

“Does Hope Disappoint Us?”
Ezekiel 37:1-3, 11-14; Romans 5:1-5
5th Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
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There are MANY reasons why I wish these pews did not have to be empty right now, and that we could all be together on Sunday mornings. One of those reasons, very small reason, is this:

If you were here, I would start this sermon with a vote.
I would ask for a show of hands.

And the question I would put before you is whether Paul is right when he talks about HOPE. In our text for today, Paul says:

“...hope does not disappoint us...”

Is that REALLY true?
Are we really never disappointed by hope?

The first time that question hit home for me, I was serving as a paralegal with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. I was 22 years old, right out of college, and I was helping people who had HIV/AIDS. This was in the days BEFORE there was any truly effective treatment for fighting that awful disease.

One of the people I was assisting was a man named David.

David didn't have much—
not much income,
no family to speak of...

I was representing David in his case for social security disability, and I got to know him fairly well during the months that we that we worked on his case.

He was a wonderful person.

He was real easy going, terrific smile, had a great sense of humor.

David was the type of person who made you comfortable the moment you started talking with him.

About 8 months after I met David, the disease took a turn for the worse, and his demeanor changed. The smile disappeared, there was a look of resignation on his face.

Finally, the week of David's hearing arrived.

He stopped by my office to go over some last-minute details.

I said to him, "David, things should go fine. We'll hope for the best."

David shot up from his chair.

"Man, don't you understand? I got no family. My friends have disappeared. I may get a little more money, but what's that? I could be dead in two weeks. Don't you get it? There is NO MORE hope!"

It was at THAT moment that I realized something:

Hope is not a casual word.

We may use it all the time—

hope things are well, hope to see you soon...

It's an important word.

It's a life-giving word.

Consider all the hopes that are in your heart at this moment.

Hoping that all of your loved ones stay healthy through this crisis.

Hoping that the economy will recover from this crisis.

Hoping that those who lose jobs will be able to get back to work again real soon.

Hoping that life can return to normal again real soon.

Hoping that—well, just hoping that, in some way, shape, or form, things will be OK...

I'd like you to consider the word HOPE, on this fifth Sunday in Lent.

What does it mean for you and me,
 as disciples of Jesus,
 to live as a people of HOPE—
 during this strange and stressful moment
 in our nation's life—
 indeed, in our world's life?

Maybe the first thing to do is recognize that the Bible
 knows a thing or two about hope.

The Bible knows that our most personal hopes—
 they do not always come true.

For example, do you remember the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? It was Easter evening, and they're walking along, and the risen Jesus comes beside them, but they don't know it's Jesus!

Jesus asks them what's going on.
 And they look sad.

And they tell him that Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed, was recently crucified...and then they say this:

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

But we had hoped...

In other words, they wanted Jesus to throw off the shackles of Rome, to become a leader like David of old.

And their hope did not come true.

Same kind of thing happened to the Apostle Paul.

If you look at the early letters that Paul wrote, Paul clearly believed that the risen Christ would return again in HIS lifetime!

In the earliest letter we have from Paul’s hand, 1st Thessalonians, Paul writes the following:

“For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call...will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air...”

Is that what happened?

That’s not what happened.

Paul was killed, most likely in Rome, at the hand of the Romans. When do you think Paul finally figured out that Christ may not return in his lifetime?

When do you think Paul finally had to let go of that hope?

Part of what I think it means right now, to live in this time,
is to have hopes that we MAY have to let go of...
or are ALREADY letting go of...

At those moments, what does it mean to say that hope does not
disappoint us?

In my younger years, I liked to run road races, and as a boy,
growing up with a father who ran races, one of the movies that captured
my young imagination was *Chariots of Fire*.

Do you remember the film?
About the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell?

A religious and devout person, Liddell was also a fast person, a
terrific runner. Those two devotions in his life—his faith and his
running—they collide in the 1924 Olympics. When his heat for the
100m dash is held on a Sunday, Liddell refuses to run on the Sabbath.

And his hope to compete against the best in the world
in HIS best event—he has to let it go.

I remember seeing the movie *Chariots of Fire* when it came out in
the early 80s, and I was struck by Liddell's decision not to run. Liddell,
it should be noted, did not leave those Olympics empty-handed, as he
ended up winning Olympic gold in the 400m race.

But the impact of Liddell's life goes much deeper than a decision
to chase one medal instead of two. After those Olympic games, Liddell
went to China and became a missionary, like his parents before him.
But when World War II broke out years later, he was captured by the
Japanese army and placed in one of their internment camps in China.

Some of you may know that Liddell died in that Japanese prison camp in 1945.

Years later, his grown daughter Patricia went to visit the place where her father lost his life. She met a Chinese official there, and the official spoke to her about her dad. She learned a couple things about her father:

1. "...my father was known in the camp as 'Uncle Eric' because he was so selfless in his concern for others.
2. He was also offered a chance to return home as part of a prisoner exchange, but reportedly turned it down and gave his place to a woman [who was expecting a child] instead."¹

What was it Paul wrote?

"...suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us..."

I don't think Paul is referring to our *specific* hopes,
when he says that hope does not disappoint us.

Eric Liddell, after all, surely hoped
that he would get to go home and be with his wife
and his children once again.

But Liddell's life was grounded in a deeper hope, the hope that Paul refers to in our text—the hope that comes from God.

¹ "Eric Liddell, the Lost Olympian," by Angela Levin, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3637689/Eric-Liddell-the-lost-Olympian.html.

The hope that comes by living with the love of God “poured into our hearts,” as Paul puts it.

It’s the kind of hope that means no matter the circumstances,
no matter what happens next—
we can trust that somehow,
someway—

God’s love will see us through, and God’s love will get the final word.

I’m reminded of a poem that William Stafford wrote, in which he and his 7-year-old daughter are standing on a dune, looking at the ocean—and there’s a storm. The waves are getting high.

The last two stanzas go like this:

*Standing on such a hill,
what would you tell your child?...*

Those waves raced far, and cold.

*“How far could you swim, Daddy,
in such a storm?”*

*“As far as was needed,” I said,
and as I talked, I swam.²*

The beauty of the poem lies, of course, in the father’s ability to hear his daughter’s true question—not how far can daddy swim, but if I were in that storm, would you rescue me?

² “With Kit, Age 7, At the Beach,” by William Stafford, found in *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems of William Stafford*, edited by Kim Stafford, Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014.

Would you be able to swim out to me?

We are called, at this particular time, to swim as far in this storm as is necessary for us to swim. To make whatever sacrifices we need to make for the health and the common good of our community, for those who are most vulnerable in our community.

And as followers of Jesus, we don't do so with grim resignation. We do so as people of hope.

Embodying God's love and hope for others
in every action,
every word, every tone of voice,
every act of patience,
every generous gift,
every email of encouragement,
every time we resist giving into our fears...
we have a chance to give someone HOPE.

Getting back to Eric Liddell for a moment—

While he was in the camp, Liddell's love for God, his delight in God, his awareness of the EXTRAVAGENCE of God's goodness and God's grace—even in that place—it just seemed to flow out of him.

Langdon Gilkey, the prominent 20th century theologian, was also a prisoner with Liddell in that camp.

Gilkey describes the scene:

"Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance [for the children who were there in the camp]

– absorbed, weary and interested,

pouring all of himself into this effort
to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths.

He was overflowing with good humour and love for life, and with enthusiasm and charm.”³

In other words, in a dismal camp that could have been filled with despair, Eric Liddell was the embodiment of hope.

Not because he was an optimistic person.
Or a naïve person.
But because he was Christ’s person.

And so are we.

I don’t know what decisions you and I may need to make in the days ahead. But whatever those decisions are, I do know that we’re called to make those decisions with HOPE.

What will that look like in your life?

Whether you are on the medical front lines of this crisis,
or are retired and feel trapped in your home,
or are just trying to help your kids get through this
time...

what does it look like in your life
to be a person of hope?

Amen.

³ This quote by Langdon Gilkey is found on the www.wikipedia.com website for Eric Liddell.