

Pitching our Tents in the Land of Hope:

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Part 2: Adventurously Expectant

Romans 8:18-28

First Presbyterian Church

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This morning is the second part of my two-part sermon on hope; specifically, the hope we have in Jesus Christ. I want to leave you with hope, and fortunately Scripture has a lot to say about it. This being my last Sunday, I have a lot to say too! The staff has been laughing with me this week, suggesting that I have to be careful the hope you have in this sermon isn't, "I hope she'll wrap this thing up!"

In Part One, called, "Pitching our Tents in the Land of Hope" (July 1st) we explored the hope that fueled the early church, hope so powerful it enabled Jesus' followers to do the impossible – to spread what sounded like a crazy message about God overcoming death so that *everyone* could have abundant life; a message that endures to this day. Their hope was magnified by the power they received at Pentecost; the same power, Peter explained, that raised Jesus from death. Reflecting on that hope today, we were reminded that we too can pitch our tents in the land of hope because in Christ, God has shown that God's power could and would overcome every darkness, even death.

I want us today to keep our tents pitched there, and imagine what this kind of hope, and power, means for the church today with so much change around us.

Our lesson this morning is from my favorite chapter of one of my favorite books of the Bible, Paul's letter to the Romans. Parts of this reading may be familiar to you too. But like all familiar texts, we need God's help to hear with new ears. Let's pray for that.

All-knowing God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, shine your light on our hearing and understanding, so your wisdom will sink in, that we would be redeemed and restored into the people you created us to be. For your glory. Amen.

Our reading is taken from Chapter 8. In this chapter Paul introduces the Spirit as the vehicle for God's work of restoring creation and transforming humanity into the image of Christ.

Romans 8:18-28

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one

who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God’s children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God’s will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When I have free time, I love to be outside. Much of that time is spent in the forest preserve next to our neighborhood, Cuba Marsh. I am there in every season. I run there. Walk there. I bike and ski there. For me it's where sermons

percolate, strategy and vision becomes clear, and problems are sorted out. It's where I make uninterrupted room to hear God.

After days and months, and years, of walking these trails, I've gotten to know them pretty well. I've treasured every inch of shade, every peak at the winding brook. I remember who I was with at different points, where we cried and laughed, or came across a giant turtle, or wiped out on skis. I knew every bend, every hill, what parts of the path flood and how much rain it takes to flood them; I knew where to walk for the best look at the sunrise, and the points on the hills where I'll have to stand on my bike to get to the top. I knew the place like the back of my hand.

At least I did until late winter of 2016. I headed onto the path on a day when the sky was as blue as it gets, the air still cold but the sun starting to anticipate the warmth to come. I turned the corner from the entrance and bam; everything had been flattened. Trees downed. Vegetation swept away. I could see nothing but acres of dirt and dead underbrush. I looked out at the vast devastation — and *I* was devastated. I didn't recognize the place. What in the world had happened? And why?

The patient man who drove up in his truck, the county forest ranger I guess, explained. They were restoring the marsh to its natural habitat. "To

what nature intended it to be," he said. I know that sounds good and nice, and right. But all I could think as I looked out on this now-*unfamiliar* terrain, space that I once knew intimately and treasured so much; all I could think was, "*I had no idea anything was wrong!*" What needs to be *restored*? In my eyes this place was perfect. It met all my needs. And by the way, it had just the right amount of shade on a hot day. Now it looked desolate, and I couldn't imagine what summer would be like in this desert. I wasn't sure I even wanted to come back.

My reaction sounds something like what I hear in churches today. Across North America in mainline denominations, churches are looking at emptying pews and aging membership, fewer families and fewer grandchildren. And we don't understand. We don't see anything wrong. The church has met our needs, sustained us in difficult times, shared our joys, supplied our friends, grounded us on Sundays. Like me and the Marsh – I didn't realize anything was wrong, I didn't see the need for change.

For some in the church, the change thrust upon us couldn't be more unwelcome. For others, change can't come fast enough. When we think of how much the world has changed in our lifetimes, or even in the last 10 years, why wouldn't we expect change in the church? How we make purchases, how we

communicate, what our cars can do, even our libraries have all changed so significantly. But more importantly, when we consider that we worship a God who is always going about change, when we consider that the journey of discipleship is all about opening ourselves to God changing our hearts and minds and actions to be more Christ-like, why wouldn't the church need to keep changing, too?

Our Scripture lesson today reminds us that change is inherent in all of creation; and that God is continuing to orchestrate the change needed for our transformation. Paul talks about all of creation being in "slavery to decay". Reading that was when my favorite marsh came to mind. The forest ranger explained how invasive species, vegetation that we often like, were killing out the native species. The marsh was in bondage to decay I couldn't see. My preference would have been to leave things alone. Or, if I had recognized decay, to try to change things to they way I liked them.

We don't mind change when it fits our needs. In fact, we keep a mental checklist of the things we wish were different, don't we? "I wish this situation would be different because I don't like it." Or, "I wish that person would be different because he annoys me." In church we definitely have a list of things that we wish were different – her preaching, that music, the communion style,

or just the fact that it's not like it used to be. But that's all critique based on personal preference rather than whether or not we are fulfilling God's purpose in the world; whether or not we are restoring the church to its intended state.

When Paul writes that we are in slavery to decay, the decay he's talking about is how we fall short of what *God* wants for us. His reference to slavery, or bondage, is our constant need for God's restoration to grow into the image of Christ. In other words, we are all *fully dependent* on God's intervention to be free to flourish. We can't do it on our own. The good news is that God is always about that work of redemption, and we saw in Jesus the extent God would go to redeem us. This is who God is.

People often ask me as they consider the future of the church, "So, Nancy, what do you think we should *do*?" We do want the answers. We want to know that if we add a program, or change the worship time, or knock down a wall, that everything will be "all right". Often "all right" means that everything will be like we remember it, or like it, rather than "all right" in God's eyes. There certainly are things we can *do* and are doing. In fact, we'll be knocking down walls right here at First Pres; not as a solution, but as a part of a broader effort to adapt to the changing needs of ministry so we can fulfill God's mission, which is our reason for being.

But the bottom line is that we don't know what the church will need to look like in 10 years and what changes are coming, every church is trying to figure that out. But Scripture assures us today that in that uncertainty there is great hope. In fact, that sounds exactly like the hope Paul's talking about in our passage. For to the Romans he writes, "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? We hope for what we don't see." You and I can hope for what we've had before, the comforts that we knew, whether it's in the church or our individual lives, or my Marsh, but God has plans bigger than we can even imagine. Those are the plans we have been freed to hope for. Plans for good.

After the Marsh was completely obliterated, I continued to go there. Reluctantly at first. For a while it was sad. So barren. And empty. But then I began to notice things I hadn't seen before. I could now look out and see paths that weren't previously exposed until you were on them. I could follow with my eyes their meandering way through the plain even before I got there, and catch glimpses of foxes and deer and those amazing cranes that look like ostriches. I noticed streams I never knew existed - peaceful to me, but also sources of water now free to return to their natural flow to reach the vegetation that was starving for it. And the sky. Wow, the wide-open sky; with views that

had me tripping on the path with my gaze fixed to the spectacular colors. I had no idea to hope for this.

And it kept coming. As spring advanced, every trip to the Marsh brought a new discovery. I even found myself eager to get there. New life, new creatures, new experiences. Now, two summers later the lush feel of the vegetation has returned, not at all the same, but beautiful in new ways. Not at all as I would have planned it, but "as nature intended it" before we disrupted the land with our own plans. Now the restored Marsh, and I, are experiencing abundant life.

When we are faced with devastation in our lives, or just difficult times and unwelcome change, we often can't see what's ahead. Sometimes we don't even know what to pray for. But God knows what's ahead and is intervening to make it all good. Paul says in our reading that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, including giving us words when we don't know how to pray. That same Spirit, poured out on the church at Pentecost, is the same power that intervenes so that God's redemption and renewal of the world and each of us will continue.

So back to the question, what should we *do*? Paul says we wait with patience and, in verse 19, "breathless anticipation"! I read one scholar translate

this as waiting "adventurously expectant." I love it! Adventurously expectant. What a marvelous way to describe the hope we have in Christ – adventurous expectancy. That's a lot different than a, "Gee, I hope this all works out," kind of hope. Also very different from a stand-on-the-sidelines-and-see kind of hope. This is an involved and embodied hope that steps out, even though the terrain is unfamiliar and uncertain, with trust that God is in this working through all of things for good that we can't yet see.

Pitching our tents in the land of hope doesn't mean we won't face difficulty or uncertainty. But this hope in Christ frees us for this spirit of adventure and helps us respond to uncertainty differently. One who carries that hope sees possibility when everyone else in the room sees roadblocks. Those who carry hope in Christ encourage each other to adventure and experiment, rather than criticizing and judging. And pitching your tent in the land of this hope frees you to let go of preferences and comforts, reminded that God has something *better* in store, something we can't wait to experience!

You have this in you, First Pres, this spirit of adventure and expectation, from your very founding in 1859. That spirit was evident this past year as we did a lot of experimentation and exploration. We experimented with Festival Sundays, we tried new things in worship, you've been exposed to different

leadership styles and different preaching styles. We've tried out an all-church Trivia Night, Bridge play on Thursday evenings, contemplative prayer services and all-church summer book club. What a great time of adventure as we practiced letting go of outcomes and control, and seeing what God would do with our creativity.

This posture of adventurous expectation will be essential for the church, all churches, to change and adapt. This isn't change for the sake of change. Instead it's change to bring us closer to what God created us to be. Made in the image of God, none of us are quite there. Created to be the body of Christ in the world, the church certainly isn't yet. We don't know where we're going but if we are to be partners in God's redemption of the world, we can no longer be complacent and wait for it to happen to us. The church has been complacent for too long.

Church historian Phyllis Tickle noticed it usually takes the church 500 years before we realize we've drifted from our mission. You've heard that she calls that the 500-year rummage sale, when we have to throw out all that isn't serving God's purposes anymore. I'm thinking after my Marsh reflections that it's also like a "habitat restoration" project. The psalms tell us we can learn who God is by what we learn about nature. If that's the case, my experience

with the Marsh has me on tiptoe in anticipation and expectation for what new life God will bring forth in this time; and that the glory of God's redemption is worth the wait, and even the groaning.

So friends, I hope you'll be on tiptoe too, adventurously expectant with your tents pitched in the land of hope. I can't think of a better posture to be in as you move into your next chapter, joining in God's ongoing work of redemption and change, and as you welcome your new pastor.

Know that I wait with you; breathless with anticipation for the hope we cannot yet see but for which we are assured that God has in store for you.

By God's tremendous grace and through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, may it be so.

Amen!