



“Choose Hope Over Fear”
Scripture – Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 11, 2019

Last Monday, our grandson Hayes who just turned 12, told his mother that wherever he is, he thinks about what he will do if he is caught in a mass shooting. Everywhere he goes – the grocery, the movies, school, church – he checks out possible exits and creates his strategy in case someone opens fire. For many of our children, it is now second nature to scope out their surroundings and imagine how they will respond if a gunman suddenly begins spraying hate-filled bullets. Hardly surprising, in 2017, more than four million students in K-12 experienced a lock down because of a shooter or fear of one.

The numbers from last weekend have been thoroughly drummed into our minds. Mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton stole the lives of 31 people and injured more than four dozen. The death toll in Dayton would have been far higher had police not been standing nearby and taken down the shooter in less than a minute after he fired 41 bullets in 30 seconds.

What prompted these mass murders? The 21 year-old man who killed 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso had posted online a four page document that espoused white nationalist and racist views. After being arrested, he told police that he “was targeting Mexicans.” The gunman in Dayton was also exploring violent ideologies and had expressed the desire to commit a mass shooting.

Last year there were 25 mass shootings in the United States. This year, with more than four months to go, we are already at 23. No wonder that other countries have issued travel warnings cautioning travelers of the danger of coming to one of the most violent countries in the world; the only country where there are more guns than adults.

People of faith are supposed to live in hope, but has the darkness gripping our nation – not only the violence, but also the divisive rhetoric, the tribalism, and the inequality – robbed us of the dream of a better day and exposed that desire as pathetically naïve? As people of faith, we turn to the scriptures for wisdom, for guidance, and for inspiration. It just so happens that the designated New Testament lectionary reading for this Sunday is a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that highlights the importance of trusting God to lead us to a better future.

Our passage begins with a compelling declaration. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The author of this letter does not say that faith means to believe certain ideas about God. He equates faith with trust. Faith is about trusting God to lead us to a better day.

Followers of Jesus know that our world is far from what God intends for it to be. It is not destined to be a dominion of violence. It is not predetermined to be consumed by a culture of greed. It is not ordained to be a hotbed of racism.

We have been given a vision of the world as God wants it to become—a kinder and fairer place where people care about one another, where people keep an eye out for those who are weak, and where there is liberty and justice – for ALL people. Do we still believe that’s possible?

The writer of Hebrews provides an example of what he means to trust God to lead us to a better day. He says that it was due to his trust in God, that Abraham set out for a new place even though he did not know where he was going. Faith includes a yearning to be in a better place and trusting God to guide us there.

In verse 10, we read that Abraham “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Abraham yearned not only for a new land, not simply a new patch of turf; he yearned for a new reality, a new world. So do we!

God calling Abraham to set out for a new land is a metaphor for what God calls each generation to do. We are to set out for that nation that God wants us to become. It is what God wants every community, every country, indeed the whole world to become. It is a place where everyone sees the image of God in one another and treats each other as a brother or sister.

A society built on the rickety legs of hostility, inequality, and indifference will not last. It will invariably teeter and eventually collapse. However, if the society is built on what Jesus has shown us is right and true, and benefits the weak as well as the strong, the society will be robust and resilient.

We have a choice in the kind of society we develop. We are not destined to follow a path that descends into doom. We are free to love or free to hate, but hate requires more energy than love. The Scriptures warn against using our freedom to indulge the desires that undermine and destroy society. God commands us to use our freedom in ways that exalt life, not diminish it.

As followers of Jesus, we do not wait patiently for God to straighten out our messes. It is evident from the teachings of Jesus – who called on us to love others as ourselves – that WE are responsible for building a better world. Indeed, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”¹ The words of Augustine should be our persistent mantra: “Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.”

However, we have no chance of succeeding without hope. Not optimism, but hope. Optimism looks at the world through pink-tinted lenses. Hope is an eager expectation of a better future. It does not derive from wishful thinking or from an optimistic attitude. Hope blossoms from a foundation of trust – trust in God’s vision of a better world and trust that God never stops presenting possibilities that can lead us to a greater tomorrow.

If instead of embracing hope we choose fear, we become more attuned to the negatives – negative words, negative events, and negative thoughts. If our daughter goes off to college, we may fear for her safety. Suddenly, the statistics of date rape loom heavy on our minds. When soreness develops in our back we might assume there is serious problem with our kidneys. Recurring headaches? It’s probably a brain tumor.

I knew a man who always expected the worst. In virtually every conversation, he would share his doomsday predictions. Of course, he was occasionally right. That made him forget all of his dire predictions which never came true.

A colleague writes why it is tempting to choose fear rather than hope because “fear is immediate gratification. We encounter the unknown and fear is a reliable partner, something we have known before – often unwanted, but there nonetheless.”²

Fear imprisons us, hope liberates us. Fear narrows our field of vision. Hope broadens it. Fear restricts our imagination. Hope dreams of new possibilities.

Even when it seems that darkness engulfs us, as it does today, we dare not give up hoping that God can lead us to something better. Because when we give up hope, we quit fighting. And when we stop renouncing and resisting evil and injustice, it allows the darkness to encroach further.

Hope has a defiant edge to it. It refuses to accept darkness as the way things must be. It refuses to surrender to hatred. It refuses to buckle under the threat of violence. It refuses to accept that the way things are today is the way things must be in the future.

Many are prone to looking at the present and expecting more of the same. The person who chooses hope knows that the present does not strictly determine the days to come. Hope does not know in detail what the world will become, but it is open to new possibilities that can arise from seemingly hopeless situations. An ugly and seemingly intractable situation can be a catalyst for buckling down and doing the difficult work that will pave the way for a brighter time to come. The atrocious violence and widespread misery that blanketed the globe in WWII prompted many to desire revenge. Others were motivated by the extensive evil to turn enemies into allies.

We can choose to live in a Good Friday world where all that is good is crucified. Or we can trust in God’s power of resurrection to transform the bleakest situation. We will not wake up one day and discover that God has erased the darkness that currently envelops us. But I believe God is at work urging us to catch a vision of a brighter, less violent world, and giving us the courage and determination to strive for it.

The human situation is not hopeless. A better world is possible. Not because God will one day override our freedom and unilaterally establish a better situation – freedom and equality for all, and people living in peace. Our situation is not hopeless because God never stops challenging people to resist evil and to work for the common good.

Why have we become one of the most violent nations on earth? Why doesn’t every single church in this country advocate universal background checks, a ban on semi-automatic weapons, armor-piercing bullets, and high capacity magazines?

The Christian Church used to be a formidable force in our nation. Why have we allowed the church to become so timid and inward-focused that an increasing number of people in our society find us irrelevant?

There is no doubt in my mind that society suffers when religious faith diminishes. It is not a coincidence that while membership in religious institutions has declined, we have seen a rise in hate groups, an epidemic of drug use, a surge in suicides, a waning concern for those on the margins, a growing alienation among people who hold different opinions, and the belief that there is nothing we can do to limit mass murders.

It is the role of the church to expose the idolatries of our culture, such as the glorification of violence, the habit of concocting facts and claiming they are true, the belief that if we are harmed we should seek revenge, the philosophy that we are separate individuals and not our brother’s and sister’s keeper, and the outlandish claim that guns make us safer.

Fear of the stranger coupled with greed, has stoked the flames of division that threaten to incinerate our nation. Seeking an advantage over others, stacking the deck against people unlike ourselves, and elbowing out people of a different race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation fuels a greater bonfire. But if we squint to see the image of God in each individual, treat every person of goodwill with dignity, insist on a level playing field for everyone, and institute common sense gun laws, we can douse those flames. Struggling for personal advantage over others is a recipe for unrest and division. Striving for the common good can build a country that is better than ever.

Communities of faith can serve as a counter point to skewed values that destroy lives and undermine the trust that binds a society together. It is only when we expose the lies of our day and carry out our core mission of justice and mercy that we will be able to counter the evils that are shredding the fabric of our nation. When we are filled and fueled by the loving Spirit of God, we can diminish violence, improve living conditions, give people a reason to get up in the morning, and instill hope that the world can move away from darkness and toward the light of a new day.

We do not need to pray for God to fix the world; we need to pray for the courage to answer God's call to cast out the demons of racism and anti-Semitism, homophobia and xenophobia, drugs and violence. Each of us has a mission. God expects us to heal wounds, to spread joy, to love generously, and to show the world the things that make for peace. People of faith play a critical role in society, but only when we are faithful to our calling.

NOTES

1. June Jordan
2. Lee Staman, "A Meditation on Hope and Fear," *Oneing: Politics and Religion*, (A publication of the Center for Action and Contemplation, 2017), p. 39.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Abraham and Sarah,
of Isaac and Rebekah,
of Jacob and Leah and Rachel —

In every age you are faithful to us! Your mercy extends from generation to generation; your steadfast love never ends. So, like Abraham and Sarah, we press onward in faith:

faith that you prepare a way for us and sustain us on our journeys;

faith that you move within, among and around us — beckoning your people to bear your blessing to the world;

faith that you still work through the chaos to renew, redeem, and restore creation, so that — one day — all will share in the joy of your promised peace.

As heirs of the promise, we long for this day, O Lord. We long for the day when nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. We long for the day when justice will roll down like waters, and people of every land and race will have what's needed to flourish. We long for the day when you will wipe away every tear — when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. We long for the day when we *all* will inhabit a better country — a heavenly one — not in death, but in life.

So we press onward in hope:

hope that comforts;

hope that sustains;

hope that energizes;

hope that demands better.

Faithful God, ground us in hope and call us again to your work. In an age when division plagues our common life, when prejudice infects our communities, when violence rages in our streets, we recognize that our prayers for peace are not enough. They are merely a starting point — a way of naming all that is amiss, all that mars your vision of *Shalom*. As we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” align our wills with *your* will and empower us to build your kingdom in our midst so that all creation may experience your wholeness. By your Spirit, make us people of expectant hope, who — like Abraham and Sarah — set out in faith to bear your blessing to the world. As we press onward, guide us, empower us, and grant us the wisdom and courage to stay the course, so that our lives might glorify you.

This way pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.