

1 Sermon, October 20, 2013

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Colossians 1:1-10

Title: "Hopeful"

Intro: Use the Colossians reading as an outline for being hopeful.

Faith, hope and love abide, says Paul in 1 Corinthians. These are the center of what it means to be Christian: Faith, Hope and Love.

Today I want to talk about hope. I've said to many that we as the church are in the hope business. We are not in the certainty business, because no one can predict the future. Despite the efforts of many to look in a crystal ball, or quote Nostradamus, or figure out Revelation, there is much that is uncertain.

So we need hope. Hope looks to something better in the future.

Today I'm going to take us through the reading from Colossians, piece by piece, because it is all about hope.

1. A message to be read out loud to the Christ-followers

Think of the passage from Colossians as a message to be read out loud to a group of people gathered in a house church, knowing that many considered their worship foolish, troublesome or even illegal.

If anyone needed hope, it was these early Christians in the years before Constantine made Christianity acceptable. Hear the opening verses of the letter:

1 From Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from Timothy, who is also a follower — To God's people who live in Colossae and are faithful followers of Christ. Pray that God our Father will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

You can read between the lines and hear "Paul" telling the Christians at Colossae to "hang in there."

When he starts out with: "Pray that God will bless you with peace," it is as much as saying that things are not peaceful.

When he praises them for being faithful followers of Christ, it is as much as saying that it's an effort to be faithful.

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2. We are thankful for your faith. That's the basis of hope.

"Paul" goes on:

3 Each time we pray for you, we thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 We have heard of your faith in Christ and of your love for all of God's people, 5 because what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven. You first heard about this hope when you believed the true message, which is the good news.

"Paul" is thankful for the faith of the Colossian Christians, and he speaks of their hope for a life in heaven. Against all odds, these Christians have claimed the good news as their own, and are living it through their love for others.

Then Paul gives some practical reason for hope:

3. Good Things are happening all over because of Christ.

6 The good news is spreading all over the world with great success. It has spread in that same way among you, ever since the first day you learned the truth about God's wonderful kindness 7 from our good friend Epaphras.

Hope is something that we have not just because of wishful thinking. Hope is much more solid than optimism. Hope is based on past experience as well as belief in reasons for good things to come.

So Paul's hope is based on many things: the willingness of the Colossian Christians to believe and live lives of love, the way the good news was spreading, the faithful example of a man named Epaphrus.

I was thinking about hope and its practicality when I thought about the tornados in Oklahoma earlier this year. They were the most powerful tornados in the US for several years, and many people lost loved ones or were left homeless.

Still, survivors of the tornado spoke of hope:

"It's amazing what we go through and what God can bring us through," said Moore resident Daniel Iverson in the midst of getting oxygen for his mother. (National Public Radio)

Vickie Myers, another resident of Moore, Oklahoma said:

"My family and God is what's helping us through this,"

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Her husband Brent, a disabled military veteran, had been pulled unconscious from the rubble of their home. (Reuters)

These people spoke of hope, because God had seen them through. Their hope was based on their past experience.

Hope looks beyond whatever the current situation is, good or bad, and trusts in the future – because of what has happened in the past. Christians hope because God has seen us through.

4. Give thanks for Epaphrus. Hope because the good news is in a person.

In Colossians, Paul mentions a particular individual named Epaphrus, saying:

He works together with us for Christ and is a faithful worker for you.[a] 8 He is also the one who told us about the love that God's Spirit has given you.

Often our hope is based on people. People who encourage us, who challenge us to be better, who trust us and love us.

Hope is increased by people telling us "You can do this." People telling us "It will be OK." People reminding us that God is good.

Epaphrus must have been that kind of person, a seed planter, an encourager, someone who made things seem possible. I'm sure your hope is based in part on people in this church who make you feel good about the world, and able to trust in God's goodness.

I think about Jessie Zuehlke, who was a constant inspiration to me and to many. She had a way of talking positively about people, a way of laughing at herself, a way of humility that made you want to be like her. She communicated her faith in a simple way, and made faith seem easier.

When you visited Jessie Zuehlke, you had more hope, because you saw what was possible, even when you hurt all the time and have limited mobility. Her joy gave you hope.

As Christians, we believe that hope came in a person. The Good News came in Jesus, who lived and showed us the way, even through death and resurrection. Hope comes in a person, and it comes through people.

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5. We hope because we trust God, and that praying makes a difference.

Paul goes on, listing another reason for hope, and that is prayer. Here's what he said:

9 We have not stopped praying for you since the first day we heard about you. In fact, we always pray that God will show you everything he wants you to do and that you may have all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives.

We are hopeful because we know that others are praying for us. We know that prayer makes a difference.

One of the remarkable stories to come out of the Tornado in Moore, Oklahoma last May was the story of Cindy Sasnett, who does child care. When a storm was predicted, all but two children had been picked up by parents. But she still had those two children left in her care when the television said that the tornado was on the way. She ran to several places in her home with the children in her arms, and prayed, "God, it's here. What do I do, Lord?"

She raced into their bedroom, where she kept her mother's ashes. As she stood in the doorway, a little voice said, "No. Go." She ran to a closet, then to a hallway, and confronted the same whisperings.

Suddenly, she heard the television announcer say that the tornado was heading for her area, and that no one without a shelter could survive.

She grabbed the children and said, "Come on, babies. We're going."

Dirt and bits of leaf pelted the 50-year-old grandmother as she strapped the boys into their car seats. The boys looked out the window and pointed – "Tornado!"

She slammed the SUV into gear and raced up the street directed on the cell phone by her husband. Cindy circled until the radio announcer said it was safe for Moore residents to return. When she got back to the house, every room in which she'd considered taking shelter was demolished. (From the Christian Science Monitor – May 2013)

Cindy Sasnett's prayers were answered in a remarkable way, telling her to do what common sense said not to, and bringing her through.

Prayer gives us hope.

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6. We trust the future because God is Good.

Today's reading ends in this way:

We always pray that God will show you everything he wants you to do and that you may have all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives. Then you will live a life that honors the Lord, and you will always please him by doing good deeds. You will come to know God even better

Ultimately, we have hope because God is good. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and understanding. And when we live a life of faith, hope and love, it is a better life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Colossians 1:1-10

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters[a] in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Paul Thanks God for the Colossians

3 In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant.[b] He is a faithful minister of Christ on your[c] behalf, 8 and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

9 For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's[d] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.