

A Present of Hope
October 20, 2013
By Pastor Laura Hehner

Remember close to this time, last year? The twelfth month of 2012. All of the fuss over the Mayan calendar coming to end,

...But were still here...

And the year before that... when was it, sometime in October?

That preacher predicted the end of the world,

and got a whole bunch of people nervous about it in large groups.

...But we're still here.

Can't even remember that guys name, or his random date,

which he changed, of course, after the predicted deadline came and went.

Going further back, Y2K----that one really got us.

Shoo! Couldn't even find a roll of toilet paper at the grocery store.

...But we're still here...

Going further back, Heaven's Gate. Going further back, Jonestown. And on and on...

[P]

We're a people obsessed with prediction.

And not just predictions relating to isolated stuff about the weather, or the stock market,

or the next political party to take the Whitehouse,

but regarding huuuuge things! Worldwide events.

Moments which will supposedly effect and sweep through every life,

whether each individual believes it will happen or not!

And nine times out of ten, it focuses on mass extinction.

[P]

We just get weird about that stuff, ya know?

We get to be kind of morbid with each other, in these things, playing off our fears,
And causing each of us to quietly sweat, dreading the worst,
while we pretend all of these rumors and predictions don't bother us in the slightest.

[P]

I have to admit to you guys, that I was really hesitant to preach about our topic for today,
because of all of the strange stuff I just mentioned.

Our theme came from our lectionary---one the Church is joined today in sharing---

And I was tempted to toss it to the side,
but decided to stick with it, because it would be a nice challenge.

Not just on my end, but for us, together, this morning.

Because it would open my mind and your minds, together---hopefully---
---into places our thoughts don't too often wander.

[P]

You see, our lectionary readings from Jeremiah and from 2 Timothy (which isn't in our
bulletin),

They deal with these tricky *predictions*.

---These ideas about the *future*, and what might happen to us all, together, on a massive
scale.

But there's something different about the predictions we read
from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, today.

There's something other than what we hear all of the time on the news, from crazy cults,

And overpaid pastors.

[bp]

These predictions are different, because they don't deal with dread, but with *hope*.

They don't talk only about the future, but about now.

---This moment---And the ways these minutes might build into the next.

And they don't focus on our *deaths*, but on the beautiful *life* we find in the presence of God.

[bp]

...And there was something else there, too, that I couldn't quite put my finger on...

...But after reading through the passages a couple times more,

I realized that what I found in them, different from the rest, was a feeling of deep heart.

A sense of passion...commitment...and love.

[bp]

And all of this together, made me realize that maybe

there was something worthwhile for us here to think about together.

To consider deep in our hearts as we go.

[P]

From the prophet Jeremiah, in Chapter 31:

(Jeremiah 31) 31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ...33 This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD.

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What do we see here? ...What do we hear?

Is it dread? ...Is it doom?

In this piece of scripture, right here,

do we read about violent images of death, and an urgent need to repent,

Letting go of all we have now, forsaking everything in the present,

thinking nothing else mattered, because soon everything would be gone?

[P]

No... it doesn't.

Instead this prediction, these words about the future talk about

a hope in God more gorgeous than anything we've ever seen.

A world in which God is known, and felt.

A world where people will see God move without the need to be *told* God is here.

Without the need to explain that God is moving.

[bp]

This passage speaks about an amazing intimacy each life will have with the life of God—

--naturally---without the strain of teaching.

And that, to me, is something beautiful. Something breathtaking.

Something striking to be seen, and something I would love to see for myself, one day;

Though I sincerely doubt I'll have the blessing witnessing this, in my own lifetime.

[P]

In this reading from Jeremiah, we find almost the exact *opposite*

of all of that dread, all of that anxiety,

that false prophets and preachers so often try pushing on each of us, en masse.

We see *joy*, don't we? ...And we see God.

An undeniable presence of God in the hearts of all.

[P]

So no, I don't mind talking about that idea, today.

To me it's something not too spooky or superstitious in the imagination.

Something not so offensive to our rational senses.

Something to reach for, rather than recoil from.

[P]

And these readings also don't leave us stranded in a far away future, but bring us back the now.

They pull us back to this moment, keeping that beautiful hope for the future

tied to what we see and do each day we wake up in the present.

[bp]

From 2 Timothy, chapter 3, speaking on the time between that moment and now, Paul says:

(2 Timothy 4) In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: (2) proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

[P]

In these words, we find again, not so much a sense of dread, or of hiding,

or of an urgent need to run to the grocery store

for gallons of filtered water and nonperishable foods---

---shoo! What a relief, right? Terrible to go without toilet paper---

---but instead, Paul here talks about *persistence*, doesn't he?

A persistence we should hold onto inside of us. Always.

No matter when or where we live.

A persistence we should continue bringing into the world,
over, and over, and over again, through our actions each day.

Not for anything else, but our devotion to God.

Not for any other reason, than for the love of God already in our hearts.

Not in some distant future, but now.

[P]

And our reading from the gospel of Luke reminds us of the same.

Jesus, talking about the widow.

That disenfranchised, most powerless member of ancient society...

... in her persistence for justice---her working constantly—over and over and over again,

No matter the odds stacked against her---

---finally achieving something amazing. Something miraculous.

Jesus, assuring in his teaching,

that if this closed minded person working with this widow

will help her succeed in what she does,

Then we can know with more certainty than anything else,

That God will see to it that through our persistence,

Through our constant work---in our undying passion---

---to spread the love and knowledge of God in the world,

That something amazing will come of the giving

for which we've given our lives and souls.

That something miraculous will come of what we live each day to do.

...As long as we just keep trying. As long as we continue breathing out from our hearts,

the truth and love we've found in God,

For others to feel. For others to see.

So that they might one day feel and see God too, on their own, without us.

Just as Jeremiah predicted.

[P]

The other day, I was on the couch with Ky,

watching a stand-up set from one of our favorite comedians, Marc Maron.

Now, I *love* this guy. Ky does, too, but not as much as I do, I don't think,

Because Maron just really reminds me myself,

so I can relate to all of the weird things he says on a different level;

but there's always an awkward moment when watching stand-up comedy, as a Christian, huh? ...

... because, of course, a favorite topic for comedians to poke fun at,

is organized religion, right?

Just give it a few minutes, and boom! Some kind of criticism toward religion rightly comes...

... and 90% of the time, it's about Christians and Christianity, right?

You don't too often hear comedians slamming Buddhists.

[bp]

Well... that moment came, of course.

Marc Maron is agnostic---not atheist, but agnostic---

And what he said was, that he could never know for sure,
But he had a hard time believing God exists.
Because the only way we ever come to believe in God
is either through being taught by our parents,
Or from tragedy. When horrible things happen to people, and in order to make sense of it,
they're "miraculously" born again,
Using Jesus as a sort of opiate for dealing with the harsh reality of their problems.

[bp]

As the words left Maron's mouth, I could feel Ky's eyes on the back of my head.
I felt his tension past the pillows behind.
And my response to Maron's words were...
... "he's right."

But just bear with me for a second, okay? Maron was right... but in a very limited way.
He was speaking from what I believe to be the correctly held perspective of a lot of
people,
but he wasn't addressing the fuller truth.

[P]

See, the sad thing is, this *is* the way a lot of people come to believe in God.
...But he was wrong on one count.

His statement was only half of the truth. Because he's missing the reality
That it doesn't need to be.

[P]

See God is Life and Something that lives always inside of each of us,
No matter when we live, or where we stand.

And we can have a very real, very active experience of God
with or without organized religion.

With or without some kind of trauma filling our days.

With or without the teachings of our parents.

[bp]

We would surely have different words to express our experiences of God, without religion.

Words without creeds and without prophets...

...But that experience would still be here, with us.

Just like in those early days before civilization tried to formalize every urge inside of us,

And the earliest of men and women, from out of the blue,

fell into these surprisingly complicated ideas

About the existence of Something we can't see with our eyes, living amongst us,

Our experience of God has no boundaries.

It's not confined by the ideas of councils of men from the second century.

It goes beyond all of that---and in fact MUST---if we hope to know our faith as being real.

If we hope to truly KNOW God, and FEEL God, and be in relationship with God,

Our experience of God must pass the boundaries of any one experience,

And touch into all things in all days, in any way---imaginable and unimaginable.

[bP]

...And I think this is exactly where Jeremiah was going

when he said those words we read from Chapter 31.

This idea of our natural knowledge of God, overtaking all need to teach or to tell.

He speaks of an opening up of our souls to receive
that Spirit of Life already all around us.

And the beautiful result that would come, of people doing this across the board,
to the point where the presence of God is simply a known fact to all.

He speaks of a future in which there's no longer
a need for parents to teach their children.

There's no longer a need for organized religion to be the place
of bringing belief to troubled hearts, in comfort,

Because the Spirit of the Living God is known past all of those things.

Because the lives and hearts of humanity have finally opened
to the point of letting the feeling of God come into their lives

just as positively, just as surely, just as visibly as we experience anyone else, or anything
else in our lives.

[P]

And at the end of the day, that's why we do all of this, now, right?

In these moments when that's not the case for most,

That's why the church is here.

That's why we hope each day to spread the love and feeling of God the best we can...

... not for the sake of doing it---not for the sake of teaching and preaching on their own---

---but so that others, who hear us teach and preach persistently

in the love of God with the same passion as the widow.

With the same strength and devotion Paul speaks of in that letter---

---might come to know God on their own. See God on their own.

Without the further help of any of those things.

We do all of this over and over and over again, so that we don't need to do it anymore.

So that people will open themselves up just enough,

to let themselves feel God outside of all of these things.

Naturally. Deeply. Constantly. Wherever they stand. Whenever they live.

[P]

And our constant work in doing this is what Paul spoke of, this morning.

---What Jesus spoke of, in the story of the widow,

And it's the hoped for world Jeremiah predicted would come as a result of all of this,

when he said in verse 33:

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

[P]

Unlike these other predictions we hear about so constantly,

this is one not to fear, but to hope for.

Not something to dread, but to work for, each day we live.

It's our call as Christians to live toward the day that this prediction becomes

a *reality* in our lives and in the lives of the people around us.

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So, for now, let's give it all we've got.

Let's work all we can.

Let's help what's inside of us... the very love and presence of God...

... be let out into the world in a way that will help others know as we have known,

And love as we've been loved;

As we watch God do unbelievable things in the life around us,

and bring us into a future of God's hope and love, all together.

Amen.