Hope Is a Verb
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Sunday, July 3, 2022
Habakkuk 3:17-19; Romans 5:1-5

Sometimes I think our world is falling apart. On the 246th anniversary of its birth, our country suffers enormous division. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, freedom and bravery are in short supply, and many fear our democracy will not survive.

Gun violence, racial and economic injustice, hatred and discrimination of all kinds, the horrendous war in Ukraine, environmental crises, fires and floods and famine, intractable political division, inflation – and the pandemic that has taken over 1 million lives in our country alone. Anger cascades across our country in a torrent and tears us apart. These are troubled times. We might well join Habakkuk in bringing our complaint before God:

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction
and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.” (vs. 1-4)

Sadly, Habakkuk’s complaint sounds way too familiar.

Twenty-five hundred years ago the Babylonians were attacking Judah and taking many people into exile. Habakkuk addresses the question of unjust suffering and evil. His world is falling apart. Justice and peace are nowhere to be found… And it seems God is nowhere to be found either.

So where do we find hope in these trying times, whether we despair over global chaos or we’re despairing over challenges in our own lives? Where can we find God in these trying times?

Rev. Mitri Raheb, president of Dar al Kalima University in Bethlehem, spoke here at Westminster a few weeks ago. He shares the reality of oppression of the Palestinian people. Mitri says he is not optimistic about the political and social situation there, but he is hopeful. Optimism sees a solution on the horizon; hope finds purpose and meaning in the meantime.
Mitri has focused on helping university students find meaning through artistic expression in their lives.

Finding purpose and meaning may be a key for us as well. Sometimes to find hope we simply have to look for it. Very close at hand, we can find hope in our Westminster team which installs clean water systems in Cuba. We find hope in our high school students who spoke on Youth Sunday about positive change in their lives, and young Meisel Scholars who are giving of themselves to make a difference in the world. Hope traveled with our junior high students to Fargo and Fergus Falls this past week where they cleaned up a river, worked in a garden, and helped the mission of a food pantry.

Hope is in a group of Minneapolis neighbors who raised money to purchase the home of an elderly neighbor who was about to be evicted. Hope is in the compassion of friends who provide rides for a neighbor so she can be with her husband in the hospital.

Where hope is, God is. God is in the people of Poland who have welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their homes. God is in the work of Jose’ Andres founder of the World Central Kitchen,
which provides meals in the wake of natural disasters as well as for Ukrainian refugees.

Where God is, there is hope. Suffering is not a new thing. Habakkuk knew it in the 7th Century BCE. The Apostle Paul knew it in the 1st Century when most of the known world was under the thumb of the powerful and brutal Roman Empire. Jesus addressed the suffering of an occupied people whose lives were often out of their control. But Habakkuk and Paul and Jesus all sound the bell of hope-in-God who never gives up on us and, however it may seem to the contrary, never, ever leaves us alone.

“Where can I go from your spirit?” writes the Psalmist. “Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day...”

Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister, writes: “Faith...that early notion that life is bigger than we are, that there is something out there that is
eternally just, eternally loving, is the antidote to darkness and a strong step in the exercise of hope.” During a dark time in my own life many years ago, the verse from Psalm 46 kept coming to me: “Be still and know that I am God.” And God often added – and you, my dear, are not. That promise assured me that light would come again. And it did.

When the world – and our lives – are falling apart and all seems dark, God holds us fast, and God calls us not only to have hope, but to be hope. God wants us to be partners in the work for a new kind of world where people count, where compassion and mercy and respect are the norm. This is not wishful thinking – it is an invitation to participate in the redemptive work of God in the world here and now, one act of kindness at a time.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, “We have a role to play in God’s transfiguration of the world. Our suffering can ennoble us and not embitter us.” God can use our struggles as impetus for change.

During her time in Tanzania, naturalist Jane Goodall met with some students who wanted to make a difference. This meeting was the beginning of Roots & Shoots, a program that has
become a global movement with hundreds of thousands of children and young people active in over 68 countries. The main message of Roots & Shoots is that every single individual matters, has a role to play, and makes an impact on the planet – every single day. “And,” she says, “we have a choice as to what sort impact we will make.”

Each Roots & Shoots group of kids chooses 3 projects to help make the world a better place – for people, for animals, and for the environment, starting in their local community. One group – like our junior high students last week - cleaned up a beach without being paid in spite of ridicule from other kids. Eventually, others joined them, and they sparked a movement of volunteerism in their community.

Hope is a verb!

Jane speaks of hope in the indominalible human spirit. You may know her story of two men in a rural Chinese village – one blind and one without arms. “They often talked about how the land around their village had become increasingly degraded since their youth. Industries had polluted the river… and the air. These two friends decided that they would help by planting trees. They had no money for seeds or saplings, so they cloned branches cut from existing trees. The blind man did the cutting while the man
with no arms directed him to the right place. The first year they planted 800 cuttings, but only 2 survived in the hardened earth. But they didn’t give up. Somehow, they found a way to get water to the trees, and the next year most survived. With help from their neighbors they’ve now planted over 10,000 trees and brought renewal to their community.

In a church in Rome there is a statue of the Christ with no arms.

Beloved, We are Christ’s arms –and feet, and eyes and ears and mouths – called to bring God’s amazing, transformative love to a hurting world. Making a difference often invites us to work together – each of us using the gifts God has given us.

Hope is a verb.

The injustice and cruelty in our world often causes us to point fingers and cast blame. But the hard truth is that God’s love that grounds us also encompasses those we might consider enemies. This love does not excuse evil, nor does it turn a blind eye to injustice, but it is a love that calls for transformation, beginning in our own hearts and lives. St. Augustine said that God loves each one of us as if there were but one to love, and God
calls us to do the same. It’s asking a lot, isn’t it? My love is far from perfect. Perhaps yours is too. But Jesus said, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This Christian life is not easy, but it can change the world.

Jane Goodall’s work for animals and the environment is grounded in the long view. Change does not happen overnight. Who of us ever thought that apartheid in South Africa would end, or that the Berlin wall would crumble? It took 30 years for Congress to pass a gun law that at least begins to address the abuse of deadly weapons. Some change we hope for may not happen in our lifetime, especially for those of us who grew up with a manual typewriter and a rotary phone. But hope calls us to keep working in whatever way we can to make the world a better place. Every kindness, every can recycled, every act of forgiveness, every word of encouragement – makes a difference and joins us in the partnership of God’s redeeming love.

Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang writes, “Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence”.

The late Congressman John Lewis worked his whole life for racial equality. He said, “Do not get
lost in a sea of despair. Do not become bitter or hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Never ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way.”

We can find encouragement for this active hope in God’s Word:

Paul knew, and life teaches us, too, “that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit…”

In Romans 8, Paul writes: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us… We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience….
Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus said, “you are the light of the world.” When we are grounded in the unconditional love of God we can bring light into the darkness and hope into a world that is falling apart, giving thanks to God each day and in all circumstances, living into the Divine Yet –

“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, YET I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.