

“HOPEFUL PEOPLE”

Matthew 13:1-9, 31-33; John 21:1-7a

November 10, 2024

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

I don't really know why the disciples went back to fishing, after having encountered the risen Jesus, spending time with him, seeing Thomas touch his wounds and witnessing Jesus perform what John rather vaguely referred to as “many signs.” We'd think, wouldn't we, that they'd be beside themselves with joy and amazement, filled with new energy, and making lots of hopeful plans? But there's no hint of any of that.

Maybe after all the upheaval in their lives and the staggering range of emotions they've lived through, they felt a need for something they could understand and manage. Maybe they suspected Jesus wouldn't be staying with them, or perhaps they thought he'd already departed. Maybe in the uncertainty, they retreated into what was familiar. Maybe they sensed hard times ahead, times that would demand courage and sacrifice. Maybe they didn't yet understand what all would be asked of them.

Maybe they just didn't know what else to do. So they went fishing. But after all night in the boat, on the water, they caught nothing at all. John doesn't use the word “disappointment” but we sense it all the same. Whatever they'd hoped for from the night's work – fish, comfort, a return to peaceful normality – they hadn't found it. Then as they're bringing the boat in, Jesus is on the shore to greet them... but they don't recognize him. Why? Have they given up expecting to see him?

At any rate, the stranger they see on the shore asks about their fishing trip, recognizes that they have no fish, and tells them that if they'll just throw their nets into the water on the right side of the boat, they'll find some fish. I imagine there might have been some skepticism; who is this stranger to tell them how to do the work that they know so well? But for some reason – what do they have to lose? – they *do* toss the nets back into the water. And come up with not just “some” fish, but a huge catch, more fish than they can haul in. At which point at least a couple of them realize that the stranger is Jesus.

I wonder how the story would have been different if they'd just packed it in, said “nope, we're tired, the fishing's no good, we're done.” Would they never have known it was Jesus? Would they still have taken up the mission of continuing to build the community that became the church? Would Jesus have had to do more to persuade them? We'll never know. But what we can see is that their response mattered.

It's clear – John gives us to understand - that the miracle of the abundance that moves the story into renewed energy and hope happens because Jesus is present. But the disciples had to put their nets back in the water. They had to have at least that much hope in them, to do that one thing, even if it didn't seem likely to prove successful.

The way God chooses to do things in the world is fully evident here: God provides the resources – plenty, and then some, if we believe the story. What we need is there. Our abilities and

energy are enough for what we're asked to do. But we get to choose whether to participate. Whether to believe that there's enough ... of whatever it is we need. Whether to claim the hope that Jesus calls us to live in.

This story seems to suggest that even this one little ever-so-slightly-hopeful action is what enables the disciples to see that it's really Jesus there with them, that he hasn't abandoned them. We can appreciate how important that reassurance would have been to them.

It can seem like, feel like, there is not enough: not enough time. Not enough money. Not enough energy. Not enough people. Not enough hope. Not enough for our needs. Not enough for the church's ministry.

I imagine that the early church (for whom John told this story) felt that way more than once. They might have had trouble discerning Jesus' presence with them. They probably wondered if they could sustain the work. As has been true for believers in many times and place. As is sometimes true of us.

But still, we are asked to put our nets out there one more time, with just enough trust that God will provide what's needed. The promise of the story is that there will be enough – more than enough. That our participation – however small – matters. And that we'll discover Jesus is there.

A lot of us this week are feeling the heaviness of this uncertain time. After this week's election, we are left wondering what the future will hold. We are disheartened and disillusioned by the widespread acceptance of hateful rhetoric and intentions, open displays of racism and sexism, and egregious falsehoods. We are dismayed to witness the gospel compromised as Christians defend such things. We're hurting and troubled by the ways our relationships have been affected, and not sure how much repair and healing will be possible.

We've heard from many of you who are fearful for daughters, gay and trans loved ones, immigrant friends, people who depend on Medicaid and the protections of the ACA, women who feel punched in the gut by the most breathtakingly misogynist things we've ever heard spoken publicly in our lifetimes.

Our hope is being challenged. We don't know what's ahead. We don't know what will be asked of us, or if we can rise to respond to the call. What does the church do in such an environment? I know there are plenty of people out there who think the church should pack it in: because in places its witness has been hopelessly compromised by hypocrisy, scandal, exclusion, or love of power and wealth, or because in other places – like ours, maybe - its efforts and resources are too small and have no hope of accomplishing anything.

The texts we read from the gospels today are Jesus' assurance that what we do matters. That what we have to offer is useful. That even the tiny seeds we plant can yield results we didn't expect. That bringing loving presence and integrity can be transforming.

They tell us we can trust God to provide the resources – tangible and intangible – that are needed and that we can expect Jesus to be there with us in the work. And that bit of hope, that’s real hope.

Because it’s our theme this year, I’ve been reading a lot about hope. One of the interesting things I’ve discovered is that some of the most profound words written about hope come from people who experienced great suffering and struggle in their lives. One of those people is Vaclav Havel. He was a poet and playwright in Czechoslovakia during the era of Soviet domination. He became a dissident and activist, and was imprisoned multiple times, once for four years. After the “velvet revolution” he served as president of Czechoslovakia and later of the Czech Republic. And throughout his life, he continued to write. This is some of what he has to say on the subject of hope:

“... it is a dimension of the soul; it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

That’s really what Christian faithfulness is, I think: we work for something because it is good. What we have to offer as a community of faith is more important than ever in this time: a gospel of grace. a vision of Christianity without control, judgement and fear. a loving Jesus. an inclusive welcome. a place to grow in faith. support for one another. faithful prayer. attentiveness to the Spirit. sacraments. a sanctuary in an angry and abusive world. care for our neighbors. reverence for creation. our voices in defense of the fearful. commitment to justice. a thirst for learning. engagement with scripture and theological reflection. music, art, poetry. many, diverse, and equally-valued gifts. generous hearts and willing hands.

Is it enough for “success,” whatever that may mean? I can’t say for sure. But it’s enough for hope.

All this may seem like an odd juxtaposition for Stewardship Sunday, but it isn’t, really. We give of ourselves and our resources because we believe in Christian community, and in the work Jesus has called us to. We give because we are willing to work for what us good, just because it’s good. We give because we know God has provided us with all we need, and trusted us to use those resources for good. We give of ourselves and our resources because we believe that who we are, what we have to offer, what we do and how we do it MATTERS. We give because we trust God’s promises. We give because we are people of hope.

Resources:

Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*