

“Hoping Against Hope”
Romans 4:16-21; Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

As we begin this morning, I’ve got a question that I’ve been curious about since I accepted the call to come here last May. At what point did the Pastor Nominating Committee reveal to all of you that I’m a New York Yankees fan?

Did they come out with it right away?
Or did they hide it from you until you had already voted???

I know this is a disappointment to most of you. And while I promise NOT to mention the Yankees in every sermon, I am going to begin this morning with a story about what happened at the end of my second year of seminary. A friend of mine got the two of us great tickets to see the Yankees play at the old Yankee Stadium.

This was a tremendous thrill for me.

I grew up in Michigan, so my only chance to see the Yankees in person, when I was a boy, was when they came to Detroit to play the Tigers.

Now on this particular May evening in 1996, these were the best seats I had ever had, Yankee Stadium, 10 rows behind home plate. Before the game, a rookie shortstop named Derek Jeter was signing autographs, so I handed him a pen and a piece of paper, and he signed an autograph for me. And THEN, this night happened to be the night that Dwight Gooden pitched a NO-HITTER against the Seattle Mariners...the first and only time I’ve ever seen a no-hitter at a Major League baseball game.

So just to review...best seats ever, no-hitter, and Derek Jeter’s autograph. It was like baseball karma was perfectly aligned for me that evening.

Well, I saved the ticket stub from that game, and of course I saved Derek Jeter’s autograph.

And then a year later, I graduated from seminary, made about 7 different moves during the course of the summer after seminary, while I was searching for a call...until I finally began my ministry by moving to Texas in 1998.

And when I unpacked my belongings in Dallas, I realized—much to my horror—that I could not find the Derek Jeter autograph! I looked high and low for it, searched every place I could think of, but no luck.

I was devastated.

How does a die-hard Yankee fan lose Derek Jeter's autograph?

I've been telling friends and family since that spring of 1998 all about it.

In fact, when I was dating my soon-to-be wife a few years later, I was being very vulnerable one evening, and I was sharing my faults, and I shared with her that I had managed to lose Derek Jeter's autograph.

I think her reply was, "Derek who?"

No matter.

For the first few months, I held onto the hope that I might find it. But then a year went by, and another year, and finally...I just gave up hoping.

The Derek Jeter autograph was lost forever.

I'm not sensing much sympathy here from all of you.

It's ok. I'll get over it.

Why do I bring this up today?

I bring it up because I want you to get that feeling in mind.

The feeling of having a hope...and then—whoosh—that hope disappears.

Have you ever had that experience?

I'm not talking now about losing an autograph.

What does that feel like?

I'd like you to get that experience in mind, because I believe we heard about such an experience in our texts for today.

“Hoping against hope,” Paul writes,
 Abraham “believed that he would become
 ‘the father of many nations.’”

But let’s back up just a second.
 I want you to picture Abraham not in his old age, but in his younger years.

Maybe he’s 30 and Sarah is 20.
 They are Abram and Sarai at that time.
 Their entire lives are ahead of them, and they are hoping to have a family.

But then there is no child.
 And the years start to go by, and still, there is no child.

And there’s the frustration of it all.
 The embarrassment of it all.

They dream and they hope, and they pray and they pray...
 until finally...they give up.

And one day when Abram is 75 years old, God comes to Abram, and God tells Abram that he will be the father of many nations.

And Abram believes God, but of course, there is no child.

So more time passes, and finally, Sarah suggests to Abraham another course of action, and Ishmael is born to Abraham and Sarah’s slave, Hagar.

And then we get to Genesis 17.

Now the way that the Apostle Paul describes the story from Genesis, Abraham “did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body...or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver.”

I think Paul is taking some liberties here.

Do any of you recall how Abraham responded when God told Abraham that God’s promise would be fulfilled through his wife, Sarah?

We didn't read that verse in Genesis 17, but it's the very next one:

“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’”

That's not someone who never wavered in his faith!
That's someone who does NOT want to get his hopes back up again.

“O that Ishmael might live in your sight!”
That's what Abraham was hoping for.

And what does God say?
God says that Ishmael will be fine.
I will bless him too, says God.

But God says to Abraham that Sarah will have a child.
In Abraham and Sarah's advanced age, God will give them more than they ever dreamed when they were 30 and 20 years old...

It's a beautiful story.

I thought this was an appropriate story for all of us today, this story of hope, because today is a hopeful day.

I'll speak for myself. I am filled with hope, very honored to be called as the pastor of this wonderful congregation with such a splendid story, a history of commitment to mission work and loving your neighbor and being a source of God's light and love in the greater Greenville community.

And my hunch is that you are filled with hopes too.

In fact, my hunch is that we all entered this sanctuary with yearnings in our hearts...not only hopes for your church, or your new pastor, but hopes for your future, or perhaps hope for a particular member of your family....do you have a hope in mind right now?

Let's look more closely at what today's texts are telling us about hope.

You see, it would be easy to conclude from our texts that if we just keep waiting, just keep praying, God will give us what we're hoping for. I mean, that's what happened to Abraham and Sarah, right?

They finally got the child that they had dreamed of all along.

And sometimes, that is what happens in our daily lives.

For example, last November, we were moving our offices at the church I was serving in Dallas, and in the midst of the move, I discovered a box.

It was filled with all of my old seminary papers.

Who saves all their old seminary papers from 20 years ago?

I was about to throw it out, but then I figured I needed to go through it...

And buried in that box, in an old "photo mailer", were some photographs of that Yankee game from May of 1996...and tucked inside the mailer was a piece of paper with Derek Jeter's autograph!!

I mean, I never thought I'd be euphoric about moving offices...but I was ELATED. I felt like running through the halls of the church—I found Derek Jeter's autograph!!

You still don't seem to be sharing my excitement.

Oh well.

I don't know why I happened to find it in that old box of seminary papers.

What I do know is that sometimes, we have a particular wish,
and then something happens, something out of our control happens....
and our hopes go SPLAT.

So what is Paul telling us?

I don't believe that Paul is arguing in Romans 4 that if we just have enough faith, God will give us everything we ever hoped for.

Paul is saying that when our hopes are indeed dashed, God is still at work.

Paul says that the God in whom Abraham trusted is a God—not who just gives us whatever we want...but a God—

“who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

The question Paul is asking is this:

Where will we place our hope?

Will we put our hopes in our minds, our own imaginations?
Or will we place our hope in the mind and imagination of God?

In Ken Burns' documentary on WWII,
one of the veterans whom Burns interviews is a former POW
named Glenn Frazier.

Frazier was captured by the Japanese in the Philippines at the start of the war, and survived the infamous Bataan Death March. He was held by the Japanese as a Prisoner of War for over three years, enduring unspeakable hardships.

One of the things that kept Frazier going during those years was the knowledge that he had a girl back home, a high school classmate.

He was hoping to make it back home at the end of the war, and marry her.

Against improbable odds, Frazier survived the war.

But he did not always know he would survive when he was fighting in the Philippines, and was in the POW camps.

At one point early on, he threw his dog tags in a pile with the dog tags of other deceased American soldiers. He figured that if he did die, this way his family would know what had happened to him.

After Frazier was captured by the Japanese, he was classified as Missing in Action. That's what his family back in Fort Deposit, Alabama, was told. Until one day, a few years later, when the Americans were retaking control of the islands, the dog tags that Frazier had thrown in that pile were discovered...and his family was informed that Glenn had been killed in action.

So picture the scene at the end of the war.

Glenn Frazier does not know that his family thinks he's been killed.

His family does not know that Glenn is on a boat for San Francisco.

And he arrives in San Francisco.

And he calls his home in Alabama.

His mother answers the phone, Glenn tells her who it is—and she thinks her son is dead...and SHE FAINTS!

So his aunt, his mother's sister, she picks up the phone.

And Glenn tells her who it is.

And SHE faints!

So Glenn's sister picks up the phone.

And he tells her who it is.

And SHE FAINTS!!

Finally, his father gets on the phone.

“Who in the world is this?” says his father.

Glenn tells his daddy who it is, and his father says, “Well, I knew you weren't dead...but it looks like I've got a bunch of dead women here, and I've got to get them off the floor.”

And his father gets a pitcher of water, and douses the faces of Glenn's mother and aunt and sister...and eventually, Glenn is reunited with his family back in Fort Deposit.

It's what he was hoping for, right?

It's what they all were hoping for.

And after his return, Glenn asks a friend about his high school classmate, the one whom he told he loved and she had written to him for three years and the hope of marrying her had sustained Glenn throughout his ordeal.

“I hate to tell you this,” said his friend, “but she’s getting married this Sunday.”¹

Ugh. It made sense, but...ugh.

She had been told, like everyone else had been told, that Glenn was killed in action.

We don’t always get what we’re hoping for, right?

Do you know what it’s like to have a hope,
and then that hope is squashed,
and it forces a kind of internal reckoning, right?

You thought the world would turn out this way, and that picture is shattered, and now you live in a different world—what does that do to your faith, to your image of God, to your hope??

This, my friends, gets at the heart of what I believe about God.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is not a God who promises to fulfill every hope that is in our hearts.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is a God who promises to come to us in our most desperate moments, our most painful times, not to prevent them, but to walk through those times with us...and then—when something terribly painful does take place, and our hopes are shattered—God says to us that God is not through.

God is not done.

God can improvise with our lives in ways we never pictured.

God offers us a new beginning, and a kind of redemption we never dreamed could take place...

Let me get at it this way.

The Village Vanguard in New York City is a jazz club.

¹ As told in *The War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick*, 2007.

And on one Tuesday evening some years ago,
Wynton Marsalis, that master trumpet player,
was part of a small combo
offering up a series of bebop classics.

The set started off in an unremarkable way,
but then Marsalis stepped to the microphone to offer a solo
called "*I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You.*"

It was a melancholy song, full of murmurs and sighs,
and Marsalis performed it with deep feeling and expression.

At the climax of the song,
he played the final phrase in such a way that the trumpet
seemed to give actual voice to the heartfelt words
"I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ..."

**The audience sat in awe, listening in silence.
And then it happened.**

It the middle of that sacred silence, at the song's most dramatic point,
someone's cell phone went off! And everyone could hear the chirping, sing-song
electronic melody.

Including Wynton Marsalis.

Needless to say, no one was hoping for THAT!

In an instant, the spell was broken.
Marsalis paused for a beat, and stood motionless.
His eyebrows arched.

The embarrassed cell-phone owner fled the scene, and the conversation in
the club started to grow louder. Of course, Marsalis could have stepped down at
that moment and quit the gig, disgusted.

But he didn't move.

He stayed right where he was.

*And he put his trumpet to his lips,
and replayed the stupid cell-phone melody...note for note.*

Then he played it again.
Then he began improvising variations on the tune.
The members of the audience stopped chatting and began to listen.

He changed keys once or twice and then seamlessly eased back into a ballad tempo, and in just a few minutes, finishing his improvisation,
he was exactly where he had left off:

“I don’t stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ... with ... you ...”²

And the song, the moment, the evening...it was all redeemed!

No one in the audience that night saw it coming.
Just like you and I never see it coming.

I don’t know what hopes you’ve carried with you into this sanctuary today.
My prayer is that your deepest hopes will indeed be fulfilled.

But if what you are hoping for does not come to pass,
my prayer is that you will leave some room in your mind
and in your heart...
for God.

The God who gives life to the dead.
And brings into existence that which does not exist.

When you exit this sanctuary today, please...
leave some room in your faith—

² I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey’s sermon “Capacity,” preached on April 20, 2014 at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC, for first making me aware of this story. The story appears in “Wynton’s Blues,” by David Hajdu, in *The Atlantic*, March, 2003.

for the improvisation and imagination of God.

Amen.