

Planting Hope
Jeremiah 32:36-44; I Peter 3:8-22

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Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

“I will restore their fortunes”, promises the Lord. (Jeremiah 32:44)
That promise came in a time of utter devastation and impending exile.

So we hope because of God. God restores.

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you...” (I Peter 3:15)

Many of us struggle with hope.

And yet, we give an account of hope by how we live our lives, moment-by-moment.

- Many have asked what I will do next.
 - The previous sermon focused on Lament, the heartbreaking reasons why this pastorate is at an end. That sermon is posted on the church website. However, that was the last sermon.
 - This sermon, however, and next week’s sermon addresses vocation.
 - Please listen with your soul, for how God is moving you, how you are being called to faithfully live your vocation.
 - And I will share what I know about what’s next for me.

- o No word on paid work yet. Each application for pastoral work has yielded an interview, but no job offer.
- o So the focus today is on how profoundly this congregation has shaped me.
- o Two main stories today:
 - § Gondar Ethiopia
 - § Veterans hospital in DC
- o These healthcare stories touch me so because my extended family's "business", if you will, is medicine and public health.
- o This is what touches me. More importantly: what of the world's great hunger touches you...calls to you...asks your help?

- o When we tell the stories of what most moves us, when we talk about our most personal concern, when name what makes us weep, it is those very places where we are most able to do as Peter says:

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you..."

Why? Because our hope and our pain are fully intertwined.

In January 2016, the MoCo sister city trip to Gondar, Ethiopia for Epiphany

- When we step out in faith, we do not know how we will be changed.
- I visited Ethiopia because of the growing number of African immigrants in our congregation, and the need to spend at

least some time on the continent understanding a little bit about the places from which our church members come.

- Visited two hospitals
 - The University of Gondar Hospital and Medical School are about 60 years old.
 - They do a tremendous job training health care workers to work throughout Ethiopia.
 - And they provide care to thousands upon thousands of people throughout northern Ethiopia.
 - Visiting the children's wing of that hospital, I asked them about the leading causes of death for children (under the age of 5).
 - They replied, "Malnutrition, diarrhea, and pneumonia." That's true for children throughout the underdeveloped world.
 - What struck me is that all 3 of these causes is utterly preventable, utterly treatable, completely curable.
 - In the children's ward, it was moving to see that family members could come and stay with their child.
 - However, I did not see a single latex glove for any doctor or nurse in the ward, meaning that infection diseases could be easily spread.
 - There is another hospital in Gondar.
 - It is the newest and most beautiful building in all of Gondar.
 - It has a manicured lawn. It looks like it could be in Bethesda.
 - It was dedicated about a year before we arrived, but at the time we were there, it had still not opened yet. Politics.

- First rate medical equipment and treatment will be available there.
- It was built largely through PEPFAR funds (U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief).
- It was an initiative begun under the second President Bush, focusing on the treatment of HIV? AIDS. PEPFAR has had excellent successes.

TPPC' Elder and doctor Sam Kalibala from Uganda is a global HIV and AIDS specialist

- Upon returning from Ethiopia, he told me a story.
- He said that when visitors come to Uganda, he makes sure to show them both the general ward and the HIV ward.
- He said the people in the general ward to be seen, those people who are "not fortunate enough to have AIDS."
- Imagine that sentence. It haunts me.
- It means that if you have HIV, you can get first-rate medical care. It is funded.
- But for children who may only need rehydration salts to survive diarrhea, they will die, because of lack of funding.
- Dr. Kalibala has a clinic he has developed back home in Uganda.
 - Dr. Kalibala's clinic reflects our calling
 - "Poverty means death", according to liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez
 - § Many of you know this through your work in the U.S. and abroad.
 - Our calling then is "To be an antidote to despair" – a practical antidote.
 - § *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez (book, pages 21 and 29)*

- **“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you...” (I Peter 3:15)**
 - § We are called to enact hope by what we do.
 - § We are called to be planters of hope.
- There are great health disparities in the U.S. as well. And much trauma.
- That led me to start volunteering locally at the Veterans Administration Hospital Community Acupuncture Clinic
 - o Group setting, around 15 people, receiving trauma-informed care, to treat PTSD. Most of the patients are black or brown.
 - o In my childhood, I was taught to fear people who are black. I am not proud of this. It was confusing to me as a child. My parents did not teach me the hatred with which they had grown up. However, they thought they were keeping me safe by teaching me to fear.
 - o Have to unpractice fear. Or practice overcoming fear. The best way to overcome fear is through friendship....the rough and tumble of sharing stories, sharing lives, breaking bread together, making mistakes, and learning from one another. That’s what TPPC is about.
 - o It is easy enough for a person like me, part of the dominant culture to say I want to choose friendship. That could just be sentimental. And I could easily step back into a more cloistered world with those most similar to me me.
 - o So it’s vitally to choose practical solidarity.

We've spoken of the book "Between the World and Me" by Baltimorean Ta-Nahisi Coates.

- It's in the form of a letter, a lament, from an African-American father to his son.
- He speaks repeatedly of the utter vulnerability of black bodies in the U.S.
 - o So humbling to me to be in a majority black and brown setting, helping to treat black and brown bodies.
 - o To in some small ways serve those who have been taken up by the military-industrial complex, used and often mostly discarded when their bodies & psyches have been broken.
- An African American professor of history shared with me some local, historical roots of working with the wounded. (Dr. Karl Smith of Montgomery County Community College)
 - o Walt Whitman, most known as a poet, volunteered tirelessly to help the wounded & dying, here in DC at soldier's hospitals during the Civil War.
 - o In a letter to his mother, Whitman says the following:

"Upon a few of these hospitals I have been almost daily calling as a missionary, on my own account, for the sustenance and consolation of some of the most needy cases of sick and dying men...One has much to learn to do good in these places...Here,...I like to flourish...I can testify that friendship has literally cured a fever, and the medicine of daily affection, a bad wound..."

This is practical friendship

- Whitman amplifies this in a poem, often considered his most intimate, entitled “The Wound Dresser.” The poem is long and quite graphic. It concludes...

**Thus in silence in dreams’ projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad...**

- What place in the world calls you to practical friendship?
- Dare we envision our lives, our callings, within the world’s great gaping need? Can our imagination be so open-hearted as to fulfill our part in our corner of the world....from our one place reaching toward a full-bodied love that can reach to the great hunger in every place?

What do any of us do next, in this world so deeply beautiful and so terribly imperiled?

- What will I be doing next?
- How in my one singular life will I live in practical solidarity?
- How will I live in testimony to the hope within us, through Jesus the Christ?

I do not know if I will ever serve a congregation again.

I have applied to the Maryland University of Integral Health.

- Arabic has this wonderful word: Insha'Allah
 - Both Muslims and Christians use the word. (James 4:13-15)
 - It means “If God wills”
 - But the feel of the word can mean “if it pleases God.”
 - § If it pleases God, Insha’Allah,
 - In 2017 I will begin a 3 year master’s degree.
 - § If it pleases God, Insha’Allah,
 - I will become an acupuncturist
 - § If it pleases God, Insha’Allah,
 - I will be able to practice a form of public health called community acupuncture.
- Community acupuncture
 - Provides primary health care, treating many people at once in group settings, at low cost.
 - The printed version of this sermon includes citations for further reading.
- The sabbatical TPPC supported 3 years ago on “The Bread of Life” also focused on sustainable agriculture.
 - Part of what I learned is that the health of crops is so completely tied to the health of the soil and environment.
 - The earth is crying for humanity to live not only sustainably on the planet, but also regeneratively.
 - Judaism names this regeneration, this restoration, “Tikkum Olum” - repair of the world.
 - God-the-restorer bids us to participate in restoring the world.
- The most comprehensive models of public health are environmental models.

§ See <http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/womens-and-childrens-health-policy-center/eco-model/eco-model.html>

§ <http://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/people-events.html>

- o Community acupuncture works WITH the great powers of the created order – all that God has made.
- o Community Acupuncture aims to build **“Health EQUITY through action on the social determinants of health.”**
 - § It promotes social and environmental health all at once.
 - § <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-of-health?topicid=39>
- o Community acupuncture is based in liberation theology
 - § <http://www.pocatech.org/about-liberation-acupuncture>
 - § <http://liberationacupuncture.org/node/14>
- TPPC, blessed by you, because of you, I sense God’s calling.
- o Thank you. Thank you.
 - o I hope you can in a way bless me to go as a missionary from you. Why? Your stories shape me.
 - o Stories from you from the underdeveloped world, whether you have worked there, been a Peace Corps Volunteer there, or grow up in an underdeveloped country.
 - o Stories from you about ecological crises & the need for practical solidarity
 - o Stories from you about race and racism.
- As a church, TPPC cannot do everything. What is the unique calling of TPPC?
 - o To which of the world’s joy, which of the world’s wounds, are you personally and uniquely called to pay attention?
 - o How will TPPC fulfill the Biblical admonition to give account of the hope within you?

We speak of planting hope. Why “planting”?

- We tend to think of hope a noun, a thing, as something we possess, or do not.
- Hope is a verb
 - Yes, there is also noun-like quality of hope. We’ll take about this in my final sermon on Sept. 25. If a noun is a person, place or thing, we hope in relationship...in relationship with God.
- But hope is a verb, something we do, an action.
- Hope is something we plant.
 - Like Elder & Dr. Sam Kalibala’s health clinic back home in Uganda.
 - Ancient rabbinical saying – the planting is ours to do, no necessarily the harvesting:

"It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it"
- Again and again and again and again we plant, knowing what we do can be uprooted and destroyed. Nevertheless, we plant.
- Hope is a verb we do, to create hope for others, even when do not feel it ourselves. Such was much of the work of the recently canonized Mother Theresa who served the poor, abandoned and dying of Calcutta. She often felt bereft of God, but for those who were abandoned by the rest of humanity, she planted hope.
- Not necessary to feel hope in order to act hopefully for others.
- God promises Jeremiah restoration. We can live that trust God is working restoration, even if we don’t always feel it.

Finally, theologian Paul Tillich describes the seed-like quality of hope

"...there are many things and events in which we can see a reason for genuine hope, namely, the seed-like presence of that which is hoped for. In the seed of a tree, stem and leaves are already present, and this gives us the right to sow the seed in hope for the fruit. We have no assurance that it will develop. But our hope is genuine. There is a presence, a beginning of what is hoped for. And so it is with the child and our hope for his maturing; we hope, because maturing has already begun, but we don't know how far it will go. We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as vision and driving force. We hope for a lasting love, because we feel the power of this love present. But it is hope, not certainty."

Let us pray:

Jesus, you taught us "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it stays alone: but if it die, it brings forth much fruit." *John 12:24* Grant us the courage to die with you, so that we may be raised with you anew, as planters of hope. In you, we trust and pray, Amen.