hope, does for you. Even as hope dies in you, or seems to die it is turned to a new strength. In the same way in the exact moment when hope seemed to be dying in Sam “he felt through all his limbs a thrill” when hope seemed to be dying for the whole world at Jesus’ incarnation as we sing every Christmas time the same thing happened—“the thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices” (from “O Holy Night”).

In his incarnation Jesus forsook the very things we often set our hope on, the very things we often make the direct objects of our hope—health, money, social standing. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus again and again gave hope to the hopeless, hope to lepers whose health was gone, hope to blind beggars whose wealth was gone, hope to notorious sinners whose social standing was gone.

And on Good Friday Jesus Christ the God of hope, Jesus Christ *your* hope, bore his cross “crushed under heavy chest, trying to catch (his) breath” all the way to Mount Doom, Calvary, to finish the job he came to do, to die for you, to ransom you, and then to be raised for you so that again as Peter wrote, “your faith and hope are set on God.” Yes, hope deferred makes the heart of the world sick but a desire fulfilled, Jesus “the desire of all nations” (Haggai 2:7) is indeed “a tree of life.” And that tree of life, the cross, remains the definitive sign of your hope.

Your hope in Jesus Christ is real hope in a real God who really loves you and really cares for you, more than you could ever imagine.

My prayer for you today is that Jesus Christ “the God of hope” will meet you exactly where your hope has been deferred or dashed, exactly where your hope is dying or seems to be dying, and turn it into new strength that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles can subdue.

And may Jesus always be the Direct Object of your hope...because you have always been the direct object of his love.

Amen.