

Pastor's Message – 2/18/2024
Guided to the Cross: Guided to Hope
Jeremiah 14:21-22
2 Corinthians 1:9-10
Luke 23:39-43

This past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we began a worship series, titled “Guided to the Cross,” for Lent this year which will continue from then through Easter Sunday. It will also be the focus of our Wednesday evening Bible studies. We began Wednesday focusing on the cross as our guide to forgiveness.

Many people begin a new year by making resolutions: some keep them – many do not. Those resolutions may be goals or plans or, at least, hopes for the year. Lent is another time that people take stock of their lives, especially their spiritual lives, and make resolutions or goals or hopes for a closer relationship with God and the desire to follow Jesus more closely and be a better Christian.

What do you hope for in this season, this year, this decade, the next chapter of your life, the rest of your life? It is hard, perhaps impossible to know what lies ahead, where God is leading you, what opportunities may arise, what pitfalls may loom ahead. Are you looking for something to make you feel better? Are you searching for things that will make you happy? Are you clinging to the chance of financial stability? Are you craving companionship? Are you wishing for peace and prosperity? These are all nice things and certainly worthy of being hoped for on some level. But the hope we should grab onto most tightly this Lent is the hope of the cross of Christ. The hope we have in Jesus Christ and his cross is not like any other type of wishful thinking we have in this world. It is sure and solid and lasting. Hope of the cross is not a passing fancy but a daily tenet to live by.

The irony is that the cross does not look like an element of hope. The cross was certainly not designed as a goal to strive for or a driving force in everyday living. It was a torture device, and one of the cruelest at that. But God chose to use a cross to win salvation for us all through the death of his Son, Jesus. The cross provides us with hope when there once was none at all. We were dead in our sins and not able to save ourselves before the cross came along and Jesus was lifted up on it. Before the cross, humanity was lost without having a full understanding at all what was in store for the days to come and not able to see the big picture of God's plan.

Then the cross and Christ's death gave us a path to follow, a picture and promise of the heaven that awaits us and a faith that would bring us to

a closer understanding of God's will to gather us together with him. These are the reasons we have hope. These are the basis for our confidence in Christ and his cross that will not fade away.

So how does this hope we have in Jesus express itself? In the words of the Bible, we learn that people can see the hope followers of Jesus have in the way they live our lives. They love and care for others as Christ loved and cared for us. Believers approach hardship and suffering with calm and peace and contentment. We are not bothered by the tragedies and disasters of this world because we know there is a world to come in which we will be safe and blest forever.

But these are the ideals. The reality is that our hope in Jesus is not always as strong as it should be. We doubt. We question. We are afraid. That is when we need to be reminded of those who followed Jesus on the way to his cross. Even though Jesus told them again and again, the disciples did not want to believe that Jesus would suffer and die for their sins. They doubted the news. They questioned it. When it was happening, they ran away and hid. They sank into a funk of hopelessness and despair.

One of the criminals on the cross next to Jesus chided him, saying, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!" (Luke 23:39). This criminal was essentially saying that he had no hope in Jesus saving him by asking Jesus this question in ridicule. The soldiers acted in the same way by mocking Jesus in the hours before he went to the cross. They put a purple robe on him; they made him hold a staff as a scepter and pushed a crown of thorns into his head and then bowed before him in faux flattery, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (John 19:3). They had no hope or belief that this Jesus was any kind of savior.

The people at the Pavement, standing before a beaten and bloodied Jesus, presented to them by Pilate, seemed to have no hope in Jesus whatsoever either, when they cried out in loud and angry voices over and over again, "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21). The people who walked past Calvary and saw Jesus hanging on the cross thought all hope was lost, as they shook their heads in dismay, as if to say, "What a shame. This did not turn out the way we thought it would." Hopes were dashed.

Only the criminal on the cross on the right side of Jesus showed he had hope in what was happening right before his eyes in the person of Jesus on the cross. He said to the criminal on the left of Jesus, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong" (Luke 23:40-41). This

criminal knew that Jesus was not guilty of any crime, but that he was. He knew that he deserved death, but that Jesus didn't. He knew that he could not save himself, that only Jesus could. So, he said these hopeful words, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

The repentant criminal had confidence that there was a life beyond this one only through Jesus. Jesus' response assured the criminal of this belief when Jesus said to the man, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 24:43). Truly, salvation in Jesus was a reality that day and has been a reality every day since. There is hope in the kingdom of Christ, and that hope is never fading.

Need a little reminder of this fact? Fast-forward to the evening of Easter after Jesus had risen. Two disciples were headed from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus, at that time only knowing that Jesus had died on Good Friday. Along the way on their journey, a stranger began walking beside them. The disciples did not know the stranger was Jesus, so when Jesus asked them what had happened over the last days, the disciples talked about Jesus in the third person, about how he had been killed. You can hear their sadness: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). In that moment, the Emmaus disciples had no hope in Jesus.

But Jesus, in his miraculous way, "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Jesus restored hope in their hearts. The disciples realized that their hearts were burning within them with hope when Jesus was talking to them and when they recognized Jesus when he broke bread in front of them in their home. What was the first thing the Emmaus disciples did when they had hope burning within them? They immediately ran to tell the other disciples about Jesus.

That is what hope does for us too. It compels us to tell others about Jesus and to be excited about the Good News of salvation in him. St. Peter reminds us of this drive when he says, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). What drives you to share with others the hope you have in Christ and the cross?

Maybe it is a profound spiritual moment you had in church, or perhaps it was a recovery from any illness or injury. Or perhaps it was an "aha!" moment you had while praying or reading the Bible. Our interaction and relationship with Christ the Crucified produce amazing experiences through the Holy Spirit that empower us to live faithful and active lives for him with an abiding hopefulness that Jesus will be with us every step of the way on the road to the future, and the way to heavenly bliss forever.

As we journey through the season of Lent this year, be guided to and by the cross. Be guided to the hope you find there. Be blest in your moving forward in faith with confidence and assurance that the Crucified Christ will always be by your side, who has left us the Holy Spirit to teach you along the way and make your hearts too burn within you for him. Our hope is built with the wood of Jesus' cross. Place your life in his care and you will find victory over sin and death and the way to heaven. Amen.