

Sermon July 20, 2008

Rev. Kerry Waller

"Real Hope"

Ps 139:1-12, 23-24 and Romans 8:12-25

Good morning. It is good to be back in this pulpit. This week, in preparing the sermon I looked back over my calendar and noticed that I last preached April 20th. So today's sermon will therefore be as long as 12 sermons. Just kidding.

These weeks of my maternity leave I have held you in my prayers, and have prayed for those who have been in this pulpit while I was away because of the birth of my son and my illness before his arrival. But is just not the same as seeing your faces, as feeling the presence of the Lord when we are together, as tasting the grape juice and the bread of communion that we share together. It is so good to be back with this community of the faithful.

It's been a while since I have been in this pulpit, but it looks the same from here. This pulpit seems to be the same height, the same width. The same shelf that Dale Hochstetler added is in place. I can see the same folks- you all seem to be in your assigned pews.

It is good to know that in a world where some things change a mile a minute, that some things stay the same, like the love of God for his people and the wisdom we find in the Holy Scriptures. Let's see if I can remember how to do this.

Let's turn to the word of God found in the Letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans. Read scripture.

When Paul was writing this letter, times were tough for his listeners. They lived in the capital city of the Roman Empire, and suffered because of the occupation of their holy city of Jerusalem. Their religion was illegal, and they were persecuted by their neighbors and the government. Their very existence was in jeopardy for much of the time.

And so Paul writes to them of being led by the Spirit of God, of being chosen by God to be his children, and of having hope in things unseen. "Brothers and sisters, we are debtors," Paul writes. Our debt is to our Maker and to our Redeemer. This Redeemer sent to us a spirit that we can follow as children of God. This spirit is not one of fear, but of adoption, of being literally made into children.

God adopts us so that we can become siblings with Christ, that we may have the great inheritance of eternal life. And God adopts us so that we may trust that we are children of God and be led by his spirit. Throughout the Bible we read of people that have been chosen by God to be led by His spirit.

Early in the book of Genesis we read of Abraham and his wife Sarah. Abraham was chosen by God to be the father of many nations, of the people who would become the predecessors to our Lord's faith and our own. God tells Abraham that he must go on a journey to an unknown land with unknown, probably unfriendly, people.

Life was not easy for Abraham. The journey was difficult. And despite being promised by God that he would have many children, he reached extreme old age without having a child. But God has something good in store for Abraham. He had not abandoned him, had not forgotten him, had not changed his mind to give him amazing blessings. And so Isaac, Abraham's son was born, long past the time when such things seemed possible. And Isaac had children who had children who had children who had children, and God's promises to Abraham were fulfilled. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Abraham's great-grandchildren became a people called the Israelites and lived as slaves under Egyptian rule. They suffered mightily until God used Moses to free them from slavery. Moses' mother had followed the Spirit of God when he was a baby. The leader of the Egyptians had heard prophecies that one of the Israelite babies would overthrow him, and he ordered that all the babies in the land be killed to prevent this. Moses' mother hid him in a wicker basket and sailed him down the river in hopes that he would be adopted by someone who could keep him safe when she could not. He was pulled from the river by ironically, the daughter of the Egyptian ruler, and taken to her home to be raised to adulthood. Moses' mother's obedience to the Lord saved her son, who was able to lead the Israelite people to freedom. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

The Israelite people escaped slavery, but they had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. As they wandered they were led by the Spirit of God. But still they doubted that they would be brought safely into the Promised Land. Still they doubted that God was good, that God had a plan for them, and that God loved them. At the end of their story, they made it to the Promised Land. Everything was not perfect for them when they were there, but God kept his promise to take them to a land that would be their own, and God kept his promise that life with him was better than life without him. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Fifty days after Christ's death the disciples of Christ were huddled in a room, afraid of the crowd. Then tongues of flame appeared among them, and they began speaking in tongues, in foreign languages that they had never known how to speak before. They knew the Holy Spirit had come among them, and that it was time to leave their room to go and make disciples of all nations as Jesus had commanded. The spirit of God had come to them, led them from their room and from their fear, and they went out, children of God, ready to spread the good news. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

It's the spirit of God that helps us understand that the bad things that happen can be the labor pains of new creation. Paul tells the people that "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for redemption. These particular verses caught my attention in a different way. I have a new respect for labor pains, after the recent birth of my son.

Labor pain is different than any other pain in life. Usually when we feel pain it is because something is wrong with us. Labor pain tells us that something is right. Some labor is easier than others, sometimes it goes smoothly and as planned, but other times the laborer needs help. You can't predict how your labor will go until you're in it, and every time it's different. Needless to say, it doesn't ever go like it does on TV.

Labor pain is not for the wimpy. But it is pain that is necessary, pain that is productive, pain that will bring forth something wonderful. People are there to help you through it. While the laborer has to do the work herself, she is never alone.

CCVP is God's creation. God labored alongside those who labored in the beginning of the church. God labors with those who labored through each time it needed to be re-created in order to live. Through the lifetime of the church there have been hard time and great times. There have been times when we did not know how it was all going to go, and it certainly didn't look like anything on TV. There were plenty of times and plenty of circumstances under which this church could have simply passed away.

This is an anxious time for our church as we wait to see what God will give birth to among us. We don't know what is going to happen in our church or to our church. We don't know if there is going to be enough of what we need, or if there are going to be enough people to do what we want to do.

What I do know is that those who follow the spirit of God are the children of God. And God does not abandon his children. God is not callous. God hears the prayers of his children, and gives us everything we ask for in Christ's name.

That doesn't mean that we should leave everything up to God. We were given free will for a reason. But we also cannot move into the future unless we are led by the Spirit of God.

This is not a business in the way that your local 7-11 is. The purpose of the church is different than the purpose of a regular business, and the character of the church is different than the character of a regular business. We can't find our value in the quarterly statements.

This is a place where we come to meet the Lord, and one another, in the breaking of the bread, in the hearing of God's word, in the prayers and in the songs. This is a place where anyone can come and be welcomed. This is a place where 400 people receive food each month to help them get by, and more than a dozen people have gone around the country on mission trips for the last six years.

This is a place where children have been baptized for 50 years, and the 52 years of Christian ministry of Rev. Newton was celebrated. This is a place where weddings are celebrated, and renewals of vows by 14 couples were recently affirmed. This is a place where people serve the Lord through serving one another in ways that are small, and large. Something different and special happens here that doesn't happen anywhere else in our society.

We have been groaning inwardly, as people who love this church and as a church community while we are waiting for adoption, as we wait for God to make us his children. What lies before us is to hope in God, that God will redeem this body of believers, that God will save us from a spirit of slavery to fear and anxiety and doubt, and instead give us a spirit of adoption.

Our scripture ends with these words "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." We cannot see the future. We cannot see what God has in store for us. But I know that it is good. I know that when we are led by the spirit of God we are children of God.

God gives us the gift of the spirit when we pray and when we listen. God gives us the gift of the spirit when we love him with all our heart, soul and mind and when we love our neighbor as ourselves.

God has good things in store for those who are led by his Spirit. His spirit leads us in the way of truth and the way of His love. In hope, hope in God, we will be saved. This is the good news for all people. Thanks be to God, the one who made us, who redeemed us, and who sustains us.  
Amen.

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