

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – HOPE

My journey from the United Methodist Church to the Episcopal Church mirrors that of many of you who have come to this place from various denominations. Over two thirds of us in this parish fall into that category, by the way. While I no longer see The Episcopal Church through rose-colored glasses as I once did—with the zeal of a convert!—I still see it through the eyes of love, and know that I have found my way home.

In the early 1990s, after the birth of our firstborn son, Hathy and I went searching for a spiritual home. At the time I was a young United Methodist pastor, serving as the Protestant Campus Minister at Central Connecticut State University. But that work left me free on Sunday mornings. And so we “shopped” around within the city of New Britain and the surrounding suburbs for a long time, as I know many of you have done: Methodist Churches, Episcopal Churches, Congregational Churches, Lutheran Churches. We were pretty open, at least within the contours of mainline Protestantism. And I need to say that it wasn’t particularly easy as a young couple in their late twenties. But eventually we came to call St. Mark’s in New Britain our spiritual home and at some point it became clear to me that I was being called to make a denominational change. The rector of St. Mark’s—a guy named Mac McDowell—put me in touch with Frank Kirkpatrick, a Theology Professor at Trinity College who was, at the time, chairing the Commission on Ministry in that Diocese. I guess I passed that interview because soon after that I was sitting in the office of the Bishop of Connecticut, Arthur Walmsley. The rest is history...

And so it came to pass that eighteen years ago today, at Christ and Holy Trinity Church in Westport, CT, I was ordained to the priesthood, where I vowed to be loyal to “the doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as this Church has received them.”

There are suggested readings for ordinations. There are specific suggestions in the *Book of Common Prayer* in the ordination liturgy. Alternatively, one can use the readings for the Feast Day that the ordination falls on—in this case, The Feast of the Martyrs of Japan. I decided, however, on a third option. I wanted all of Isaiah 40 read—the whole thing, as it had been read at my wedding. It is for me a kind of “life text” that takes me to the very heart of what I understand my calling to be about. You need to know, however, that I didn’t manipulate the lectionary today. As I began to think about this anniversary, I was pretty excited to see that as it happened, this was the Old Testament reading appointed for today, at least starting at verse 21. While we didn’t read those first twenty verses today, I’m sure many of you remember how this famous chapter begins, even if through the musical genius of George Frederick Handel. *Comfort, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...*

From beginning to end, chapter forty of Isaiah is about hope. And, as it has been observed on more than one occasion here over the past fourteen years, I’m a preacher who is rather fixated on hope. When I teach this text at Assumption College to undergraduates I always show them a clip from *The Shawshank Redemption* where Andy Dufresne says to Red: “Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.” Faith, hope and love are all pretty good things according to St.

Paul, and he is probably right that love is the greatest of all of them. But hope is a really good thing, too, and a pretty close second.

I am, by nature, an optimist. If the glass is $\frac{1}{4}$ full, I can squint in just the right way so that I'm pretty sure it's more than half full. I tend to see the good in people, and the possibilities that exist in every challenge. I don't have to try very hard to do that. It's just the lens through which I see the world. It's the way God made me, or maybe it's just the way I've experienced life so far. But the practice of ministry has taught me that my outlook is not shared by everyone. Some people I care for very deeply see $\frac{3}{4}$ full glasses as half empty or even empty. And I imagine that is how God made them, or maybe it's just the way they have experienced life so far.

Such persons have taught me, among other things, not to confuse my own innate optimism with Christian hope; because optimism and hope are not synonyms. And it's important to get clear about that. Whether we are optimists or pessimists by nature, we are all called as Christians to live in hope. That isn't about whether the glass is half-full or half-empty, but about how we choose to live our lives. That is why we need these words from the prophet Isaiah, words that are addressed to optimists and cynics alike—words of hope.

Isaiah 40 is all about hope. I knew that intuitively and I knew it from my Biblical skills eighteen years ago when I picked the reading for my ordination service. But my ordained life and especially my ordained life as your rector over the course of these past fourteen years, has taught me this lesson at a much deeper level.

At the time of the Babylonian exile, God's people had bottomed out. The glass wasn't half-full or half-empty when the temple was destroyed and the temple leaders were carted off to Babylon. It wasn't half-full or half-empty when they could not sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, and so they laid up their harps and wept. *They were on dead "e."* They were dried up. They felt God had abandoned them to the pit. They felt they had no future, that they had come to "the end"—the end of their rope, the end of the line, the end of the story. Case closed.

And then time marched on, as it always does. Some of them probably never got over their despair. As a pastor I know that can happen. Sometimes tragedy strikes and you can pray for someone and pray for someone and you can love them to death but sometimes it is just too much for them, too overwhelming. You can't make someone have hope. People survive, it's built into the evolutionary process, I think. You can survive by learning to go through the motions and you can muddle through. People can learn to cope. *But coping is not the same as hoping.* Hope requires a new vision. Hope comes by way of the imagination, when a voice cries out in the wilderness that God's future is not bound by the past. Hope requires a willingness to learn a new song in a strange land and trust that God really can do a new thing; that God can bring life from death. Hope comes only as a gift, by God's grace. So even though it is in the Old Testament, Isaiah 40 is an Easter text. It takes us to heart of what faith is all about: the promise of new life that comes after death. It's why we make our song, even at the grave: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

Decades ago, my younger brother told all of us in his family that he was an alcoholic. He was still a kid, really, and I'd been away at college and then seminary and then married so I didn't see it all up close. But now he was in rehab and then he started going to AA meetings and we all knew that was a good thing. And it worked for a long time. Then, a few years ago, things started to unravel for him: work, marriage, and his relationships with his siblings, too. It all became too much and he went through a tough time and we all walked through that valley of the shadow of death with him. Eventually, though, he got back to rehab and got sober again for the second time, which I think in some ways was much harder than the first time around. The big difference this time, though, is that he is really working the program, as they say, and has done more than merely stop drinking. He is regaining and rebuilding his life. He is growing, blossoming really—in so many ways, including spiritually. It's an amazing thing to watch unfold. This past Christmas, in fact on the day after Christmas, for the second time in his life he received a one year coin at an open AA meeting in the basement of the Presbyterian Church in Hawley, Pennsylvania. This time he invited his family to be there, and we were.

Now I've read the twelve steps and I've talked about the spirituality of the twelve-steps before in my preaching. But let me just say that it was real in that church basement. It took on flesh. Hope was palpable, and it wasn't about the glass being half-full, or half-empty. It was about people who knew firsthand what it means to hit rock bottom and deplete all of your own resources. And then, only by the grace of God, to get back up again and start to live again one day at a time; to truly let go and let God. My brother is a believer, and a person of tremendous faith and he loves the Church. But he made a comment in that meeting that I wholeheartedly agreed with. He said that very often what happens in those meetings on a Saturday morning is more authentic and more honest and more *Christian* than what happens on a Sunday morning upstairs. And I think that is true and that people who are in recovery have a lot to teach us about hope. And that is what Isaiah is talking about.

Exiles in all times and places, from ancient Babylon to AA meetings to places like this parish church, here and now, need to remember that going home is just a beginning, not the end. Going home for those exiles didn't mean life was easy from that point forward; if anything it became harder, at least at first. It takes a lot to rebuild your life, your home, your temple. It can happen only one day at a time. But the work is made possible because of hope. Hope is a good thing.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? God does not grow weary and God does not faint. The Lord strengthens the powerless. Even teenagers get tired. Even long distance runners hit the wall. But not God. Not the One who created the heavens and the earth; the One who created you. *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?* Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, and mount up with wings like eagles, and they shall run, and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.