

Sermon
Mar. 18, 2018
Last Sunday in Lent
Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34
The God of Hope
Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

As you know, Saturday was St. Patrick's Day. This day has become an excuse for people to drink an excessive amount of alcohol, wear green, and celebrate all things Irish. No Irish person in America back in the 19th century would have had any idea how much Irish culture would be celebrated in this country. Back then, Irish people were fleeing Ireland which was being ravaged by the potato famine. For survival, they risked the trip across the Atlantic Ocean to come to America, a place where they hoped they would be able to carve out for themselves a better life.

I am sure that it was better for the Irish over here than it was over there. But that doesn't mean it was a great life for Irish people. The bigotry they experienced from the English didn't magically disappear on this side of the Atlantic. The Irish in America were widely discriminated against. They were driven into ghettos, prevented from anything other than menial labor, and stereotyped as drunks, crooks and disease ridden. It was a brutal existence.

But the Irish that came over to America kept carving out a space for themselves. They clung to the hope that one day their children and grandchildren would have a better life. I doubt if anyone told their kids that one day an Irish Catholic would be president, or that the Chicago River would be dyed green and there would be parades celebrating Irish culture all over the country. But there was hope that one day the Irish would claim their place in the American experiment. There was hope that future generations would thrive in this land of promise and possibility. Hope is what kept them going during those times of turmoil in 19th century America.

There was a time several years ago when Kim and I were facing financial ruin. We took advantage of access to easy credit, loaded up our

credit cards, and then found ourselves struggling just to make the minimum payments. We seriously contemplated filing for bankruptcy. It was stressful. All that debt weighed very heavily on us. But we had hope that eventually we would claw our way out of this mountain of debt. Slowly but surely, and with the surprising windfall we received from my mom's sister when she passed away, we were able to get out of that hole. It was hope that our finances would some day recover that kept us making the sacrifices necessary to get to a better place.

This is the power of hope. In times of struggle and turmoil, when it seems everything is against you, the obstacles are too great, the breaks never come your way, that despair is lurking to pull you down into the abyss. But hope...hope is what has the power to lift you up and pull you forward. Hope is what keeps us believing that one day things will be better.

Israel found themselves in a terrible situation. They were in need of some hope. Jerusalem had been razed to the ground. The Temple, the center of Israel's religion, the place where God dwelled, had been torn down stone by stone. The best and the brightest had been herded to Babylon to live in exile. Everything was in shambles. God's chosen people had lost the land God had given them. It appeared they were a God forsaken people. It was a time of unspeakable loss.

Israel knew it was their fault. They knew that as a people they had failed in their loyalty to the God who had once delivered them from slavery in Egypt. They didn't keep God's commandments. They worshipped other gods. They oppressed the widows and orphans that lived among them. They knew that God was punishing them for their overall failure to be faithful and obedient.

But this was bad. I mean they were decimated. Their future looked really grim. The question had to be asked; has God forsaken us? Do we have a future? I imagine that there was a real concern that a line had been crossed. Perhaps there was no return. Maybe God was through with them. They would die off in Babylon. God would go choose another people who would be more faithful. It was just a matter of time before Israel would fade away into the dustbin of history.

So Jeremiah went into action. He offered his people a word of hope, a promise that Israel does have a future. Jeremiah told the people that God has not given up on them. God is faithful. God's love is steadfast. And this is what God will do at some point in the future. God will write the law, not on tablets of stone but on the tablet of the heart. In that day everyone will know God, not just in their heads but in their hearts. Israel will intuitively know what is the right thing to do. Their hearts will be in the right place. And God will forget the sin of Israel. It will be a fresh start. God will see to it that the people will know God and live the right way. Never again will the people be punished for their rebellious hearts because God will make their hearts right. God is bound and determined to have a people who will love, be faithful, and obedient to God's commandments.

Now Jeremiah tells them this is what God will do in those days. That's an open ended time period. He didn't give a specific time of when God would do this. And to be honest what Jeremiah said would happen still hasn't come to pass. God hasn't written the law on the heart of Israel. The future society that Jeremiah described was a vision of utopia, a perfect society that has not been realized. Utopia doesn't exist.

So did Jeremiah give Israel false hope? I don't know. It doesn't feel right to say that a prophecy from God would in any way be false. Maybe this vision that Jeremiah presents to Israel will some day come to pass. Sure, this vision was given to Israel perhaps 2500 years ago. Who's to say that this vision won't become reality 2500 years from now?

Whether or when this vision becomes reality, maybe the more important point is that God will not give up on Israel. This is what Israel needed to hear in their time of turmoil, that all was not lost, that God still loved them and had not written them off. Israel needed to hear a word of hope so that they would not fall into the depth of despair. And God, through Jeremiah, gave them that word of hope. They had a future. Things will get better. God will make a way for them.

Skipping ahead about 500 years, Paul was writing his letters to the churches, sometimes while sitting in a jail cell. He wrote about faith, hope, and love. We talk a lot about faith. We talk a lot about love. But

let's not forget about hope. Sometimes hope is what we need to get through tough times.

In life we sometimes find ourselves in terrible situations and wonder if there is any hope. All the options are bad. The goal you set for yourself appears way out of your reach. As you lay awake in the middle of the night and run through your mind all the conceivable possibilities to get out of the jam you're in, nothing seems to work. The problem is so big, so much out of your control, there's nothing you can do to fix it. There's no hope.

Maybe there are times when we are in hopeless situations. If you are Alabama and you are down by 20 points against Villanova and there's only 2 minutes left...you are not going to win that basketball game. If you have a D grade in English and the last assignment for the class is a final essay, I don't see how that essay will be good enough to get you an A if that is your goal. Toys 'R Us discovered that their business model of big box stores to sell toys in an era of online shopping was hopeless. If you are supposed to be in San Diego this afternoon to attend your friend's wedding but all the flights at Boston Logan, where you are, have been cancelled because of a blizzard...you aren't going to make it to San Diego that day.

But just because we find ourselves in hopeless situations does not mean there is no hope at all. God is known by many names. And one of the names for God is hope. God is a god of hope. God is always with us. So we always have hope, even in hopeless situations. God is always engaged, opening up new possibilities for our lives. We are sometimes in hopeless situations. But in life there is still hope because there is still God making a way out of what appears to be no way. With God there is always hope.

When Jeremiah gave to Israel that vision of hope, he didn't tell them that everything would go back to the way it used to be. He didn't say there would be a rebuilt Temple and a restored Jerusalem. He said that what God was up to was establishing a new covenant. Now in some ways the covenant is the same. God is still the one who initiates it. God is still committed to Israel. God still has commandments that need to be followed. But in other ways the covenant is different. The law will be

written on their hearts. All their sins will be forgiven and forgotten. No one will have to teach them to know God because everyone will intuitively know God. God will still be their God. They will still be God's people. But it will not be the same. You might even say that what God is up to is establishing something better. God is establishing greater possibilities for covenant faithfulness. There is where the hope rests, not in the repeating of the past but the establishment of something different, something new, something better.

This is what hope is about. Hope is about trusting that things will be better some day. Being better means they won't be the same. Things will be different. Not a copy of the glory days of the past. Not the realization of some utopian fantasy. But things will be better than they are now. Some how and some way God is going to work it out, open up new possibilities that brings about better outcomes, life that is more flourishing, community that is more aligned with God's desires. This is what hope is about, trusting that tomorrow will be better than today.

Jerry was living a good life. He was working in management, making a six figure income. He had a family. He was achieving his life goals. But then he got tripped up with addiction. He lost his high paying job. Then he lost his marriage. Then he lost his car. He kept losing until he found himself without a safe place to lay his head. He had spent time in the city's shelters. It was in those shelters where he had to deal with people who were not properly treated for their mental health issues, where he had his stuff taken, where he caught some weird illness that compromised his lungs and put him in the hospital for a few months. He would have nothing to do with the shelters anymore. So at night he would slip over to the public library and get between the outside walls and the hedge to bed down for the night. In the morning he would rise, gather his things and slip away before the library opened.

Jerry was hurting. He had lost so much. From living well to struggling on the streets in such a short period of time was incredibly hard to adjust to. It was the way people looked at him, or, more accurately, didn't look at him, that hurt the most. It was humiliating. His will to keep going on was severely tested. He wondered if his life even

had any meaning. There were nights he wished he didn't wake up the next morning.

Nevertheless, Jerry didn't forsake the faith he learned as a child. He didn't understand why this had happened to him, but he didn't give up on God. Over time, he began to appreciate the little things. He became a humbler person. And one day he came across a pastor who didn't just blow him off. The pastor took him to Wendy's where they could have a bite to eat and begin to build a relationship. The pastor helped Jerry any way he could. Someone in the pastor's church had a spare bedroom and was willing to take Jerry in. As the weeks and months passed, Jerry's life stabilized. His life on the streets had taken a toll on his health. He still was having to work through some of the trauma he had experienced during his time of spiraling down. But he was in a different place, a better place. And Jerry gave the glory to God, who he believed watched over him and kept him alive during his most difficult times. God had brought him to a better place.

This is our hope, that God never gives up on us. No matter what we go through in life, God never forsakes us. We don't know how things will work out or when things will turn around. But if we can just hold on and trust that God is with us, then there is hope. And to have hope is not a small thing when everything around you is falling apart and you have lost so much.

Please join me in prayer with these words from Paul's letter to the Christians living in Rome: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:13) Amen.