

WE CAN'T WAIT

Living Now Toward Then | Hope-Full (Part 3)

Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:58

God Is a Redeemer

We are exploring this month the subject of Christian HOPE – what it is, why we have it, and what difference it makes in our lives. As I shared in my message at our contemporary services last week, HOPE is one of the most powerful forces on earth. It can launch wise men on long journeys and inspire in even the simplest creatures the courage to endure long after normal strength would give out.

The particular kind of HOPE that followers of Jesus have is not to be confused with some shallower notions of hope popular in our time. Christian hope is not irrational optimism. It is not confidence that life will just get better on its own with time. It isn't comforting ourselves with thoughts of escaping earth to some distant heaven. As I want to stress today, Christian hope is the abiding peace and forward-leaning energy that comes from living in the presence, power, and plans of a God of REDEMPTION.

That word "redemption" is a loaded one. Whether in Hebrew or Greek, the word "redemption" literally means to = buy back in order to build up. Redeeming is what the Egyptian Potiphar did when he bought Joseph out of slavery and made him head of his household. Redeeming is what Boaz did when he rescued Ruth from hungry servitude and took her as his treasured life-partner. It was for the redemption of Sodom and Gomorrah that Abraham pleaded with God. It was for the redemption of the Hebrew people that Moses went before Pharaoh. It was for the redemption of the Jews that Esther risked her life to go before the King of Persia. It was for the redemption of Jerusalem that Nehemiah left a plum job in Persia. Redemption aims to free people from whatever binds them so that they can fully flourish.

The Old Testament writers picture God as someone profoundly concerned with the redemption of people. He is the God who wants to see cities rebuilt and vineyards replanted and covenants reestablished and exiled people returned. He is the Lord who moves to repair the broken and recover the lost and restore the stolen and refresh the weary and renew the worn out.

These redemptive themes continue in the practice and teaching of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus labors long hours to heal the sick and open the eyes of the blind. He feeds the hungry and takes note of the invisible and forgotten in the crowd. Jesus champions the cause of children, women, and outcasts. He crosses religious and social fences to establish redemptive relationships with lepers and adulterers, Samaritans and Gentiles, hated soldiers and despised tax-

collectors. Christ tells his followers that God will assess their heart on whether it beat like his heart with a passion to bring HOPE to the least and last of society. He forgives his enemies even as they crucify him. And in dying on that cross, Jesus pays the supreme price to buy humanity back out of its bondage to sin and death. Why? So that WE might be free and able to flourish.

Reclaiming Redemption

For the first two centuries of the Common Era, the early church took its direction from God's modeling on all this. Jesus had said to them: **As the Father sent me, so I send you.** (John 20:21) **Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.** (John 14:12) In other words, Jesus had left them with clear instructions that they were to continue the redemptive work that he and his Father had been doing. They did not need to die to pay for their own sins or the sins of others. That work had been uniquely done and completed by Jesus himself, the only one qualified for that job. But everything else the Father and the Son had been doing to redeem this world... all the work they'd modeled and taught about helping relationships here operate with the love, justice, mercy, and beauty of the Kingdom of Heaven... this the early church was commissioned to continue and to make more disciples who would also do likewise, until the day when God's will was done on earth as it is in heaven.

And so, the early church set about that task. As the Book of Acts describes, they established the first earthly colony of the Kingdom of Heaven. Amidst a highly segregated society, the early church was a place where rich and poor, slaves and land-owners, Jews and Gentiles, black, brown, and white worshipped, grew, and served together. They challenged wrong-doing where they saw it and advocated for justice with the governments in their land. They cared for the poor and vulnerable, while also insisting on every able body working and bringing their best gifts to the community. They proclaimed the cross of Christ and the need for repentance of sin, while also becoming renowned as a community of remarkable love, hospitality, and joy.

As time went on, many, many people were attracted to the HOPE that the kind of society they were shaping offered to the world. So free and flourishing was their way of life that as Acts 2 reports, **"They enjoyed the favor of all the people, and the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved."** (Acts 2:47) Within a few generations, the radiant influence of that once tiny colony of heaven, transformed the Roman Empire and began shape what we call Western civilization.

It wasn't easy for the early Christians to do this. The selfishness, prejudices, categories and competition of the surrounding cultures pulled strongly at them – as they do on us. The Apostles write a lot about that struggle. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul urged the Christians to hold fast to the HOPE of the

Gospel of the Kingdom of God. **Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.** (1 Cor 15:58)

How were Christ's followers to know that their labor for the redemption of this world was not in vain? The answer lies in the first word in his statement. Whenever you see the word, "**Therefore,**" in the Bible look closely at what comes before it. The entirety of 1 Corinthians chapter 15 before verse 58 is a discussion of the encounters the church had had with the resurrected Christ and the implications of that for Christ's followers. The early church was convinced that what God had done in raising Jesus proved three things: 1. That every other promise and teaching of Jesus could be trusted; 2. That they no longer needed to fear death themselves; and 3. That the resurrection of Jesus' ravaged body into the glorious form they had met after Easter meant that Christ truly had the power to reclaim and renew fully the entire material world.

The first Christians realized that their ultimate future didn't lie in some disembodied heaven off in the clouds. When Jesus came back, God was going to bring heaven fully to earth. God would do then for their bodies and the whole material creation, the glorious work of renewal they'd seen inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus' body. Like schoolchildren in a Chicago winter who've just seen an unmistakable sign that summer is definitely on its way, Christ's followers said in effect: "**We can't wait.**" There was a double-entendre to that sentiment. They were immensely excited about the prospect of that future coming. And, secondly, it was such a wonderful eventuality, that they couldn't imagine sitting still and just waiting for it. On the contrary, they immediately started to rearrange their lives, and the life of as much of their society as they could influence, to prepare for that coming Sonshine.

Living Now Toward Then

We've wandered a long way from that kind of HOPE-FULLNESS, I think. As English theologian, N.T. Wright, observes: "There are two extremes toward which Christian people" have tended to slide over the years. On the one side are "those who declare that... the single main Christian task is to build the kingdom here on earth through social, political, and cultural revolution. Alas, this social gospel has singularly failed to deliver the goods... An enormous amount of good has been done: social conditions have been improved vastly... But we are still a fragmented, frightened, and battered world." We have failed to help enough people deal with the root illness of sin that will always wreck our social projects until people come to the feet of Christ.

"At the other end of the scale are those who declare that nothing can be done until the Lord returns and everything is put to rights. The forces of evil are too entrenched, and nothing save a great apocalyptic moment of divine power can

address them or change the deep structures of the way things are... We [should] get on, such a view says, with the real business of the gospel, which is that of saving souls for the future world. We will do... Band-Aid activities, to look after the people at the bottom of the pile. But we won't do anything about the structures that put them there and keep them there..."

"Neither of these views begins to do justice—in any sense—to Paul's injunction to be steadfast and immovable in doing the work of the Lord because in the Lord our labor is not in vain... When we reintegrate what should never have been separated—the kingdom-inaugurating public work of Jesus and his redemptive death and resurrection—we find that the gospels tell a different story... It is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus's followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice now."

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a jail in Birmingham Alabama for mounting a non-violent protest to the violent actions of Sheriff Bull Connor and the dehumanizing practices common in that city. Dr. King's heart ached with sadness that more of the good people of the American church had not taken more courageous action to strive for the redemption of racial relations in our world. Several clergymen had told Dr. King to "just wait" for the courts to act and the laws to change. There will be evolutionary progress, they were saying. But in his famous LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL (Google it and read it), Dr. King wrote these words, explaining why as agents of Christian HOPE, we can't wait to do what God wants done NOW.

"There was a time when the church was very powerful... In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society... They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest... If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for [this] century... I HOPE the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour... We can't wait any longer. The time is always ripe to do right."

It's been half a century since Dr. King penned those words, and there are many areas of our society that need to be set right. There is the economic hopelessness, family breakdown, and broken criminal justice system that underlies the horrific violence of Chicago's south side – and the racism which we know flow both ways across the color divide. There is the multibillion dollar scourge of pornography and the stunning depravity of so much of what passes for entertainment these days. There is the continuing infanticide and the scourge of human trafficking going on right here in our region. There is the insufficient

stewardship of God's creation and of our own bodies. And I could go on till you threw me out. But "The time is ripe to do right."

If you know our church's mission program, then you know that, as one congregation, we are trying to do right. We are involved to some extent addressing some of these issues because they are both spiritual and social problems. But the honest conviction I feel from God is that we are not yet involved enough. We haven't brought anything like the full force of the potential creative action of this awesome congregation to bear on some of these issues. So without advancing solutions yet, let me pose a few questions, in closing, to spark some conversation in our church and in the hope that we'll wrestle with them until God gives us answers and directs our path further.

REVIEW: Where do you see our society living badly out of sync with the life of the kingdom of heaven?

RETHINK: What steps can we take to educate ourselves further about one of the most glaring issues?

RESOURCE: And, finally, Why are we waiting to be the agents of hope, Christ has commissioned us to be?

In view of God's heart for people and his stated plan to redeem the whole of creation, we need to recover the passionate purpose for which the early church lived. The time is ripe to help set this world right.

Please pray with me...

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