

“Walking in Hope”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

April 3, 2022 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Scripture Texts: 1 Kings 19:9-15

⁹ At that place [Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

¹¹ He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

Luke 21:5-8

⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

⁷ They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸ And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the past few weeks we've been making our way through the season of Lent. It is a journey we must take, but the path before us is one that is made with our every step. The good news is we walk this road with Jesus, who leads us in our steps. The not-so-good news is that it isn't an easy road, and the destination isn't one at which we enjoy arriving. The destination is the cross. The journey is filled with obstacles and pot holes, and it would be so easy to turn back, to avoid the trouble and go back to our comfortable lives. But that's not who we are. We are Jesus' followers which means we must make the journey. We can't avoid it. We must face the discomfort, the trials and the loss. However, we face this with courage because we know the terrible darkness through which we must travel will be pierced by the light that cannot be extinguished. The dreadful silence will be interrupted by shouts of praise that cannot be outdone. The finality of death and destruction will not be final at all, but will be overcome with indestructible life. That is the hope with which we make the journey. But first, we must endure the journey.

This week we continue to reflect on devotions written by the Rev. Teri McDowell Ott, Editor of the PCUSA magazine, *Presbyterian Outlook*. The series leads us along the road we must make as we walk. As a reminder, here is the poem on which Rev. McDowell Ott's thoughts are based...

Walker - Antonio Machado¹

Walker, your footsteps
are the road, and nothing more.
Walker, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
Walking you make the road,
and turning to look behind
you see the path you never
again will step upon.
Walker, there is no road,
only foam trails on the sea.

For this fourth Sunday in Lent, our devotion reminds us we are walking in hope. Here is what is written for today:

“During the bleakest, most isolated times of the pandemic, I turned to dystopian novels for comfort. [Mirriam-Webster defines dystopian as an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives.] It feels absurd that these harrowing, sometimes horrific, stories made me feel better, but they gave me fresh perspective. ‘Well, it’s

¹ Antonio Machado, trans. Willis Barnstone from *Antonio Machado, Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*, Copper Canyon Press, 2004

not this bad ... yet,' I would think. And I began to recognize not just all we had lost, but all that remained.

“The characters of dystopian novels are always traveling, in search of food, a warmer climate, a safer shelter, other civilized humans to join for group survival. In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, a father and son journey on foot after some undisclosed cataclysm. Ash fills the air of this ruined world and the only survivors have turned savage. Pushing their meager supplies in a shopping cart, a motorcycle mirror fixed to the handle to keep watch for marauders from behind, they travel to survive in a cold, colorless world.

“The only beauty along McCarthy’s road is the devotion of this father for his son. Their tender intimacy stands in stark contrast to the evil surrounding them and the savagery to which others have turned. Along their journey, the father reminds his son of their purpose, the calling to which they must cling. ‘My job is to take care of you,’ he says. ‘I was appointed by God to do that ... we are the good guys.’

“Chapter 21 of Luke’s Gospel introduces Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse, foretelling the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the second coming of the Son of Man. Jesus warns his disciples not to be led astray during the frightening times that lie ahead, not to be deceived by false prophets or led to believe good people can do nothing or no hope is to be found. No matter how rough the road gets, we are to hold on to what is good and turn to God’s promise of deliverance. The road we walk through Lent may feel dystopian. But we walk with hope.”²

We walk with hope.

The picture McDowell Ott paints for us in her devotional reading is not a pretty one. Perhaps it does help to serve as a reminder of what we have rather than what we have not. But there are elements of her thoughts that stir images of our actual world in our minds. Air filled with the ashes of destruction. People fleeing a situation of danger, looking over their shoulders to make sure they aren’t being stalked by those wanting to hurt them. A father whose primary role in life is to protect his son. A life turned upside down by the upheaval of forces beyond the control of the victims. And the only beauty is the compassion seen between human beings, the only thing keeping them going.

Sound familiar? Is this not the case for victims of war? Families fleeing their homes to save their lives? Parents protecting their children from those who would hurt them? This isn’t a novel I am describing. This is the sad reality of too many people in our world. Images of war ravaged nations fit into this setting. Victims of abusive parents, spouses, coaches, and other people in positions of authority dream of escape. Shelters receive those that arrive with only the clothes they are wearing. Homeless people fear going to sleep at night. I could go on, sadly.

The prophet Elijah found himself in this situation. *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.* Sounds pretty awful. Elijah was running for his life. He was afraid. He was tired. He was alone.

² “Making the Road” A Lenten series of devotions written by the Rev. Teri-McDowell Ott, Editor of Presbyterian Outlook magazine, Presbyterian Church USA, 2022. This reading is the devotion for April 3, 2022.

At this point in the story he is experiencing a level of despair that has led him to want to die. And yet, he wasn't actually on his own. God spoke to him. God stayed with him. And then God told him to go anoint a new king. Excuse me? This journey had been hard enough. Now, instead of fleeing, Elijah had a task to fulfill. He would continue on the difficult journey toward a destination and purpose. He would anoint kings. He would meet his successor. He would arrive at his destination and fulfill his purpose. He had to make the journey, a difficult journey, and he would do so with courage. With faith. And with hope – hope of God's reign overcoming that which threatened him.

Following the Lord is deeply rewarding, but that doesn't make it easy. Jesus' life wasn't easy, so I suppose we should not expect the lives of his followers to be any more so. Except we don't have to go to the cross, not physically. Following Jesus means being in the presence of the Son of God, the presence of the Spirit of Christ. It means following One that always points toward hope, toward peace. But to reach these things, we have to travel the road with him, experience the bumps and pot holes, and endure the unpleasantness of his last days. We must make our way to Jerusalem just as Jesus made his way there. Even when he experienced time to rest and be renewed along the way, there was trouble looming, even in the home of some of the people he loved most, to whom he was closest, where he stopped to rest.

Rebecca Simpson is the Director of Denominational Formation for Presbyterian students at St. Andrew's Hall and Vancouver School of Theology. Her contribution to the school's series of Lenten devotions reflects on the story of Jesus stopping at the home of his friends: Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 12:1-8). As they relax, Mary pours expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair, much to the disgust of Judas, who stole from the common purse for his own gain. Simpson writes: "Picture this bustling house. Martha was making dinner, Lazarus reclining at table, Mary anointing Jesus' feet. The fragrance of blessing filling the house.

"Life with Jesus looks like this. At times it is utterly ordinary, like Martha making dinner, again. Other times, life with Jesus is extraordinary, like Lazarus risen from the dead, breathing and present with his family at the table, again.

"And the fragrance of blessing filling the house.

"Life with Jesus looks like Martha serving, Lazarus breathing, Mary worshipping.

"But also, Judas is there, thieving and scheming. Judas' presence on this poignant evening, when it seems that all could one day be right with the world, reminds us of the ugly fact of injustice and betrayal still.

"Judas' stealing from the poor and selling Jesus out to his enemies foreshadows the coming pain and death Christ will suffer very soon.

"Life with Jesus is like this. Life with Jesus doesn't deny death, it doesn't turn a blind eye to betrayal or ignore injustice.

"Life with Jesus stares injustice and betrayal in the face and invites them to dinner.

"Life with Jesus looks like serving, breathing, anointing, and abundance of blessing despite what's not good, because in the end, the goodness of Christ has already won out over death. His powerful presence permeates all of life.

“‘And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.’ Let’s not waste the perfume of blessing on what seems dead and dying. Let’s spend it now, on what Christ is bringing to new life in and all around us.”

Friends, this is our destination. We travel toward the pain of the cross, but also the glory of the resurrection. We make the journey toward betrayal and fear, but also unspeakable joy. Our journey doesn’t end with the physical destination. Actually, it carries on throughout our lives and the life of the world. We pray for that day when all will be right with the world. And in the meantime, we do our best to keep the journey going. We do our best to be a part of Christ’s reign, far greater and more powerful than any earthly power. We walk with courage. We walk with hope. We walk with faith in the One who will lead us to his glory.

I’d like to share a video with you that speaks to this glory. It is a song by The Newsboys, and it is simply called, “He Reigns.”

[Close with video]

That is why we walk with hope. One day all people will declare this praise because Jesus made the journey to his ultimate destination, and we make the journey to meet him there. Amen.