

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 26, 2007

### **Thy Kingdom Come (Hope)**

Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28

In my work as a pastor

I often talk to people who are encountering a period of difficulty  
in their lives – a time of extra stress, or worry, or pain, or just irritation.

They may be unemployed and looking for a new job.

Or they may have been assigned a daunting project at work or at school.

Sometimes students find themselves with a teacher

they think they cannot endure for another day.

Or someone decides to embark on a new degree while still working,

adding a demanding course load to their already busy lives.

It usually helps,

when we face a period of time like this

to put things into long-range perspective.

Look for the light at the end of the tunnel.

Remind ourselves that this set of circumstances will not last forever.

Often, a person can gird up their strength by saying,

“It’s only 6 months. I can do anything for 6 months.”

“It’s only one school year. I can do anything for a year.”

If know we can hunker down and reasonably expect a better day soon,

things are more tolerable, more endurable.

But these time-limited problems are not the most troubling ones.

What of those causes of suffering that appear to be permanent?

What of those tunnels that are interminably dark?

If there’s light at the end, we can’t see it because it’s so far away,

and it may be blocked by miles of collapsed tunnel,

with the rock and debris of bad choices,

big mistakes, broken relationships

hardened human hearts,

and even genetic issues

not only blocking out the light

but preventing any progress toward the light.

I’m talking about...

A terminal cancer diagnosis.

An ugly divorce, with children involved.  
Estrangement in a family.  
Soldiers returning from war, traumatized and scarred,  
harassed by agonizing nightmares and flashbacks.  
A planet under a growing threat of ecological disaster,  
or nuclear destruction.

Do you have something like this in your life?  
An unrelenting thorn in your flesh that you cannot remove  
and whose torment will not subside?

Little comfort in these cases to say  
"Hunker down.

You can do anything for 20 years, or 40 years, or 60 years,"  
or however long you expect to live.

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If the Christian faith offers any power or benefit at all to the believer,  
if it is worth the ink on the pages of scripture from which we read,  
if it deserves our loyal devotion, our sacrifice of time and resources,  
then it must in some way deal head-on with these realities  
that cause so many in our world  
to lose hope and fall into despair.

How do we as Christians cope, spiritually,  
when we face a situation  
that looks like it will not be resolved or repaired or restored  
in our lifetime?

What can we say in the face of suffering and ugliness and evil  
that mocks the goodness of God's creation  
and laughs at our belief that God is loving,  
and good, and powerful to save?

What do we say when Sin or Evil looks us in the face, laughs  
and says, "Ha, Transform This!"

What is it that keeps our profession of faith from being simply  
a ridiculous wish-dream?

We speak eloquently with Isaiah  
of our longing for the day when God  
*will destroy ...the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
...when God will swallow up death forever.*

*and will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,  
so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;*

But there comes a point in which the waiting turns into years,  
and we begin to despair that we will never know  
the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

When we suffer like this,  
if we are less self-focused and more compassionate,  
we may look beyond ourselves  
and see that the suffering of others is much worse than our own;  
the trials of others much more daunting than our own.  
We may look across the ocean to the tragedy in Darfur,  
or simply down the hill at the recurrent flooding in Millvale.

But that just puts off the question;  
it only moves the question a little further away.  
What do we say of those who suffer interminably on this earth  
from the cradle to the grave,  
for whom this life is but a veil of tears,  
irredeemably bleak.

On our knees we ask...  
What, God, of your promises?  
What of your salvation and joy and perfect love?  
What of the reconciliation to which you call us?  
What of the goodness of the body and the earth you created,  
which you intended for our joy and delight  
but which have become for us a source of deepest pain?  
What of your promise to save and heal the person who has faith?

There must be something more that we can expect from our faith.  
Too many people wallow their days away in misery  
and die at the end of a wretched existence –  
even many people of faith suffer in this way,  
much of their lives.

What is our hope for them?

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It is to this reality of the human experience  
that Paul writes his words to the Corinthians,  
in the first letter, chapter 15:

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied.*

In Paul's day,  
the city of Corinth was the seat of government for Southern Greece  
known as Achaia.

It was noted for its wealth, and for the luxurious,  
immoral and vicious habits of the people.

It had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews.

Like a good proportion of Middle Class America  
many of the Corinthian Christians would have been well off enough  
to be fairly satisfied with their lives on the earth.

When things are going pretty well for you here on this earth,  
there isn't much need to dwell on the afterlife,  
or hope for something better in the next age,  
and so many of the Corinthians had more or less dismissed,  
even perhaps chuckled condescendingly at the idea  
of the resurrection of the dead.

The Christians of Corinth were able to tolerate the idea  
that Christ himself had in fact been raised from the dead –  
as one instance of what they thought were  
occasional, isolated miracles.

But to go further and say that Christ's resurrection  
means that we too will be raised  
seemed a bit far fetched to them,  
leaving too many absurd and unanswerable questions.

But Paul says that to believe in Christ's resurrection  
we must leave the door open to God's power  
to raise all who have died,  
and not just the *possibility* that God *might* do it,  
but that it is God's *full desire and intention*  
*to do it*, to raise the dead.

*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, Paul asks,  
how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?  
If there is no resurrection of the dead,  
then Christ has not been raised;*

*and if Christ has not been raised,  
then our proclamation has been in vain  
and your faith has been in vain.*

*If Christ has not been raised, he says again,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.  
Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.  
If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied.*

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The hope that is offered by the Christian faith  
is, has always been, and always must include  
hope for an afterlife –  
hope that there will be life after death,  
that death will not be the final word about us  
but that God will save and preserve our lives.  
God will redeem our human, creaturely capacity  
to live in relationship with God and with all the things  
God has created.

And to say that this life after death is a bodily life  
is to affirm for each individual person  
the same thing that Isaiah affirms for the whole creation:  
when he envisions a new heaven and a new earth,  
with houses and vineyards and fruit  
and animals, and feasts with good wine.

This eternal life that awaits us  
is a physical life, and a social life,  
a life in communion with God and community with others,  
a life of extraordinary relationships  
in which love and friendship cannot be rent asunder  
by mistrust, or jealousy, or dishonesty, or selfishness;  
a world of plenty where there is no lack of anything good;  
a life in which every desire is pure and perfect and good,  
and will face no obstacle to its perfect fulfillment;  
a life for which there is no lack of time to enjoy the goodness of God  
the fulfillment of God-given desire;  
no life will be cut short,  
but all will live in the relaxed assurance  
that death is no more.

Can you imagine not being limited by time;

if you like to go fishing, you can fish every day for 1000 years;  
if you like to golf, you can play 36 or 360 holes in an afternoon;  
if you like to paint, you have time just to sit and paint...everything.  
if you like to play musical instruments, you can learn them all.  
if you have a friend or family member  
    from whom you are separated by miles,  
    or by circumstances, or by estrangement, or by death,  
    you will be able to sit with that person  
        in the cool shade of a tree,  
        with a gentle breeze blowing,  
        sipping on something fresh and delicious,  
        and talk about everything you've missed,  
        and it will be new and sweet,  
        yet profoundly rooted in all that has gone before.

    And the family gatherings will roar with laughter and joviality  
        and the old familiar stories, and always new stories to tell.  
Our hope in Christ for eternal life in the Kingdom of God,  
    means that death does not have the last word.

Any of us who have lost a loved one,  
    can understand why Paul speaks of the finality of death  
        as an enemy – the last enemy.

The Christian hope  
    holds firmly the belief that God will not allow death to destroy  
        who we are, or who our loved ones are,  
        nor to take away what or whom we deeply love.

Love will be perfected, and life will be sweet and everlasting  
    in the kingdom of God.

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But our hope in Christ for eternal life in God's kingdom  
    does not mean that this life loses its importance.  
Even as we pray, "Thy Kingdom Come..."  
in the next breath we pray, "Thy Will Be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven."  
We are never permitted by our hope for next life,  
    to give up on this one, or stop living God's way,  
    or to think God has abandoned this life.  
We still must live in love and with justice toward  
    God and our neighbors and ourselves.

But because we have this hope in Jesus Christ,  
We do not have to live and strive in this life  
    as if our only chance for significance is these 80 years,

as if all our desires must be met by our last breath.  
That's a good thing, since we cannot meet all our desires in this life.  
We can't always get what we want, and we often want the wrong things,  
or we want the right things wrongly.

But now, because we know that all good things are in store for us  
in God's kingdom,  
we can wait patiently, when we face suffering that we cannot fix.  
We do not need anxiously to control our lives,  
or compulsively to protect ourselves from harm.  
We can trust God to work things out in this life,  
knowing that one day, in God's perfect time,  
love will be perfected,  
and all of God's goodness and beauty will be enjoyed by all,  
for *God will be all in all.*

Even if we have to wait 80 years, what is that?  
We can do anything for 80 years,  
when we know that our first 80 years in the kingdom of God  
will be perfectly beautiful, beautifully perfect,  
and always only the beginning  
of more and greater joy and love and life  
yet to come.