

Preaching Hope in a Time of Discouragement

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One of my favorite pictures of what “church” looks like at its best is the word-picture Frederick Buechner drew in a sermon he preached somewhere some thirty years ago. He was imagining people who come to church week after week—what they looked like, what they were thinking, how they were changed. Perhaps, on any given Sunday, Buechner mused, they weren’t changed much at all. He wrote:

Yet they kept on coming anyway, and beneath all the lesser reasons they had for doing so, so far beneath that they themselves were only half aware of it, I think there was a deep reason, and if I could give only one word to characterize that reason, the word I would give is *hope*.

They came here...to get married and stood here with their hearts in their mouths and their knees knocking to mumble their wild and improbable vows in these very shadows. They came to christen their babies here—carried them in their long white dresses hoping they wouldn’t scream bloody murder when the minister took them in his arms and signed their foreheads with a watery cross. They came here to bury their dead, and brought in, along with the still finished bodies, all the most un-still, unfinished love, guilt, sadness, relief, that are part of what death always is for the living. In other words what they were doing essentially beneath this roof was offering up the most precious moments of their lives in the hope that there was a God to hallow them—a God to hear and seal their vows, to receive their children into [God’s] unimaginable kingdom, to raise up and cherish their dead. I see them sitting here, generations of them, a little uncomfortable in their Sunday best with their old faces closed like doors and their young faces blank as clapboard; but deep within those faces—farther down than their daydreams and boredom and way beyond any horizon of their wandering minds that they could describe—there was the hope that somewhere out of all the words and music and silences of this place, and out of a mystery even greater than the mystery of the cosmos itself, a voice that they would know from all other voices would speak their names and bless them.¹

In his homiletical imagination, Buechner remembered—and described and all but *named*—the people who have come to church, who have *been* church, across all the centuries of the church’s life. What beckoned them was the hope that a voice would speak their names and bless them.

What sort of hope beckons us in these days? These are, after all, discouraging days for many church people. We take the measure of things—the post-Constantinian experience of being marginalized by an indifferent culture, the decline in worship attendance, the underrepresentation of the millenials, the rise of the “Nones”—and we get anxious. Moreover, since Reinhold Niebuhr was right years ago when he observed that anxiety is the precondition of both creativity and sin, it is so often the

case that our anxiety drives us to go looking for hope in all the wrong places.

There are certain kinds of hope which are both appealing and inadequate. There is a kind of hope which ties us too closely to the externals of life—which goes up and down like election season polls. If things are looking good today—if I’m feeling well, and there’s plenty of money in the bank, and I just got a promotion, and the news of the world is not as bad today as it was yesterday—then I have hope.

Churches often fall into the practice of this kind of hope. In my role as a seminary president, I am always getting phone calls from the Pastor Nominating Committees representing churches, large and small, across the country. “Can you give us the names of pastors who would be good fits for us?” they ask. Sometimes they express interest in a good preacher, a good pastor, a good theologian, a good visionary, someone interested in evangelism and social justice, all of that. But all too often, they just cut to the chase: “We want someone who will fill this place again.” “Fill it with what?” I’ll sometimes ask. “We don’t really care; we just want to grow again.” Their hope is based on the externals. Fix the externals, they’re thinking—bring in new members, electrify the worship, turn around the dashboard metrics—and the Kingdom of God will come in.

In these days when some Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations are hosting conversations about schism, there are these occasional meetings which you can attend where a guest speaker will stand up in the front of a large room and point to some very impressive charts. The high-water mark at the top of one particular graph will show the denomination’s total communicant membership way back there in the 1950’s. And then, like a sliding board, the line from that mark descends depressively across the width of the chart toward the current year, at a point somewhere near the bottom right-hand corner, while the speaker makes the dramatic point that this is the evidence of the wayward influence and incipient liberalism of a communion that has lost its way. My own thinking is that there is a much larger cultural phenomenon going on that is impacting every ecclesial family in America—the Protestant mainline generally considered; the Catholics in every region except, perhaps, the border states (like the one I live in); even those Evangelicals whose rhetoric about their own immunity from these trends has sometimes been prematurely triumphalistic. This larger cultural phenomenon signals a profoundly spiritual problem and hunger, for sure, to which Christians ought to be attentive, but also tracks the rise of individualism and a malaise generally considered and the decline of voluntary associational groups of all sorts—religious and civic. It is, in short, a big hairy dilemma the dimensions of which are multi-layered and complicated. But what is so often implied by a flimsy and self-serving analysis of that descending line on the big chart up front is that if you and your congregation will only join the shiny new denomination that has paid for the guest speaker’s travel expenses, then in no time at all you will all witness the reversal of those downward trends as your church’s measurables once again rise up toward the evidence of greater faithfulness at the *top* right-hand corner of the chart.

If things are going well with respect to the external measurements, then we have hope. The problem with this sort of hope, of course, is that that’s when I am least persuaded that I *need* hope. The point at which I need hope the most is precisely when hope is in its shortest supply. A hope, therefore, which is so dependent upon the positive measurable externals of life is a hope that will not sustain us in hopeless times.

There is another kind of hope that goes in the exact opposite direction—that cultivates as few ties as possible to the externals of life. For there is a way of hoping that depends upon being totally disconnected from the daily affairs of human history. This approach to hope simply focuses upon the “sweet by and by” without drawing any connections with the needs of the world in which we live. This is the kind of hope we hear about, for sure, in the neat pieties of privatized religion—a hope that centers around a one-on-one relationship between the believer and God that is not likely to require any more public expression. Years ago, Sally Brown from Princeton Theological Seminary made the observation that the old nineteenth-century hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone,” with its vision of a Jesus who “walks with me, and...talks with me, and...tells me that I am his own...” could be the anthem of twenty-first century Anglo-Protestant spirituality. “The people to whom we preach today,” she wrote, “are highly influenced by a culture of individualism.... [M]any understand Christian spirituality in fundamentally individualistic terms—as a matter between the self and God.”² This sort of privatized hope is discernible in many churches that are high on spirituality and indifferent to any imperative to apply it in any sort of outwardly communal or missional direction.

But such a constricted version of hope is not just visible in church; there are secular versions of it, also. This is the hope, I suspect, behind the allure of those suburban highway billboards trumpeting the assets of those bucolic gated communities awaiting us at the next exit. We may work in a shop or skyscraper downtown, but those planned communities in the woodsy perimeters of town awaiting us at the end of the day make possible a disengagement from the noise and messy problems of urban life. There are those in many of our churches who have constructed for themselves hermetically-sealed cocoons that provide for them the gift of “salvation by separation.” When they go home to the gated house in the gated neighborhood—with its wall and its security code and its splendid isolation—it is possible to experience a secularized version of “the sweet by and by.”

The problem with a hope that is dependent upon the positive measurable externals of life or with a highly privatized hope that is dependent upon “the sweet by and by” is that neither of these attempts at hope approaches the rich, redemptive, eschatological flavor of biblical hope. Biblical hope—hope that is attested to throughout the pages of Scripture—has always given its most eloquent witness over against the world’s bleakest backdrop. It is the kind of hope that the prophets threw out as a lifeline of comfort for the chastened Israelites to cling to in the midst of exile. Jeremiah, for instance, testifies to being commanded by God in the midst of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that will lead to the first exile to buy a field in the midst of Judah. As my Old Testament colleague Dr. Suzi Park has said, “Though he knows that exile is coming, Jeremiah listens and obeys God’s command. He buys a field in a land that is about to be conquered and destroyed as a gesture of hope and faith that God will eventually save and return the people back to their land.... Indeed, an act of hope in the midst of discouragement!”³

This is the kind of hope that St. John wrote about when he envisioned that same comfort taking on human form and coming into the world as light which would shine in the darkness and which darkness would not overcome. It is the kind of hope that St. Paul described when he wrote to the Roman Christians: “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.”⁴ In both Testaments, such biblical hope is not fair-weather hope and not escapist hope, but hope that places itself squarely in the midst of pain. In that specific location, hope speaks a distinct word to pain that, all evidence to the contrary, things as they *are* are not things as they *will be*. Biblical hope is hope that starts in a hopeless place and then weaves itself throughout the amazing saga of the people of God in every age. It is hope, finally, that acquaints itself as well with our saga, too, yours and mine.

It is crucial to preach this hope in times of discouragement such as these. When it takes so little imagination to behold the bleakness of the world around us—consumed as it is by terrorism and war and income inequity and environmental danger and the bloated lives made possible by a near-addictive consumerism, and in a church often surrounded by the magnitude of human needs and fears—it is crucial for the preachers of hope to remember two things. First, the good news of the Gospel began, as it always does, in the midst of the very teeth of death and despair. It drew near to human pain, not human triumph. It rooted itself in a cemetery, after all, the last place in which anyone expects to encounter life, where faithful people encountered the risen Christ.

Secondly, the Gospel is preached into the midst of community. In the Matthean account of resurrection, for example, two women went to that Jerusalem cemetery encumbered by a view of life on the ground, but there in that hopeless place they met the risen Christ. Rather than encouraging them to stay there, marinating in their hopelessness, he directed them back to the world and the church. “Do not be afraid,” he said; “go and tell my brothers [and sisters] to go to Galilee; there they will meet me.”⁵ His word to them was to go and tell the church, for the unexpected news in that arena of death would not be intended to be a private experience. So they were sent back to the world and to the church by One Who had overcome the inevitability of death and thus saw the life beyond death with the bigger vision that is only possible with the right kind of eyesight.

Preaching hope in these discouraging times requires this right kind of eyesight. It requires, I believe, that the preacher name without fear the conditions that assault hope, the very conditions in any age for which the biblical message of hope is always intended. Moreover, preaching hope in these times requires that the preacher point listeners back again and again to the very same arena toward which Jesus has always pointed them—the world *and* the church.

I sometimes hear people of faith, including many seminary leaders, drawing a false dichotomy between the world and the church—as if the church is so ghettoized and compromised now by its own self-absorption and self-destruction that even God has given up on it. Better now, I have sometimes heard them say, that we jettison our historic preoccupations with the church and direct our intellectual and missional energy toward the world generally considered. “After all,” I actually heard one lecturer say once at a meeting of seminary leaders, “Jesus didn’t say in Matthew 28, ‘Go therefore into the *church* and make disciples;’ he said, ‘Go therefore into *all nations* and make disciples....’”⁶ Well, fair enough. But, since Jesus also beheld Peter—that particularly neurotic and mercurial disciple almost comically given to repeatedly putting his foot in his own mouth—and said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *church*,”⁷ can we not admit and claim boldly that Jesus loves both the world *and* the church? Sally Brown, quoted above with respect to the dilemmas inherent

in our culture of individualism, went on to say that “the Reformed tradition insists [that] distinctively Christian spirituality is irreducibly corporate and communal—in short, ecclesial, spirituality.”⁸ And so it is. Preachers of hope cannot stress that point often enough.

One of my favorite preachers of hope was Dr. Jack L. Stotts, a theologian, ethicist, and a predecessor of mine in the President’s Office at Austin Seminary. For each of the years of his presidency here, he gave a Charge to the graduating class at the Seminary’s commencement ceremony. In 1994, he riffed on another text from Matthew: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves....”⁹ Not such a great way to send someone out into service in the church, if you ask me, except that Jack was reading that text with just the right kind of eyesight. And so he went on to say this:

The wolves of our day are not the wolves of Matthew’s time. They are not an identifiable group in the churches, as much as we would like to point them out as this or that interest group of the right or left. The wolves instead are forces that act to deter the daring action and risk-taking ventures to which Jesus calls us.... In the churches which have suffered loss of membership over the past several years, there is the wolf of uneasiness and discomfort that invites us to focus on what will add numbers without counting the cost to the full-voiced gospel. In a market-driven religious environment, there is the temptation to offer what will please rather than what will stir. For a church that struggles with its identity, there is a temptation to settle on the lowest common denominator, one that will hold people together at all costs. And there is the equally corrupting temptation to provide a formula-faith that invests authority in what is penultimate: our experience, the Scripture, the church, or a creed, rather than what is ultimate—the God who calls us in Jesus Christ. There is the alluring temptation in an unstable environment to long for and to seek a risk-free world, or at least an enclave of assurance and comfort. And thus there arises in the church a culture of intimidation that works against standing up for the right and seeking the truth, no matter what. This culture is one of defensiveness and fear, discouraging or avoiding struggle, of denying the wolves of ignorance and greed, of poverty and constriction of spirit, the wolves that prowl around us and within us, ravenous beasts of prey.

But listen: “I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.” It is not a threat. It is a charge worthy of your gifts, your faith, your knowledge. It is a word not to douse your enthusiasm but to elevate it. It is a word not to discourage you but to encourage you. It is a word not to make the task of ministry threatening, but to affirm its noble and ennobling dimensions....

And I send you out not armed with automatic weapons to kill the wolves, but as a bearer of love that will overcome them. This love confronts the beasts that devour our spirits.... This love rests on the love of God that has in Jesus Christ overcome the wolves of the world, rebuking the untruthful, urging...thinking and acting that frightens even its proponents, and having the courage to risk one’s own comfort and security for the sake of the gospel.¹⁰

Every now and then, when we behold the church of faithful experience as opposed to the church of our most relentlessly impossible dreams, we can see breathtaking evidence of such embodiment of hope.

In a recent issue of *Texas Monthly*, I read an article that recounted a parable of such embodiment. The tiny hamlet of Wells—hardly a wide spot in the road in the piney woods of east Texas—has become the home of a small following of separatist fundamentalists, not more than 90 members including some 35 children. The “elders” of this cult-like congregation moved the whole congregation there from Houston in one fell swoop and began to treat the 700 or so citizens of Wells like unwashed heathens. These elders, all of them young men, practice a process of “shunning,” which includes separating new recruits from their families. They have bought several pieces of real estate in the town, from which they control their own members with high-handed strategies of indoctrination and proclaim that all other Christian bodies in America—including the three small Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal congregations in Wells—are apostate. Many families from across the country, whose young adult children have been lured into membership in this church, have come to Wells hoping in vain to be able to see their children and perhaps encourage them to come home. These families have been denied unsupervised time with their recruited loved ones and have been treated with suspicion and disregard by the elders who control and monitor their access. Gradually their plight has become common knowledge amongst the pastors and church people in the community, as the townspeople, too, have become more alarmed over the secretive and abusive behaviors they have witnessed.

A few months ago, the Baptist and Methodist pastors in town organized a prayer vigil. They gathered near the old railroad depot and marched, some 75 or so locals, to the ramshackle house that is the headquarters of this new congregation. By the time they got there, the crowd had swelled to over a hundred. There was an uneasy conversation in the front yard of the house between the leaders of the march and several leaders of the separatist church. One of the elders shouted at the crowd, “You love the world and you think the love of God is in you?... You should be ashamed of yourselves that you’d come out, this night, playing the fools of God.... You are false Christians.” Later, pointing at one of the local pastors, he shouted, “If you follow these blind leaders, you’re going to fall into a ditch and you’re going to burn in hell!... This man is not a man of God. This man knows not the Lord Jesus Christ!” But in the midst of this loud tirade, the sputterings of this man were drowned out by a new and louder sound. It was the sound of singing, as the church people of Wells took up the songs of their faith:

Oh, how I love Jesus,
Oh, how I love Jesus,
Oh, how I love Jesus,
Because He first loved me!

When that song was over, they sang “Victory in Jesus,” and when that song was over, they sang yet another. The meeting eventually dispersed, but the church people of Wells had found their voice, and now in various ways, they are continuing to raise their voices against the tyranny of a dangerous spirit dwelling in their midst.¹¹

Truthfully, the Church of Jesus Christ is not always much to look at when it comes to assessing the powers of the world and which of those powers we would be wise to bet on. It is, after all, so often polarized and embattled and timid. All it is really good for, in the final analysis, is singing its bold song into the face of all that looks so powerful and yet is finally so hopeless. This is why those two women took heed of the risen Christ's words there in a cemetery on that first Easter. They went back to whatever they could discern of the church in that moment of time, resolved to repeat what Jesus told them to proclaim. They loved the church for the simple reason that Jesus did and does, and so they went back to a discouraged and embattled collection of dispirited disciples and fairly *preached* it into renewed faithfulness and hope. This is our job too, even—no, especially—in times of discouragement.

Notes

- 1 Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 32-33.
- 2 Personal correspondence with Dr. Brown. See also Sally A. Brown, "Preaching as Spiritual Formation," *Journal for Preachers*, XXI, no. 2 (Lent 1988): 26-30, where Dr. Brown argues for an communal/ecclesial understanding of Christian formation.
- 3 From a recent conversation and subsequent correspondence on this topic with Dr. Song-Mi Park, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.
- 4 Romans 8:24b-25 (NRSV).
- 5 Matthew 28:10b (NRSV).
- 6 Matthew 28:19.
- 7 Matthew 16:18.
- 8 Op.cit.
- 9 Matthew 10:16a.
- 10 Jack L. Stotts, *A God to Glorify* (Austin: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1996), 49-50.
- 11 I am grateful for the investigative reporting of Sonia Smith's article, "When Is a Church a Cult?" *Texas Monthly* (February 2014): 82ff.