

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
A HOPEFUL LIFE
MARCH 3, 2013**

Have you ever felt totally hopeless?

I'm a hunter, and the hunters among us will understand this.

There is a nightmare I've had more than once.

I'm going out to hunt deer.

A really big buck walks out at fairly close range.

And only then do I realize I've not loaded my rifle.

So I dig the shells out of my pocket,

only to discover they're not the right caliber for my rifle.

The deer sticks around for a while.

But I am totally frustrated,

because there is no hope of getting that deer.

Now somebody's going to psycho-analyze me.

For most of us, our experiences of hopelessness, at one time or another, go a lot deeper than a bad dream.

When he first lost his job due to cutbacks,

he was confident he'd find something else.

He worked up his resume, his list of references, and a list of potential employers.

But there were surprisingly few places hiring.

He hand delivered resumes where he could,

submitted online where he had to,

made follow-up contacts on all of his submissions...

and waited. And waited. And waited.

More follow-up calls.

More waiting.

Days turned into weeks, which turned into months.

Oh, there were a couple of interviews.

But every position had dozens of applicants.

And nothing came through.

His savings were disappearing.

And hope began to fade.

When the doctor delivers bad news and your chances are not good,

when the marriage crumbles and he or she is not willing to do counseling,

when your 17 year old,

who has been a long-term challenge,

leaves home because they don't want to live by the rules,

and things just keep going down and down and down,

hope begins to fade.

But hope is essential to a good life.

Hope is the only reason anyone works to improve anything.

They have hope that things can be better, and so they work toward it.

Hope drives the medical researcher to try another path.

Hope pushes the entrepreneur to start a business.

Hope is why a man and a woman get married.

Hope is why a woman continues her pregnancy.

Hope is why you get on the airplane.

Hope is why anyone tries to bring change in society.
 Hope gives you a reason to get up in the morning.
 Without any hope at all,
 the only logical options are to drag through the day for no reason whatsoever
 or suicide.
 Sadly, too many people live and die without hope.
 Dragging through day after day,
 doing today what they did yesterday,
 doing tomorrow what they did today,
 not finding any joy or meaning in it,
 but without any hope for something different or better.
 They just do it over and over because that's all they know.
 Some choose to not endure the painful drudgery over and over,
 but instead take their own lives.
 Suicide is the ultimate expression of hopelessness.
 It is hopelessness taken to the level of clinical depression and beyond.
 To live, to really live, requires that we have some sort of hope.
 But we use the word "hope" in some interesting ways.
 Sometimes it means, "Uncertain."
 Did you do well on the test?
 I hope so.
 Uncertain.
 Sometimes it means, "I doubt it."
 Will you be able to make the church board meeting?
 I hope so.
 I doubt it.
 Can you come over tonight to see our vacation pictures?
 I hope so.
 Uh oh.
 Sometimes it is an expression of desperation,
 where the real answer is probably "no"
 but you just can't bring yourself to say it.
 This is an extremely aggressive form of cancer,
 but we're hoping... we're hoping.
 Sometimes we use the word "hope" when we're standing on shaky ground,
 and we say it with a wavering sound.
 Sort of wishful thinking,
 but I know it's not likely.
 But in the Bible, whenever hope is founded on God, there is no shakiness,
 no hesitance, no uncertainty, no "I doubt it."
 When hope is built on God, it is bold, strong, certain.
 Biblical hope is the future dimension of faith.
 Faith looks backward with gratitude and looks forward with hope.
 The letter to the Hebrew Christians says,
 "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (He.11:1)
 Sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
 How can we so sure?
 Because we know something of the character of God.
 We can hope in God because of the evidence of his past work in biblical history.

The Bible shows us a God who has all power,
 who creates the universe out of nothing,
 who can call forth or push back storms, wind, and waves,
 who toys with Egypt's pharaoh to show him who is really in charge,
 the king of kings and lord of lords.

This God is the foundation of our hope.

The Bible tells of a God cares about us.

Really cares about us.

A God who continually revealed himself to his creation
 so he might be known, honored and loved.

A God who cares about his creation enough that he brings rain and sun to create growth,
 who set free the slaves in Egypt,
 who supplied them with manna and quail in the wilderness,
 who gave them a land of their own.

A God who sent judges and kings to lead the people,
 who sent prophets to speak God's word to the people.

This God is the foundation of our hope.

A God who cares enough he took on human flesh to come be with us.

To become one of us!

He gave his only Son,

so sin might be paid for and sinners might be forgiven and redeemed.

A God who conquered death, once for all,

raising Jesus from the dead,

and opening the way so we might have eternal life in fellowship with him.

If death and the grave is not a show-stopper for God,

nothing is.

So we can have hope in any and every circumstance.

This is the God who turned a church persecutor into a church planter.

Who took a tiny little group of followers of an itinerant rabbi

and transformed them into a world-wide movement

that changed the course of human history.

This God is the foundation of our hope.

The Bible shows us a God who makes promises and unfailingly keeps them.

He promises, "I will be with you to the very end of the age." (Mt.28:20)

His word promises,

"We know that in all things

God works for the good of those who love him." (Ro.8:28)

And ultimately he promises that his kingdom shall come in all its fullness,

and those who love him will live with him there for all eternity. (Re.21; 22)

The Bible says, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,

for he who promised is faithful." (He.10:23)

We know he is faithful,

because his history proves it.

This God is the foundation of our hope.

We can hope in this God because of what he has done in our lives and the lives of those around us.

In this congregation alone God has

healed broken marriages,

saved babies who were not supposed to make it to be born,

removed the cravings of an alcoholic,

kept shaky finances afloat with unexpected money,
 housed those who were almost homeless,
 fed those who were hungry,
 brought Christmas to homes without the resources,
 and so much more.

This God is the foundation of our hope.

Our hope is not a fantasy, not wishful thinking, no wavering on unlikely.

Our hope is built on a solid foundation,

on the history of God's goodness in biblical history and in our own lives.

We have real reasons for our hope.

So we can sing that grand hold hymn,

"My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

Now, one caveat about the hope we have.

We can always hope for good in the future, because God has the future in his hands, and God is good.

But we don't know exactly what he'll do with what we're going through.

I would say, though, that we can trust an unknown future in the hands of the known God.

We can always hope.

A few years ago a lady physician was examining the possibility of retirement from her private practice
 and doing some work for a nonprofit.

But she had been so generous with her time and finances through the years,

she had not laid away much of a nest egg for retirement,

and she knew that working for a nonprofit

was not going to build that nest egg at all.

She prayed and listened and pondered.

During this time, unbeknownst to me, she heard me use that phrase in a sermon,

"Trust an unknown future in the hands of the known God."

And she decided to actually DO it.

Boy, it's frightening what people will sometimes do

with what they hear in a sermon.

She retired from her practice and took the nonprofit position.

She had no idea what God would do.

But years later she said it was, without a doubt,

the best decision she could have made.

When hope is built on the solid foundation of our God,

our hope is real; it is substantive; it is motivating.

Our hope pushes us forward into the future.

So rather than sitting back and waiting for the kingdom to come,

we start living a kingdom kind of life right here and now.

That's what the early Christians did.

When a plague would sweep across the land,

Christians would bring the sick and dying to a centralized location

to care for them in their last hours,

away from people who were yet uninfected.

Many of those Christians gave their own lives in the process.

They remind me of the ministry of Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India.

Or Christians who ministered to AIDS patients

before the disease was well understood.

They were willing to take the risk.

While their pagan neighbors would abandon unwanted babies,

the early Christians would pick them up and take them home as their own.
 Like Christians today who offer to adopt a baby if the mother won't abort it.
 While most of us spent disproportionate amounts of money on
 Christmas gifts for friends and family,
 gifts that are nice but not really needed,
 some Christians choose to cut back a bit on that,
 and spend more money helping a family in real need,
 or sponsoring yet another child
 through an agency like Compassion International.

Their hope motivates them to live a kingdom life right now.
 Because we have hope built on the solid foundation of the risen Christ,
 we can take risks we might not otherwise take.
 Oh, not foolish risks, but kingdom life risks.
 Think about it.

If death and burial is not the end,
 what risk could we take that is beyond his power to overcome?
 So we might risk by trying our hand at serving in ministries we've never tried before.
 Generously giving when it would be easier to just keep it for ourselves.
 Offering the hand of friendship to the person we don't know,
 so the stranger might become the guest
 and the guest might become family.
 Forgiving the person who wronged us,
 and working to rebuild the relationship,
 rather than playing it safe by holding them at arm's length.

And sometimes it's not so much anything you DO,
 but just a matter of your attitude toward life.
 When my brother and I went moose hunting in Canada,
 I hunted nine days without seeing a single shoot-able moose.
 I felt myself sinking toward frustration and hopelessness.
 But my hunting guide was a spiritual seeker.
 He was asking me all sorts of questions about spiritual matters.
 I had hopes for what might come of our conversations.
 I started out hoping for a moose.
 I now was hoping for something much bigger.
 And I realized a bad attitude on my part would not help my witness to him.
 So I made a conscious decision that I was going to
 put my focus on the good things God was giving me to experience:
 the beautiful surroundings, the wildlife, the northern lights, the quiet,
 and a Canadian who was curious about spiritual matters.
 My mood lifted,
 and I enjoyed myself,
 even without seeing a shoot-able moose.
 Our conversations about spiritual matters continued throughout the entire hunt
 and on into 2-3 emails afterward.
 And I hope some seeds were sown.

Sometimes our hope moves us to take action,
 and sometimes it just brings a more positive perspective on life.
 But real biblical hope always makes some sort of change.
 It moves us to living more of a kingdom kind of life.

So when your hope pushes you forward,
what new bit of kingdom life might you start living out?
Figure that out.

And then when someone asks you,
“What difference does it make that you’re a Christian?”
you’ll have an answer.
“Being a Christian makes me hopeful,
and for really good reasons.
And that motivates me to live a kingdom life.”

Scriptures cited: He.11:1; Mt.28:20; Ro.8:28; Re.21; 22; He.10:23