

Sermon 5-10-20: Hope — At the end of your rope

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Central Church — Based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton

Today, we begin a **sermon series on hope**. Hope is something we all need. We can't live without hope. It is what enables us to get up in the morning and face the day. It is what sees us through the dark times of life. We all need hope, and I don't know about you, but I could use a dose of hope right now. Which is why I have chosen to preach this series on hope. It will be based somewhat loosely on a sermon series that Adam Hamilton recently preached at the Church of the Resurrection. Over the course of this series, I will be surveying what the Bible has to say about hope. This week we will be looking at the Psalms. Next week, we will turn to the Prophets, then the Gospels, the Epistles and finally, the Book of Revelations.

We will be asking, where can we find hope? This week, I will be asking the question, "What do we do when we are at the **end of our rope?**" Have you ever been at the end of your rope? Have you ever lost all sense of hope, and experienced the disorientation that accompanies it?

I have. It happened after my first wife asked me for a divorce. I knew things weren't great in our marriage. I knew we were struggling, but divorce was not on my radar. I did not want a divorce. I had three kids. I did not believe in divorce. My wife had made up her mind, but I was not ready for a divorce. My world slipped out from under me. I entered into a dark time.

One thing I knew was that I had to tell my father, so I drove to where he was living in Twin Falls. Dad was supportive, which was nice. But my questions remained. Questions like, should a divorced person be a pastor? What would this mean to my kids? Who was I if I wasn't married? I felt like

I had fallen off a cliff. I drove part way back to Idaho Falls, but had to stop when I was overtaken by tears. I pulled over and had a good cry. After I calmed down, I started the engine, prepared to drive home. However, I could not remember where I was or where my home was. I just sat there, completely lost, disoriented, at the end of my rope.

A lot of people are at the end of their ropes these days. They may be out of work and running out of money. Their business may be on the verge of bankruptcy. They may have lost a loved one or they may be sick, themselves. Pandemics are hard, and it is not just the health and financial consequences that make them hard. Pandemics disrupt everything.

Since today is Mother's Day, I thought I'd share a story that our daughter shared with us. It was about something her son, our grandson, told her. Unfortunately, our grandson hit the end of his rope that day. Our daughter told us that he just lost it. He wanted things to go back to normal. He missed school. He missed his friends. He missed playing sports. He was used to being on the go, and he had had it with sitting at home in isolation. It came to a head that night over dinner. He came down, looked at dinner and cried out, "Not groceries again. I am tired of eating groceries. When can we have some real food?" How many of us are nearing the end of our ropes? How many of us just want to go back to the way things were?

I saw a flight attendant being interviewed. She pointed to her plane, with only a handful of passengers in the seats, and lamented, "This is worse than 9-11. After 9-11 we were all together, helping one another through that tough time. Now we are all social distancing. We are all alone, going through this in isolation. It is hard. Really hard."

We are anxious. We are afraid. We wonder what the future will bring. Some of us are scared for our lives. Others fear for their economic health.

We need hope. After all, hope is what keeps us going. Hope gets us up in the morning. It is what enables us to get up and show up. Hope keeps us from giving up when the going gets tough. We can't survive without hope.

What do I mean by hope? Maybe I should take a moment to define it. After all, we often use the word hope quite casually. We say, "I hope it's a nice day tomorrow." Or "I hope we have roast beef for dinner." Hope can be a sort of wishful thinking.

However, when I speak of hope in this sermon series, I will be talking of something deeper. This hope can be either a noun or a verb. When we use it as a noun, we will be talking about the **conviction that, despite what is happening today, we believe that the future will be better.** When we use hope as a verb, it will mean acting as if the future will be better than the present. Understanding that hope can be a verb is important, because hope is more than just a belief. Hope leads to action. When we have hope, we live differently. We act as if the future will be better and that very act can help bring about a better future. But more on that later.

This week, we will be looking at the Psalms. There is a lot of hope in the Psalms. The Israelites often found themselves in dark, even hopeless circumstances, and the Psalms served as a reminder, maybe a call, to turn to God in hope. The Psalms were the Israelites book of worship. They are a hymn book, filled with songs of the faith. If you open your Bible to the very center, you will find the Psalms. That only seems appropriate since they are the center, the heart, and the soul, of God's people. They are both our source and our declaration of hope.

We certainly need a source of hope. Funny, isn't it? Just five months ago, life seemed good to most of us. The stock market had hit record highs.

Unemployment was low. Things were looking up. Life was good. Or it was good, until it wasn't.

Many of the Psalms speak of good times like that. Take **Psalm 8:1**, "**Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.**"

The Psalmist was looking to the heavens, proclaiming the glory of God. He was thanking God, because life was good. Yes, life was good for him, until it wasn't. That is the thing about good times. They don't last forever. They didn't last for Israel and they haven't for us either. Certainly Israel had good times but, if you read the scriptures, you also read also of droughts, natural disasters, invasions, and pandemics; times when the good life fell apart. When that happened, Israel entered into a season of disorientation when nothing made sense. These were the times when the Psalmists cried out to God, but God seemed nowhere to be found.

An example would be, Psalm 3:1, 2 which reads: "**Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'**" The Psalmist finds himself surrounded by enemies and apparently all alone. All seems lost and so he asks the age old question of God, "Don't you care?"

Or how about Psalm 13:1: "**How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?**" Or Psalm 22:1, whose words Jesus echoed so hauntingly from the cross: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**"

These are the Psalms that the Israelites prayed when they were at their lowest; when their worlds were falling apart and they could not understand

why or see God in any of it. You might say that these were the Psalms they prayed when they had reached the end of their ropes.

That said, if you read through these Psalms, if you stick with them to the end, the prayers that start out with hard questions and deep laments almost always take a turn and end with words of hope and praise. Take Psalm 13. As we noted, it begins with haunting words of abandonment: **“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”** However in the fifth verse it takes a turn: **“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.”**

How can that be? How can the author of the Psalm move from laments of abandonment and hopelessness in verse 1 to praise and trust in verse 5? It is a **matter of hope**. Despite all that is going wrong in the psalmist’s world, he chooses to place his trust in someone he cannot see. How? He can do it because he has experienced God’s love and providence in the past. He trusts that the God who came through for him and his people in the past will come through again. Hope is a matter of faith even in the darkness.

The Psalmist placed his trust in God and eventually he was delivered. We read that again and again in the Bible. God ultimately brings deliverance. Sometimes it takes weeks, months, or even years, but deliverance always comes. More than that, God’s people emerge transformed from having walked through the darkness. Dark times often bring about transformation. How? Dark times remind us of our need for God and each other. They often bring us back to God and to community. It was the dark times that often led Israel to repent, to turn back to God and to each other, and in doing so find life and hope again.

My grandfather used to tell stories about how hard the great depression was, but not my grandmother. When my grandmother talked about the depression, she remembered how it brought people together. She said that the dark times reminded people of their need for each another and their need of God. It was a matter of where they found hope.

Thus, Psalm 40:1-3 reads: **"I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God."**

The Psalmist waited patiently for the Lord, and the Lord heard him and delivered him out of the mire of the slimy pit. This is a Psalm of hope and rescue from dark times. Growing up on a ranch there was no municipal sewer system to hook up to. We had a septic tank, as did all our neighbors. From time to time, the tank would fill with sludge and the toilets would back up. Which meant that we had to dig down to the tank, remove the lid, and pump out the tank. Having done that, I can assure you that there are few things as gross and slimy as a full septic tank. When I think of being pulled from the slimy pit in Psalm 40, the image that comes to my mind is that of being mired in a septic tank full of sludge.

Don't look at me like that. It happens. People really do get mired in septic tanks. One fall, our neighbor's septic tank backed up and needed to be pumped out. He dug down, removed the lid, and then went to his shop to ready the pump. Unfortunately, that was when his curious, six-year-old son decided to investigate the dark hole in the middle of their yard and fell into the tank. The poor kid found himself up to his neck in raw sewage. He cried and cried for help, but his father could not hear him. He wondered if anyone would ever come. Thankfully, his mother heard his cries, ran to him, handed him a rope, and pulled him out of the slimy mire, setting him on

solid ground again. My neighbor's son learned a couple of valuable lessons that day. He learned to be careful around open septic tanks. But, more importantly, he learned that his mother was there to rescue and deliver him. A good thing for us all to remember on Mother's Day.

My neighbor's son learned a lesson in hope. Hope. The Hebrew word that we translate hope is **Qavah**. It can mean both hope and wait. If you think about it hope and wait really do belong together. After all, what is hope, but trust that waits expectantly on a better future. In the Bible, such hope grew out of the dark times. For it was in the dark times that people turned back to God trusting in hope that God would bring a better future.

It's true. In good times, we have little need for hope. We have little need for God, for that matter. Things are good. We have things handled. It is only when we find ourselves at the end of our rope, when our world is falling apart and we see no way forward, that we become aware of our need for God. It is in the dark times that we turn in hope to God.

One of the things I miss about Sunday mornings is gathering with the "praise at 9:00" group. We gathered to share and pray and Pat Harty invariably handed us a Bible verse to memorize that week. I have found memorizing those verses to be a powerful practice, a reminder of hope. So let me give you a verse to memorize this week. Don't worry, it is short. This week's verse is Psalm 40:1 **"I put all my hope in the Lord."**

The Psalm begs the question, "Who is at the end of your rope?" When we reach the end of our rope, who do we trust? The Psalmist said, "I put all my hope in the Lord." He could do this because he had experienced God's help in the past. And because God had been there for him, and for his people, in the past, he trusted God would be there in the future. My neighbor's son trusted his mother because she heard his cries, pulled him

from the mire of the septic tank, and set him back on solid ground. And the Psalmist trusted God because he knew that God would hear, and that in God's time, God would pull him out of the mire and set him on solid ground again.

This is not just wishful thinking, at least not for Christians who are rooted and grounded in Easter. For we know that Christ came as a human baby and showed us the way, truth and life; that he suffered and died on the cross; and that he was buried. When he died, all the hopes and dreams of the disciples died with him. The world did not get any darker, any more hopeless, than it did on Good Friday. But on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, bringing hope and the message that God had redeemed his suffering. It is a reminder of something my mother used to say. She said, **"The worst thing is never the last thing."** We know that the worst thing is never the last thing, because our God redeems the worst, making it better, just as he redeemed the cross. So, when the worst comes, know that in hope it is not the last thing, that God can and will redeem even this.

The Psalms are songs of prayer that remind us that better times are coming, that the God who has helped us in the past will help us again, pulling us out of the mire and setting us on solid ground.

Like my grandson, a lot of us are at the end of our ropes. We are tired of living in social isolation. Some of us are out of work and out of money; some are in danger of losing our businesses; some have lost loved ones. We are near the end of our ropes.

When you find yourself there, at the end of your rope, remember our memory verse: **I put all my hope in the Lord. — Psalm 40:1.** Remember that the word for hope is Qavah. It means both hope and waiting. So, hoping in the Lord means trusting, and waiting patiently on God, even in the

darkness. Knowing that in his time, God will toss us a rope and pull us up out of the mire and set our feet on solid ground. This week, I want you to memorize that verse, and when you find yourself at the end of your rope, lean into it, hoping against all hope in the God who will redeem even this.