

“Finding Rebecca, Finding Hope”

Wildwood Mennonite Church
September 8, 2019

I would be curious to know how many of you came up with something that you hope for during our meditation time this morning. Perhaps that came to you quickly. Or perhaps we have learned not to think in terms of our wildest hopes and dreams. We might say, “Well, in a perfect world, this is what I would hope for.” We may have determined at some point in our lives, that to hope is to be sure of disappointment. So why hope at all?

Sometimes it is hard to be hopeful; to live in hope, to move forward in hope. Because I can be a bit of an ostrich, sometimes I wonder whether when I am hopeful, I am just burying my head in the sand. Just as I often say when I drive around in the countryside, that “all roads lead home,” as a Nine on the Enneagram, it works for me to believe that all things will turn out in the end. But is that really hope? Or is it just me trying to maintain a sense of peace and calm, rather than worry or fear?

Sometimes I can tell the difference. Sometimes, when I wake in the night with fears and concerns about a family issue, when I metaphorically fall on my knees in prayer and come up with a new idea of what to do or how to cope, then I feel hope. And the difference, I realize, is that I am not blindly avoiding the matter, but actively trying to make a change. And the belief that this is divinely inspired pushes me to carry on, and to carry on in hope for a better life for those I care about; to carry on with the assurance that I cannot give up.

There are many reasons to feel despair and a sense of hopelessness. When the Globe and Mail headline about the upcoming federal election reads, “Which leader do you dislike the least?”, when there is yet another mass shooting, when poor minorities are most affected by cuts in healthcare, or social programs, when hurricanes devastate communities or countries and snatch lives... I don't need to go on. There is enough cause for disappointment and despair in the world for us all to know it is hard to maintain a sense of hope for a better world.

I think it is easy to fall into despair over the state of the world when we don't understand the whys and wherefores of it. Perhaps if we looked at it from a God's-eye view we might feel differently – or perhaps we would feel it even more acutely. Who's to say?

I'm going to suggest, as we go through these next Sundays, when you spend time at the outset of the service to consider these two questions, “When, in the past week, have you felt despair and hopelessness?” and “When, in the past week, have you felt hope and gratitude?” that you bring these questions right down to a personal level. I would also suggest that you could ask yourself this question each night as you prepare for bed, or perhaps you can reflect in the morning on the experiences of the previous day. “When, (today or yesterday), did I feel despair and hopelessness?” and “When, (today or yesterday), did I feel hope and gratitude?” You may want to journal your responses,

or you may want to share your responses with another person. For myself, it helps to cement these experiences into my brain if I “follow up” my thoughts by seeing them on paper or hearing myself speak these thoughts to another. I know these questions and our answers to them also serve as a way to deepen our relationship with Christ and also “Deepen our Walk With Each Other”, part of the vision of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan for this year.

In our meditation time this morning, you considered not only when you felt hopeful, but also when you felt despair and hopelessness. I’ve likely said this before, but what I am learning about what might be considered as the negative side of these questions – what I am learning is that my responses to them are teaching me to ask God for help, to trust that God WILL help; they are a doorway to hope. And so, even the answers to what might seem like “negative” questions, turn out to be sources of hope.

As a small example, one of my reasons for despair this past week was in recognizing that I was quite jealous of a friend who has been enjoying kayaking over the summer. And THEN I thought, I can do something about this. I have taken kayaking lessons before, although it was a few years ago – and I loved it! Perhaps next summer, I can take those lessons again and find a way to get out on the river a few times. And so, my despair over feelings of jealousy turned to hope.

I would be curious to know, as we go through this worship series, whether you find that also to be true – because for me, doing this exercise, particularly that question about hopelessness inevitably teaches me something I believe God wants me to know about myself, and gives me some direction for how I am to be or what I need to do in a given situation.

The story of “Finding Rebecca” is a story of hope. It is a story of hope because it is a story of our trustworthy God; a God who interacts directly in the lives of ordinary people.

It begins with Abraham’s recall of God’s promise that this land where they live will belong to his descendants and his realization that Isaac needs a wife - someone to mother those children. He believes God is trustworthy, so he asks his steward to go to his country and his own relatives to get a wife for his son.

In this story, the Steward looks at his situation seriously. He considers the “what if’s” and asks the question. What if this young woman doesn’t cooperate? What if she refuses to come? Myself, I don’t ask those questions out loud often enough. I worry them around in my head for far-too-long periods of time; I make assumptions about what is and is not expected. I make assumptions about what is and is not possible. But the Steward asks the “what if” question out loud – and learns that all he is being asked to do is try. If the young woman refuses, he is relieved of his responsibility. All he is being asked to do is to try.

The Steward prays for a specific sign; for guidance from God in knowing what to do and how to fulfil this promise to find a wife for Isaac. Like Abraham, the Steward has a fair bit of confidence that God's promise will be kept. He WILL find a wife for Isaac among Abraham's people in Haram – and so he leaves in hope - prepared with camels and gifts.

Now, in Haram, we meet Rebecca - an ordinary woman doing an ordinary day's work; she is doing what she has always done: she is taking a water jar, walking to the well, and filling it for her family to use in their household. At this point, Rebecca has no idea that big change is about to happen in her life!

She is likely not paying any attention to the Steward who is waiting at the well. But when he approaches her for a drink – I don't know – is it his accent? Is he dustier than most folks she encounters there at the well? Is it the unusual number of camels he has in tow? Regardless of the reason, Rebecca recognizes that the camels must also be thirsty, and so she does what any hospitable person would do – she offers to water them as well. When Rebecca dumps the rest of the water from the jar into a trough and proceeds to fill it with enough water for all 10 camels, to her it seems like ordinary hospitality. "Of course!" she says, "That's just what we do." She has no ways of knowing that at that very moment she is part of God's plan, opening herself to enter God's story!

The steward waits until his camels have drunk their fill before he opens his bag of treasures and offers this young woman generous gifts - a gold nose ring weighing a fifth of an ounce, and two gold bracelets weighing four ounces. These gold bracelets – two of them – were quarter-pounders each. Thankfully the nose ring weighed less!

These gifts seem to me to be unusual for that time. I know of a woman who received an inheritance from her father. The woman's husband, however, thought it was wrong that a woman should receive an inheritance – and he made her give it back. Later she was diagnosed with a chemical imbalance in her brain. And I thought, "Yeah! In that situation, I'd have a chemical imbalance too!" I can get angry about stories like that. Yet here, way back in Genesis 24, we have a story that, as I said, seems unusual for its time – or at least my understanding of that time. Unlike what I would have expected in that day and age, these gifts were offered to the prospective bride; they were not a dowry made as payment to her father.

What I find hopeful here is that rules that some think were laid out in the Bible for all time, particularly regarding patriarchy, were not always hard and fast rules; they changed as cultures and situations changed – making room for differing views; for other ways of regarding and treating each other – that may even be biblical! God is always moving us onward to fullness.

At any rate, after giving the gifts, the steward then proceeds to ask her about her family. He asks, "Whose daughter are you, anyway?" It seems like he was pretty certain by now, but he's checking, you know. "In case of safety" as we say in our family. He's just checking - to be sure.

Of course it turns out, as he strongly suspects, she is the one! She is part of the family. She will be a fitting wife for Isaac; the young woman he has been looking for. And Rebecca, now wearing her gifts, continues to be hospitable as she offers straw and fodder for the camels and a room for the Steward to stay in.

Then, as the girl runs off to tell her mother, the steward recognizes the magnitude of what has just occurred – and he bows low and worships God, blessing God for constant and unfailing faithfulness, and for guidance to the house of Abraham’s kin.

Rebecca’s father and brother also do not take long to recognize that, no matter what they might think, they are up against a powerful God, and that they then have no say in the matter. Then the Steward brings out more gifts - gold and silver jewelry and articles of clothing and gives them to Rebekah. He gives expensive gifts to her brother and to her mother. Again, nothing for the father. Interesting!

The next morning, although the Steward wants to begin his journey home, Rebecca’s brother and mother ask if she could stay with them a little longer, even 10 days would give them a bit of time to adjust to this sudden change of events. But when the Steward shows his eagerness to get on the road, they leave the decision up to Rebecca. Who knew a young woman could make choices for herself in those days?!

Rebecca could have chosen to stay, but when they ask her, she is up for it. “I will go,” she says, as she makes a quick decision that will totally change everything. Her family blesses her, and she is on her way to a new life.

Rebecca is a good example of a life that is changed by her encounter with God.

A story quite different from that of Rebecca, but a story of another woman changed by choices she made and her encounter with God, is that of Corrie ten Boom. Originally published in a 1972 issue of *Guideposts*, I will read her story, directly from a site called “The Question of God”.¹

“Corrie ten Boom has long been honored by evangelical Christians as an exemplar of Christian faith in action. Arrested by the Nazis along with the rest of her family for hiding Jews in their Haarlem home during the Holocaust, she was imprisoned and eventually sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp along with her beloved sister, Betsie, who perished there just days before Corrie's own release on December 31, 1944. Inspired by Betsie's example of selfless love and forgiveness amid extreme cruelty and persecution, Corrie established a post-war home for other camp survivors trying to recover from the horrors they had escaped. She went on to travel widely as a missionary, preaching God's forgiveness and the need for reconciliation. Corrie's devout moral principles were tested when, by chance, she came face to face with one of her former tormentors in

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/boom.html> - accessed online on Sept. 7, 2019.

1947. The following description of that experience is excerpted from her 1971 autobiography, *The Hiding Place*, written with the help of John and Elizabeth Sherrill.

"I'm Still Learning to Forgive" it's called.

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us."

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fraulein*, ..." his hand came out, ... "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive [others] their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. (*unquote*)

Corrie ten Boom, it turns out, is the author of a poem you may have read called "Life is but a Weaving" (also known as the Tapestry Poem). While it is written in a different time and place – and while we may not agree with all of it, this is none-the-less what she wrote: ²

“My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily.

Oft’ times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.

Not ’til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why

The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver’s skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.”

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/741391-life-is-but-a-weaving-the-tapestry-poem-my-life> accessed online Sept 7, 2019.

Rather than living with our enemies of fear and timidity, we find hope when we trust and follow God, when we make choices in line with our understanding of who God is and how God would like to see us live in this world, recognizing that we cannot take on the weight or responsibility of others' decisions. It seems we are expected to live on the underside, so to speak. It is not ours to know and understand what God is doing with our lives. Sometimes it is only in looking back that we see God's hand at work. Sometimes we can only move ahead, not seeing it at all.

If we want to live full lives – and I'm not saying *easy*, I'm saying *rich*, full lives - the challenge, as I see it (and I know this is true for me), is remembering to call on God, to ask for direction, and to trust that God is directing my path and yours for God's purposes.

What has given me hope, as I have studied and pondered in preparing for this sermon, is this story of "Finding Rebecca", which is clear evidence we can trust that God is actively involved in our ordinary lives. We have the assurance that God is above all and in all, and that God is powerful. So let us follow the encouragement found in Proverbs 3:5,6, reading from *The Message*: "Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; [God's] the one who will keep you on track."

I want to leave you with this song, as sung by Ladysmith Black Mambazo.³

'O my heart be wise when your enemies surround you. Keep praying; ask our God for help. For God is powerful. That is your weapon; do not lose it. Pray without ceasing, for our God is powerful.'

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iq_64vG2al&feature=youtu.be&list=RD-iq_64vG2al&t=32