

2 Timothy 1:1-14 “Where Is Our Hope?”

I've been talking a lot about hope lately. Someone remarked, “Sounds like we're starting Advent season early!” And before I could say anything to the contrary, I had to stop and think, “Okay, but what is Advent? Advent is about the people of Israel feeling helpless and hopeless while the prophets are relaying a message from God about the coming Messiah. In other words, “Hope is on the way.” Okay. I can work with that. We will start Advent early this year! God knows there have definitely been times this past year where it's felt like we're under siege or in exile. So let's run with it.

Last week we talked about what it means to be faithful through little acts of hope. The example we read about was the prophet Jeremiah buying a piece of property right before the Babylonian army occupied Israel and Judah. Why would someone pay money for a piece of property that's just going to be taken away from you, right? Because Jeremiah had faith that God would return the land to God's people, that's why! Buying the property was a little act of hope. What I want to talk about this week is where we *receive* this hope. How can you do little acts of hope when the hope tank is running on empty?

I like to drive the back roads. Sometimes you can find short cuts that will take some mileage off your trip. Other times you just like to enjoy the scenery. Katy showed me a great back-roads route to get to I-5 from Chico. You head out of town on Dayton Road, hang a right on Ord Ferry and then turn left on 45 south until you reach Colusa. Then you hang a right and pop over to I-5 and there you are. It's beautiful just about any time of the year and there's not much traffic (except when you get slowed down by tractors or harvesters). Generally speaking, it's a peaceful drive. Except when you're heading home after a long day at whatever meeting was in the Bay Area, and you turn off I-5, go through Colusa, get 20 miles outside of Colusa on 45 and then realize the little orange light by your gas gauge turns on. I don't know if this is true for your car, but when my low-fuel light turns on in town, it's sort of ...

subtle. It's a nice little low-key glow that says, "Hey, you might want to think about getting gas today or tomorrow. You know ... when it's convenient." When you're out on 45 halfway between Colusa and Chico and the light turns on, it seems ... blindingly bright. As if to say, "You are in some big trouble there chief." And of course, this doesn't happen in Mary's little hybrid that gets 56 miles to the gallon ... this happens in my big ol' pickup truck with the kayak racks and the pop up canopy that already knocks a few points off your fuel efficiency. So there I am, traveling on this otherwise beautiful road. The wind in front of me whistling through the kayak racks ... making the canvas on the soft-topper flap around. Orange light blinding me. No cell phone signal. Sun slowly going down over the horizon. Geese flying overhead making noises that sound vaguely like mocking laughter. "HaAAh-ha-ha-ha!" How many more miles do I have until my tank runs empty? Will I make it home?

How much hope do you have in your hope tank right now? Got enough to make it through the week? Through the day? Did your little warning light just come on? Or have you been running on empty for a while? What Joe read this morning was from the second letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy who was a leader in one of the early churches in Asia Minor. If you were at Bible study on Thursday evening, you'll know that Timothy was a young man who traveled with Paul and another apostle named Silas after Paul parted company with another apostle named Barnabas and John Mark. The common belief is that Timothy was sort of an apprentice who learned everything about ministry from more experienced apostles like Paul. After a time, the apprentice would be commissioned to lead the churches that the apostles founded. If you ever hear a church refer to one of their members as a "Timothy" or a "Priscilla?" This is why. It means they received their call to ministry in the church and then went on to pursue vocational ministry. Karen, Nina's daughter is a Priscilla of our church. So is Laura Cowan Pierson. Timothy was an apprentice and Paul was his mentor. Sometimes you hear me talking about Jack Musick, my old clergy mentor who oversaw my supervised ministerial experience when I was

in seminary. First and Second Timothy are both letters that Paul wrote to Timothy from jail.

Some scholars say that this may have been written during Paul's last imprisonment before he died. It's complicated because scholars can't even agree if this is an authentic Paul letter. That's neither here nor there for us though. But ... if this is Paul writing from his last stint in jail, then Paul probably wrote it during a time in his life where he didn't have much hope for his own future. Yet he still offers hope and courage to people like Timothy who are still out there struggling on the front lines of ministry. But rather than focusing on the downfall of those who hold him captive, Paul puts his energy into the affirmation of the faith of those who have committed their lives to the gospel ... to those who proclaim the good news of Jesus. And, the good news is - "God is reconciling the world through Christ." Bridging the gap. Opening the veil. Pushing out the tired old structures built on selfishness, greed, and oppression and ushering in a new system built on grace, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and love. Jesus' message was, "The kingdom of God is at hand!" That is the message of the early church.

Problem is, Timothy seems to be losing his grip as a leader in the early church. He's struggling with some of the issues that are coming up in the church. He's thinking, "What's up with this ministry thing? I thought this gig was going to be about preaching and teaching and healing and doing all that good Jesus work, but instead I'm dealing with issues like, 'What qualifies a person to be a bishop or a deacon?' How the heck should I know? I just want to preach the good news! Why are these church people so ... complicate?! What am I gonna do?" See, my old clergy mentor would have just looked at me through his bifocals and said, "Boy ... let me tell you something..." and then he would have offered some tidbit of wisdom from his many years of experience pastoring country churches. But I guess that's sort of what these letters are. Paul is offering his wisdom and encouragement to a young minister who needs some hope in his hope tank. I wonder if he called Timothy

“boy?” I don’t know ... nowadays it’s considered pretty insulting to call an adult male “boy,” but it never sounded insulting coming from Jack.

What hope is there for those of us who are running on empty? Paul’s words of encouragement to Timothy? “Rekindle the gift of God that is in you.” “God didn’t give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of love and power.” “Practice good self-discipline and boundaries.” All good stuff. Thank you Paul ... thank you for those encouraging words. Then he says something that probably took Timothy by surprise. “Don’t be ashamed by your testimony about God. Join me in suffering!”

Join me in *what*? Could you run that by me again? It sounds like you said, “Suffering.” That’s right. I’m suffering in jail right now. My life is winding down. I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be around. Join me in my suffering. Ok. So ... this is supposed to be the cure-all for a crisis of faith? “Join me in suffering?” What the heck? How’s that supposed to work? I’m having a hard time keeping things together in my own faith journey and you’re saying, “Join me in my suffering?” The thing is, Paul had his struggles too. He said he did the very things that he knew he shouldn’t do. He described his own struggles as a “thorn in his flesh.”

You know, I’m *glad* that the Bible has so many examples of people who struggle with their faith. In fact, if you get right down to it, there are so many more examples of people in the Bible struggling with their faith as there are folks who boldly step out of their comfort zones to do what seems like the impossible. In other words, for every Isaiah who stands up and says, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” there’s eight Moses’ saying, “Couldn’t you find someone else God?! I’m not exactly great with words here!” Honestly that’s what gives me hope sometimes! It gives me hope that God uses flawed people who don’t always have it together to lead the church!

Remember last week when I was talking about that Karl Barth quote about having a newspaper in one hand and a bible in the other hand

when you're preparing your sermon? And I told you that's a common misquote and that Barth actually said, "Have your newspaper in one hand and your Bible in the other but let your Bible help you interpret the newspaper?" Here's the other quote that this gets mixed up with. This one isn't even from Karl Barth. It's from Frederick Buechner. Buechner said, "We should ask ourselves every day when we wake up if we can believe it all over again. But before giving an answer, we should read the news and consider the brokenness of the world around us. If after that, our answer every day is still, 'yes,' then we probably don't know what it means to believe." You see where he went with that? He's saying that the suffering in the world *should* shake our faith to the core sometimes! Half the time, when we ask ourselves if we'd believe it all over again, the answer would be "no" if we're honest with ourselves. But on those days when the answer is a resounding, "yes" then it should be an affirmation filled with confession, laughter, and great joy, because that truly is something to celebrate.

Today is World Communion Sunday. This is our day of celebration for the gift of the Lord's Table. This is a day when we join our hearts, minds, and spirits with Christ's church throughout the world to give thanks. Some churches call communion "the Eucharist" which literally mean "give thanks." We give thanks for this moment where we receive that which Christ offered freely, so we may live a life that abounds in faith and hope ... even during ... maybe even especially during time of suffering.