

January 10, 2021

“Taking Our Temperature: Anxiety or Hope?”

Psalms [43](#), [62](#), [131](#); [Isaiah 40:25-31](#); [Philippians 4:4-7](#)

**[If you are able to go online, there is a great video we watched on Hope. It is by The Bible Project and named Hope. Link to video: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/yakhal-hope/>. In 4 minutes you will learn a LOT about biblical hope. I highly recommend it.]**

You and I are not the only ones who have felt hopeless at times. Hopelessness – or at least the pull to become hopeless – never really goes away because there will always be something or someone that’s not quite right . . . and maybe even downright awful. When I began crafting this on Wednesday afternoon I wrote, “Pandemic and politics aside, there’s a good chance that in the last month you have been tempted to give up hope on some level.” [I just didn’t want to get bogged down in the ongoing pettiness of it all.] I had no idea that while I was typing the first few sentences of this sermon, we were all being faced with yet another reason to lose hope. Hope in civility. Hope in a political process that has been working – though not perfectly – for a couple centuries. Hope that our worst fears wouldn’t become a reality. Hope that rhetoric remains mostly just that; empty words. When I came home and watched the news, saw the images, and heard the eyewitness accounts, I saw a lot of people who have dedicated their careers and lives to our political process looking pretty hopeless.

We got used to saying that 2020 has been a terrible year. 2021 has not started so well either.

But even before 2020 and this racial and political mess – and even if there were no racial, political and medical messes – people like you and me are being pulled from hope to anxiety all the time. Little things and big things entice us to give up on hope; to stop imagining things will get better; to stop trusting that God is worthy of our trust; to stop hoping that our prayers will be answered for God’s goodness “on earth as it is in heaven.” Things like: kids/grandkids of any age making poor decisions or facing struggles; the tensions of marriage; struggles related to finding, keeping and losing jobs; every variable related to poor health; failing friendships; the many limits we keep bumping up against; financial stresses; ongoing moral failures (our own or those of others; and more.

As we think about hope, let’s not confuse hope with optimism. “Don’t worry. It will all work out.” And let’s not forget that we have way more to be hopeful about than so many others. And let’s keep remembering that biblical hope has always been rooted in the person of Jesus Christ and a God who is personal & personally present. We do NOT espouse a hope based on an outcome or statistic or finite and fallen human being. And if and when we do, we are in trouble.

To the people of Israel, in the middle of an exile that uprooted and upended them, God had a word of truth and hope. It was the prophet Isaiah who delivered it.

[Read Isaiah 40:25-31](#)

Everyone gets weak, tired and worn out. EVERYONE! “But those who hope in the Lord . . .”

If you were to take your temperature right now, related to HOPE, where would you register? How hopeful are you these days? Inversely, how anxious are you? What are the chances that what has been and is being uprooted and upended in our lives (we’re not talking about the Israelites) has made us more anxious than hopeful? I’m sorry to report I have observed a steady decline in HOPE and a steep increase in anxiety over the last several months. Maybe more importantly, I’ve noticed how misplaced our HOPE can get in moments like this . . . which then raises our anxiety as people and things fall apart. I’m so glad God’s Word speaks into these realities and gives us something very practical to do: PRAY.

[Read Philippians 4:4-7](#)

I’m not a huge fan of ‘positive self-talk.’ But I am a fan of the Bible. I love how the prayer in Psalm 43 ends: “Why are you downcast, O my soul?” (Psalm 43:5a) What a great question to ask in the context of prayer; to speak out loud to your soul in the presence of God. Peterson actually translates it like this: “Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?” (in The Message) There’s a good chance that the answer has something to do with misplaced hope. But since this question is asked in the context of prayer – and prayer involves an actual dialogue with God – the Psalmist gets to hear something very important from God: “Put your hope in [Me].” (Psalm 43:5b)

If we’re honest, a lot of things get us down in the dumps; and erode our hope. Serious things. Troubling things. Sad things. If we’re honest, even trivial things! This is not a call to blind optimism or the “Power of Positive Thinking” which somehow encourages us to deny pain and heartache. Biblical hope and the Christian faith are rooted in realism that does not minimize or whitewash what is really happening. There are many reasons to have a soul that is downcast, and lose hope.

-People really are dying.

-Divisiveness in our culture winds its way into the Church pretty easily; and that can be and has been very disappointing.

-For every story of rescue and freedom IJM shares with its pray-ers and givers, there are millions of people enslaved who will not be rescued.

Sometimes it hits you from every direction. The loss of a job; the relocation of a friend who will no longer ‘be there’ for you at a moment’s notice; a financial failure that will not be easy to climb out of. And the list goes on. Again, we do NOT espouse a hope based on an outcome or statistic or finite and fallen human being. But we do it all the time.

I was just re-reading a chapter out of a book by Earl Palmer on Philippians. The book is called *Integrity in a World of Pretense*. Palmer is my pastoral hero! I glanced at his ‘dedication’ page and read the list of 8 men and women who he wrote “have taught me the meanings of integrity.” One of the names was a superstar pastor in our denomination who – more than 25 years ago – confessed to numerous, prolonged extramarital affairs. Checking the copyright date of the book, I realized Palmer wrote the tribute to his friend one year before the story broke. I sat for a moment and tried to imagine how Palmer must have felt when he got the news.

Some of my pastoral friends and heroes have fallen from grace over the years. And the more it was that I looked up to them, the more downcast I became when I heard the news. Those moments took a toll on my soul and diminished my sense of hope. Which has also been instructive in helping me name that I was misplacing my hope in a someone, instead of THE SOMEONE.

When we are honest about what is eroding our hope; when we don’t minimize it or feel shame for losing hope for whatever reason; when we have the courage to actually own the fact that our souls are downcast, then at least we have the chance to locate what is taking our hope away, and admit we have mis-placed it. It is then that we can talk to our soul using the words of scripture and say, “HEY! Hope in the Lord!” (Psalm 131:3)

And when we choose to place our hope in the Lord, our souls can be “calmed and quieted . . . like a weaned child with its mother.” (Psalm 131:2) Our hope is restored, renewed and strengthened as we remember the faithful activity of the only One who is worthy of our hope.

Let’s take our temperature when it comes to hope using a little situational litmus test. This is not meant to shame or shut down any of us. It’s meant to help us locate where we are misplacing our hope, so we can relocate it in the Lord. Did any of the following pull you away from, chip away at, and reduce your hopefulness?

- Election in November or the events of this week
- Your health: physical limitation, diagnosis, chronic disease
- Brokenness of a friend/family member; or your own brokenness
- Your competence, and ‘on-top-of-it-ness’
- Your financial reality

How about some of these church-related hope-stealers?

- Leadership ups and downs; disappointments; disagreement with decisions or responses
- Measurables

Superficial: attendance, budgets

Significant: lives transformed, mission carried out, people being loved

- Limitations of all kinds; pre and post-pandemic. No church can or does all that it can, should or wants to.

Is it possible that you and I have been placing some of our hope in any or all of those things?

Let's "Hope in the Lord." We are not talking about blind optimism or a denial of reality. We're also not talking about fatalism or inaction or resigning ourselves to mediocrity and failure. We're talking about living with hope that the God who has been faithful in the past has not ceased to be and will not cease to be faithful still. God does not want us to be "anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, [to] present [our] requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7) Like a weaned child content in its mother's arms.

Isaiah puts it another way. "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

### **Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion**

1. What is your temperature currently, when it comes to hope? Can you think of a time in your life when you have been most hopeful? Least hopeful? What was going on in your life that made you more or less hopeful?
2. Can you name your top three hope stealers?
3. Do you tend to minimize or whitewash the events and realities of your life that chip away or wipe out your hopefulness? Why do you think that is – that you have a hard time naming and acknowledging what is happening to you and around you?
4. Which of the images from the scriptures helps you to envision a life of hope:
  - A child content and weaned in his/her mother's arms? (Psalm 131)
  - A eagle soaring? (Isaiah 40)
  - A soul that is downcast returning to praise? (Psalm 43)
  - A decision to dwell in the rock-solid protection of God? (Psalm 62)
  - A heart and mind guarded by the peace of Christ? (Philippians 4)
5. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?