(LOVE) LETTERS FOR LENT: HOPE ON A ROPE

February 25, 2024
Text: Romans 4:13-25
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In his book, The Hungering Dark theologian Frederick Buechner details one of the Hebrew words for hope. The word is gawah. The root meaning is It comes from a root meaning to twist, or to twine. He says, *"It is a word that seems to fit our brand of hoping well. The possibility that this good thing will happen and this bad thing will not happen, a hundred little strands of hope that we twist together to make a cable of hope strong enough to pull ourselves along through life with."* [1]

Hope on a rope. **A rope called hope**. We cling to it. We tie our lives together with it. As one old bumper sticker puts it: *"When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on."* In some instances just *"hanging on I guess"* is itself an act of hope.

Buechner continues...*"to hope for more than the possible is to court despair. To hope for more than the possible is to risk becoming the ones who wait, helpless and irrelevant in their white robes for a deliverance that never comes. To hope for more than the possible is a kind of madness.*[2]

To hope for more than the possible is a kind of madness. Loony thinking. Utter foolishness. Those Crazy Christians. That's precisely what we do.. We believe in a God who does the improbable and the impossible. We wait for the promises of God to be filled. We do it in a world where pain is real, suffering abounds and tragedy of all kinds often threatens to overwhelm and consume us.

Our text for this morning is from Paul's letter to the Romans. It's a letter of introduction. Paul didn't found the Church in Rome. While Paul wanted to visit Rome on more than one occasion, he was prevented from doing so. He's more likely writing to converts and contacts Paul made with those who were exiled from Rome during the reign of Claudius. It's a letter of encouragement. He wants to give them hope but also let them know the basis of what they hope in.

He ties it back to the beginning. Paul uses Abraham as a model, saying that Abraham *"hoped against hope"*. He writes of Abraham saying, *"No distrust made him waver concerning the promises of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do*

[1] Frederick Buechner, **The Hungering Dark**, p.121
[2] Buechner, p. 121

what he had promised." That's how the Bible defines hope. **Very simply hope is believing that God will do what God promises**. It's living from the premise that God can be trusted. This is the hope that does not disappoint us no matter what happens to us.

God gave Abraham a promise. *"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you."* Cue to gasps and guffaws. When Abraham heard these words he was already an old man. He and his wife Sarah had no children and no heirs. Without children there could be no descendents. God said, *"I will bless Sarah and give you a son by her, I will bless her and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."*

God made a great and wonderful—and pretty outrageous promise to Abraham. Said he would be the father of many nations. He would be blessed and be a blessing for others. Abraham and Sarah would have a son. Considering their circumstances it was an incredible promise. Abraham was astounded. "*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'*" He laughed. When Sarah heard the promise, she laughed too. Wouldn't you? It's absurd. They can't conceive of it. It's beyond their expectations. No wonder they laughed!

That is kind of the point. By any human standard this birth is impossible. Ninety-year-old women don't give birth to babies. With one foot in the grave, Sarah wasn't planning to put the other in a nursery. So they laughed. They didn't laugh with God at such an amazing, astonishing promise. No, they laughed at God. Ridiculous. Beyond their comprehension. God tells them to name their son, *"Isaac"*. The name means *"laughter";* so that now, each time they call the child, they will remember.

Despite his initial reaction, Abraham believed. He learned to trust. His disbelief turned to faith. He came to understand that it was God who would and could provide. God alone. Later, when God said, *"Give me your son,"* Abraham offered him. Isaac was the sign of the promise. God was the Giver of the promise. Abraham depended on the Giver not on the gift. And so they called him *"righteous"*.

Paul ropes us in. Reminds us we are Abraham's descendents. Part of a continual line. The promise therefore is also ours. The same God who blessed and kept faith with Abraham will bless and keep faith with us. We receive God's promise by faith. In hope we act on it.

"Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." That's the ground and content of our hope. It's also our burning question. **Do we believe God will do what God has said**? Do we believe God's promises will be kept? It's okay if our answer is *"No"*. But then the matter is closed. We have already made up our minds—the conclusion self-determined. Our vision is based not on what God says, but on the limits of our own capabilities, skills and resources. We define the future but declaring: Some things are impossible and that's all there is to it.

If its *"Yes"?,* however, all kinds of new possibilities arise. The future is open. God becomes the definer of reality. In God's world all things are possible. Old barren women give birth. Stones are split. Tombs are opened and the dead are raised. Stones are rolled away and crucifixion becomes resurrection. Death doesn't get the final line.

Madeleine L'Engle puts it this way. *"It might be a good idea if like the White Queen in Alice, we practiced believing six impossible things every morning before breakfast, for we <u>are</u> called on to believe what to many people is impossible."*[3] We're called on to believe the impossible. More than that, we're called to do it. In a goodbye speech to me once, a young adult said that "I made them believe in the impossible." That was one of the highest words of praise I've ever received. I can't help but be reminded of the lyrics from Man of La Mancha.

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go
To right the unrightable wrong
To be better far than you are
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star
This is my quest, to follow that star
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far
To be willing to give when there's no more to give
To be willing to die so that honour and justice may live
And I know if I'll only be true to this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm when I'm laid to my rest
And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star

[3] Madeleine L'Engle, **Walking On Water**, p. 82

What we believe about God is a matter of theology. **Whether or not we believe God is a matter of faith**. It's faith that defines our actions and shapes our lives. *"Are we convinced that God is able to do what God has promised?"* If *"yes"*, then what are we willing to do...to what will we commit ourselves ...what are we willing to risk? What would you dare attempt if you thought God would give you what you need to do it? What limits on life would you lift? What future for the world would you seek? What have you avoided by thinking or saying, *"It's impossible?"*

Rev. Faith Conklin puts it this way: *In a life governed and grounded in hope that which seems inevitable isn't. What seems fixed forever may be changed. In the short run Christians may be pessimists, but not in the long run. In the long run, Christians are always optimists. We're optimists because we're people of hope. Sometimes we hope when there's no seeming evidence for it. We "hope against hope" but we hope nevertheless. Our hope is God-grounded, God-sustained and God-directed. It rests on God's promises and in God's grace. Our confidence remains in spite of the apparent impossibility of the promise being fulfilled.*

All around us there are realities that fly in the face of—that confront, even outright deny-- that hope. None of us are untouched. The temptation to surrender to despair and futility which faith resists and hope counters. Holding hope doesn't automatically change our circumstances. It doesn't cure cancer. Doesn't stop acts of terror and violence. Doesn't prevent the death of those we love. It doesn't fix our relationships, make us successful or even make sure we're happy. What hope can do is change how we view and understand and respond to those things. Author–pastor Donna Schaper speaks to this truth when she writes: "*Hope is less the belief that things are going to turn out well than it is the confidence that no matter how things turn out they still make sense and carry meaning*."[4]

Hope is confidence in God and in God's ability to bring grace and possibility into **every situation**. Hope in hard times is an act of courage. It takes courage to change course when you're headed in the wrong direction. It takes courage pick up the pieces of a fallen apart life. Like Quixote, it takes courage, courage looking like foolishness, to commit to causes that don't seem to be making difference but you know are vital. It takes courage to face death without giving in to despair. It takes courage to care for and about knowing full well you may get hurt in the process.

There's an old story told about some botanists who were looking for a very rare flower. They searched a long time for it. They finally found a very

[4] Donna Schaper, **Hard Times**, p. 9

fine specimen. It was growing on a ledge far down a steep cliff. They went to the man who owned the land and asked if they could pick the flower. He said they could.

They went back to the cliff. It was a long way down to the flower. The farmer had a young son. They went to him and asked him if he would allow them to tie a rope around his waist and lower him over the cliff. The boy thought for a long moment. He said that he would climb down and get their flower. He had one condition. He wanted his father to hold the rope.

Cling then, to that **rope called hope**. It's held in the hands of God. It's woven of God's grace and is as strong as God's promise. God will not let it go.