

SERMON FOR CT CONFERENCE WEEKEND

Available for CT churches to use if they wish on October, 19th, 2003

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“People of Hope”

Texts: Job 38:1-7 (34-41)

Mark 10:35-45

Have you ever had/made a “Wish list?” or jotted down a list on New Year’s Eve of your Hopes for the coming year”, made a child’s Christmas list, a bridal registry, planned with a significant other for your lives together, prayed for family, friends, others in times of trouble...gathered your “hopes” for your church family as you look to the future, hopes for your work....your school,safe travel for family and friends?.....peace in our world, in our communities, our families, our lives? To wish for something with the real expectation of its fulfillment? There is an energy, an eagerness within us when we do this , a forward motion.....life.....hope.

In recent months we have been remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr...his hopes and dreams and his courageous leadership in those difficult times and the movement that gave us all spaces and places to reflect deeply, to connect spiritually and to take action that others might be energized to simply hope and dream. We now tell of Dr. King’s work and remarkable speeches to first and second generations for whom the civil rights struggle of the 1960’s are but a part of history that they did not experience. Perhaps some of you remember this short poem of Dr. King’s...

“One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand

Children from India will ask: What is hunger?

Children from Alabama will ask: What is racial segregation?

Children from Hiroshima will ask: What is the atomic bomb?

Children at school will ask: What is war?

You will answer them.

You will tell them.

Those words are not used anymore

Like stage coaches, galleys or slavery....

Words no longer meaningful.

That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.”

“One Day” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What hope he held for us and for our country?

For what do we hope?

Not long ago while sharing leadership in bereavement sessions for widows and widowers who came together to help others in their communities, a local rabbi and a minister were asked to tell of the bereavement care in their congregations. As they responded to one another, the minister noted her respect for the time and space the Jewish tradition gives to those who grieve. The rabbi thoughtfully and caringly responded, "I honor the hope your faith tradition offers your people." Even in times of darkness shines this light, this hope that marks us as a people, a People of Hope...the theme of this year's CT Conference meeting as representatives of our United Church of Christ churches gather in New Canaan this weekend.

Let's consider the Scripture texts for this morning. Look at poor old Job sitting there in despair and hopelessness as he perceived that God had abandoned Him and in fact seemed to continually be persecuting him. After all the dark life scenes he has moved through he doesn't seem to get the picture. In fact it has been said that Job occupies a key place in Old Testament theology...opening the door to begin speculation about life after death...those last verses point out God's continued care for creation... God is not only the initiator, the provider of life...but sustainer as well and God just wants Job to see things in a new way and recognize His powerful presence. The suffering was not about Job. It's about being able to see God's presence in the storm...and truly know that God is there. In the end God restored to Job all he had lost and God can restore us as well...sometimes with what we need and didn't even know it.

A few days after Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida, a young girl asked her dad why God let the terrible destruction happen. As the Mexican family had huddled for safety in a stairway, the powerful winds ripped the roof from their home. The girl's father didn't want her to think badly of God...but given the circumstances he had no words. Finally he replied to his daughter, "Sometimes you have to lose the roof to see the sky." Perhaps Job had to "lose the roof to see the sky." Perhaps there are times when even you and I need unusual circumstances to help us "see the sky"... "see God" at work in our lives...for God will be there with us so that we won't lose our way.

Now James and John had their hopes, too. They hoped to be first among Jesus' disciples...to sit in places of honor in the kingdom of God. "Could you do us a favor, Jesus? How about a more prominent spot where we look better than the others?" What could be more human? Will you help me look better than my neighbors, my competitors? I hope to do better, look better than the others...which is a way of ignoring the gifts of the present, the gifts God has given us, the opportunities of the now. You may have caught the recent DSL commercial on TV...The "guys" in the suburbs are comparing their latest purchases...who has the bigger or most expensive new acquisition...Neighbor #3 has a small box and notes he has just installed his DSL...and a new perspective comes into play.

James and John remind us that from the beginning the church (the closest disciples) have been enamored of power and position but Jesus separates true greatness from the exercise of authority over others. Jesus tells them they've got it all wrong if they think the first will be first and the last will be last and that among his followers it has to look quite different. For Jesus' example throughout his ministry was that of a servant leader. What do servant leaders look like? They are people who embrace both the concept of serving others and serving Someone greater

than themselves. A true spiritual leader serves first and by serving leads...by example. They are people who understand the importance of awareness, listening, empathy, and building community. It would not be until after Jesus' death and resurrection that the disciples would see fully in a different way...that being a real disciple means living a life committed to humility and service. It is not in jostling for position or power that we will find greatness but we are called to point beyond ourselves to let God's light shine through us, God's power direct us into service that embodies that which the Eternal One desires for our world.

Ah, but that ever present human nature that creeps up on us from time to time... to be the ones in control... There's a story that comes out of Essex folklore from an earlier generation about a prominent father and daughter. Speaking of his daughter, the father would say "like a good dairy cow, she'll give you a full pail of milk, but then she puts her foot in it!" Isn't that like many of us...doing the right thing, doing the work of the church, but then putting our foot in it...souring it with our need for control, prominence, or credit? Mark 10:35-45 reminds us that from the beginning the closest disciples have sought power and position at the expense of servanthood. In Jesus God redefines greatness moving from the exercise of authority to the rendering of service, embracing the servant songs of Isaiah. If our expectations are God's expectations then our hope is rooted in what we have seen and experienced in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and we join with the many again and again on Christmas Eve to sing...

"Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight."
From vs. 1... "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

How many of our congregations have been caught by that hope?...as they walked with and took a stand that the Mende people of the Amistad might be freed....as they have assisted Korean, Asian and other immigrant groups in new church starts...as they have supported seminaries in encouraging new leaders and strengthening folk on the front lines in our churches, hospitals, and a wide variety of service agencies...as they have walked with inner city neighborhoods to organize for better chances for safe and fair living and education...as they have connected with people of faith through partnerships in South Korea, Colombia, Europe, and other places throughout the world...as they have given of their dollars to strengthen the church, to reach out to Neighbors in Need or helped untold numbers of men, women and children through One Great Hour of Sharing...as they have fed the hungry or helped to provide aid to the homeless..... These have been the "servant leaders" all across Connecticut. Where have you seen your congregation involved as "servant leaders"? Where have you been part of giving hope to others? What are your hopes for the future?

When we are a servant people, we find ways to feed the physical and spiritual hungers of folks within our communities. We try to point people toward the hope that there is a way beyond hunger, loneliness, and a sense of despair. Believing that God has a positive future in mind for us, we see service as a way to share and at the same time rediscover God's ever beckoning future, a future full of possibility, challenge, and meaning. This calls for "servant leadership" characterized by compassionate listening and a belief that God is moving through us and in the lives of others.

This summer our granddaughter was singing a "spirit song" about her elementary school. The tune was familiar and most of the words were familiar...only the word, "Christian" had

been changed to keep the civil liberties folk at bay. The song came from those who caught the hope and vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of you know this song. It's a good one to teach to our children and our children's children.....It's a classic.

The second and third verses are these:

“We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.
We will walk with each other , we will walk hand in hand.
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love.
We will work with each other, we will work side by side.
We will work with each other, we will work side by side.
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love.”

They'll Know We Are Christians” by Peter Scholtes, 1966

can be found on p. 494 in Chalice Hymnal

Yes, we are called to be the keepers of hope

We are called to be the bearers of hope

We are called to know its source....to see and to live with the enthusiasm of our God within each of us....as a People of Hope, indeed!

AMEN!