

BEFORE WE CAN HOPE

Psalm 77:1-12; Psalm 10

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Last week, Jerry reminded us that hope is real and central to the Christian life of faith in the real world. He also mentioned that hope can be hard. And that's what I'm going to talk about today.

Somebody has said that it feels as if we are all living with "crippling anxiety, unbearable anger, and unbelievable grief," as losses of various kinds as well as the realities of climate collapse and social dysfunction make themselves felt in our lives. Hope is hard to claim.

We wonder ... "Will this ever get better?"
"How can this ever be fixed?"
"Does anything we do matter?"
"Is hope just unrealistic?"
"What kind of world will our children (or grandchildren) inherit?"

Some people wonder if they should even bring children into the world.

Is hope harder than usual these days? I don't know about that. Certainly it's not too difficult to identify moments in history where wars and other catastrophes left whole civilizations with little hope for the future. It's also worth remembering that people less privileged than we are have faced similar difficult questions and seemingly hopeless situations for a very long time, and somehow kept on. It might not be a bad thing to try and keep a little perspective.

Still, hope is hard, and that's not new. In the two Psalms of lament we heard this morning, we hear the voices of ancient people of faith as they struggle with feelings of hopelessness. Psalm 10 speaks in the context of a time of trouble, and asks "Where is God?" The wicked persecute the poor and the greedy dismiss the idea that God might call them to account for the harm they cause. Cursing, deceit, oppression, mischief, and iniquity are commonplace. We don't get a lot of specific details, but we don't need them. The general outline is plenty familiar to us. And we've asked that same question, "Where is God when these bad things are happening?"

Eventually, the writer says (to God) "But you *do* see" all this trouble and grief, and claims the hope that God will hear the cries of the fearful and act to bring them justice.

Psalm 77 shows us a struggle for hope that's a bit more personal: the speaker refers to things that keep him up at night. "My soul refuses to be comforted," he says. "I am so troubled that I cannot speak." He asks himself: has God's love ceased? Has God forgotten me? Is God angry?

Is it me?? What have I done? Again, we don't know the whole story. But we do know about sleepless nights, the fears or grief we can't even express, the feelings of inadequacy.

Here, too, the psalmist makes an effort to grab onto hope. He says, "I will remember what God has done; I will meditate on God's works." In other words, I will hold on to what I know of God's power and faithfulness, even when I'm not seeing or feeling it in the moment.

There are so many things in the world that can make it hard to hold hope. This week, even as thousands of people braced for a category 4 hurricane, we were also reminded that some would-be political leaders want to abolish or cut back the agency that provides warnings of such storms *and* the agency that assists with cleanup and relief. This is only one of many examples of climate-related crises in which refusal to engage poses danger that's not theoretical or distant. Storms, fires, floods, loss of habitat and species decline, water shortages, pollution – we see the effects, we see how lives are being upended, yet the resistance to taking action to about any of it makes us wonder how much worse it will get.

Wars go on and on, and the threat of widening conflict is real; the proliferation of firearms and anger in our society makes us fearful; the rich get richer while children go hungry ...more problems we don't seem able or willing to address. An international refugee crisis which many want to "solve" by turning away and heaping hate on people who have already lost more than we can imagine. We aren't sure about the future of democracy, human rights, the social safety net, our public discourse, our economy... and so much else.

We know that we need to do better, but a lot of the time there doesn't seem to be much evidence that we will.

Of course, we also struggle with closer-to-home obstacles to hope. Our health isn't what it once was. Opportunities we've dreamed of are no longer within our reach. Maybe it's constant financial stress. Maybe broken family relationships that show no sign of mending. Maybe in the grief that comes with the death of a loved one, the future seems empty and happiness impossible. We may have begun to see that things in our lives we want to wish away are realities we simply have to live with. We want to make a difference in the world, but it doesn't feel like what we do matters much. We have all kinds of worries about our children's and grandchildren's futures. We are troubled to see some of the changes that have taken place in our culture, in our community, even in the church; we fear that some things we value may be gone forever.

We know we need to find hope in the midst of these sorts of circumstances, but it's hard to know where to start.

Sometimes we go to responses that are not really hope, and I think it's important for us to make some distinctions here. Denial is not hope. Wishful thinking and unfounded optimism and determined-to-be-cheerful "looking on the bright side" are not hope. The distractions of busyness, entertainment, consumerism, technology, and the like are not hope. The false

promises of self-improvement and trying harder aren't hope. Distancing ourselves – as in, “well that's a bad thing but it doesn't affect *me*” – isn't hope, either.

Hope is something deeper, more lasting, more honest, more spiritual, more communal, more powerful, more sustaining, more transformative, more empowering, more visionary, more courageous, more open. In some ways, hope is a gift. In some ways, hope is a choice.

But. Before we can hope, we have to truly and honestly grieve the losses that draw us toward hopelessness.

Whether it's the life we used to have or thought we'd have, a sense of safety we used to feel, the absence of loved ones, trust that's been broken, beautiful places spoiled, simple pleasures our grandchildren might never know, the civil discourse gone from our public life, the prospects for peace in the world, things we believed in that no longer seem to hold, confidence in the future Whatever it is, it's important to name our losses, our fears, our anger.

Naming what we feel grounds us in honesty. The Psalms teach us that faith doesn't demand sunny optimism; on the contrary: God desires truth. Like the people who speak to us from the Psalms, we can find courage to acknowledge our struggles and nevertheless move forward, carrying those feelings of grief, anxiety, or rage.

Don't dismiss it. Don't tell yourself that it's not important or that you shouldn't feel it. Don't pretend, deny, or distract. Allow yourself to be aware. Listen to your heart and your body. Don't rush past it. Stay with it a bit. Consider what it has to tell you.

Here's why: naming our losses, our anger, and our fears helps us to remember and to clarify

- what we love
- what matters most to us
- what we still long for.

It helps us name our hopes, focus our prayers, and direct our energies.
It helps us remember who we are.

It helps us to find gratitude for what still remains of those things and relationships and dreams we love... and, in being recalled to what we love, it points us to signs – and seeds - of hope.

A wise person suggested this question: “How would I live if my life were an answer to the earth's prayers?” I can imagine many variations on that question, and they all amount to this: “what am I called to be and do and love?” A lot of the time, it's those things that keep us up at night, the stuff we regret and the losses we grieve, the things that hurt our hearts or make us fearful about the future or fill us with anger that lead us to a calling. And that is a place where a seed of hope can begin to take root.

I want to leave us with this blessing.

It's from Lydia Wylie-Kellerman's recent and lovely book *This Sweet Earth*:

Dear friends,
Let courage find you.
May words come
and tears fall.
May space open wide
for rage and grief.
Welcome the questions.
Bless the unknowns
Hold on to one another
and keep watch for what
is yet to come.

As the questions pour out,
may the silence and uncertainty
lead to collective truth-telling
that opens space
to embrace the fertile sacred
ground of what can be come
when the answer
is "I don't know."
Trust the mystery. (p. 58)

Amen.

Resources:

Lydia Wylie-Kellerman, *This Sweet Earth: walking with our children in the age of climate collapse*, 2024

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: the Psalms speak for us today*, 1983