

Shrine of Hope  
Hebrews 6.13-20  
July 1, 2018  
Pentecost +6B  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

I feel deeply hopeful this morning, and I can't quite explain why. It's certainly not that all is as it should be. I could list for you, if I felt the need for that degree of self-disclosure, the myriad ways my life is...not exactly how I'd like for it to be. The ways I've neglected myself and my family and my friends. I could list my failings and shortcomings and need for personal growth in all kinds of areas. If I felt the need to depress (and even panic) you, the active congregation of St. Charles, we could talk about the list of physical needs this 45,000 square foot building has at this moment. And I am confident you are already keenly aware, many of you much more than I am, of the terrifying and tremendous threats facing our city and nation and global community even as I finish this sentence. The world is not as it should be. Our lives are not as they should be. We carry fear and regret and shame and anguish.

And yet. I feel deeply hopeful this morning.

Do you feel that hope resting in your pocket? Our children passed out hope this morning, and there is still enough for everyone here in this room and plenty of hope leftover to take and share as you go. The scripture before us this morning reads, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain." The Hebrews Preacher reminds us today that we are tethered to hope in the person of Jesus. We access a hope that enters the holiest place and links us to what is most hidden and most sacred.

How in the world do we find a shred of hope, much less a shrine of hope, when we know the scope and scale of what is unsettled and broken and terrifying? When we feel in our bodies what is falling apart, what is left undone, what is on fire?

We tune our ears toward hope. We adjust our eyes toward hope. We allow the frequency of our bodies to be tuned toward what can and will be. That's not to say we deny what is. It is to say: we do not live only in the world as it is. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain.

It's impossible to stand in the June 30 mid-day sun, temps climbing toward 100 degrees in the sweltering sauna of South Louisiana, surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of neighbors who have gathered in solidarity with oppressed people and not feel hope. The signs, the chanting, the camaraderie between strangers. The bemusement of a cluster of atheists who have just discovered a dozen passionate, justice-minded Baptists and realized that we are standing on common ground, fighting the same battle side-by-side, sharing the same heart for all people, advocating and lending our privilege to push back against injustice.

We have our work cut out for us, God knows, but I have hope.

I will not give into cynicism. I will not believe the world is ending. I will not wring my hands. I will not allow my diet to be a steady 24-hour-news cycle. I will not believe the best days are behind us. I will not believe we are powerless to affect change in our planet, in our nation, in our personal lives. I will not surrender my confidence in what we hope for nor my assurance in what we do not see.<sup>1</sup> I have reason to hope that God is near to us, fighting for us, welcoming us as partners, cheering us on as change-agents and peacemakers.

I swear it's true. And I don't just swear it's true, but God swears it's true.

Our Hebrews text today begins, "When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.'" And then all this talk of swearing and oath-taking. What's with the oaths?

In his commentary on Hebrews, the great preacher and homiletics professor Thomas Long notes, "In the ancient world, whenever people wanted to guarantee their promises or give solemn value to the trustworthiness of their words, they would swear by the divine name. Phil states that 'an oath is an appeal to God as a witness on some disputed matter'...If two people were in disagreement on a matter of trust—word against word—one of the parties could up the stakes by uttering an oath, thus summoning the divine presence and saying, in effect, 'If I am not telling the truth, may the gods do to me as I deserve.' In a world where speech and act were intimately connected, to swear to a divine oath was to play the ultimate chip, to put oneself at risk by raising a verbal lightning rod and declaring, 'You can believe my word, and I swear, if I'm telling a lie, strike me down.'"<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11.1

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, pp. 76-77

When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.'

God swore on Godself—this blessing is true. This promise I am making is true.

We hear the promises coming true in the story of Joshua 1, the people of Israel stepping onto promised land after the death of Moses. The promise to Abraham still making its way through the multiplied people.

God says to the people, "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous."

Carry hope in your pocket, children of God, "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." This is your oath. Thomas Long says these sacred stories lend us the image of "a cable of hope passing through history, to which the congregation is urged to hold on for dear life."<sup>3</sup> Hold on for dear life, my friends, because there is much work to do, there is much reason to throw in the towel, there is much to send us running for cover. I swear on this holy book, however, that hope is our best and truest way forward.

Pope Francis literally wrote the book *On Hope*. As it should be right? Most of us are already a little bit Catholic just by living in this town, and that charming and delightful Pope stands a pretty good chance of winning us over to a solid 50/50. He writes:

"[H]ope never disappoints. Optimism disappoints, but hope does not. We have such need in these times that can appear dark, in which we sometimes feel disoriented by the evil and violence that surround us, by the distress of so many of our brothers and sisters. We need hope. We feel disoriented and even rather discouraged, because we are powerless and it seems this darkness will never end.

We must not let hope abandon us, because God, with his love, walks with us. 'I hope, because God is beside me': we can all say this. Each one of us can say: 'I hope, I have hope, because God walks with me.'"<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Long, p. 79

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *On Hope*, chapter one

Set on the table before us is this ritual of our hope. At this table we consecrate hope. We eat hope. We drink hope. We remember a night that nothing was as it should be. When the embodiment of abiding love, radical hospitality, fierce peace was betrayed and set on a path toward death. Our sacred story, the one on which we are setting our lives, tells us that he did not respond in rage and in fear. He responded by washing the feet of his closest friends and telling them that their ultimate job was to be people consumed by love. People who carry hope in their pocket are people guided not by fear but by love. People who are anchored to a hope that goes to the most sacred, inner shrine are people who are guided not by rage but by the deep peace of love that blesses all the way to death, blasts past its limited walls, and then redefines what life itself is.

We are people of hope, my friends. As we prepare ourselves for the meal before us at this table today, may we feel that great cable across time that links us to the blessings and promises of God:

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain.

I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous.