

November 13, 2022 Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 65:17-25

"Yes, the Thing with Feathers"

Douglas T. King

I have a riddle for you this morning. What is the single possession, that in the hands of one person is the most powerful, sturdy, and useful of all things in the world, and in the hands of another is weak and flimsy and useless? The answer is hope. How we embody hope in our lives shapes how we do everything we do. In our world that feels dark and broken far too often, hope is a most precious commodity.

Many of us are familiar with Emily Dickinson's poem about hope.

"Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,
And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me."

I always appreciate this poem because it elegantly paints a picture of the inherent dichotomy of hope. The image of that tiny bird in the midst of the storm reflects that notion of that riddle I made up. There is such vast strength in hope that it can withstand the greatest turmoil the world can create. And yet, we can so easily shew hope away from us with a flick of the metaphorical wrist and find ourselves bereft.

This brings us to the audience of people receiving the prophecy of hope from our Isaiah text this morning. It is probably around 475 BC. The grandparents of these folks were the ones who had been released from captivity in Babylon and returned with much excitement and expectation to Jerusalem. Everything was going to be perfect once they returned to their homeland! And now it was two generations later and things still were not as perfect as they envisioned. The temple had been rebuilt but it could not

compare with Solomon's version. And much of the city was still in disarray from the original invasion all those years ago. The grand promises of restoration were appearing to ring untrue.

For some people that meant hope felt like a pretty weak and flimsy thing in their hands. But for others, hope remained a powerful and sturdy possession. The prophet Isaiah, through whom God spoke, was one of these people who had a firm grasp on a palpable and substantial hope.

To be clear, we are not speaking of optimism here. Optimism assumes that things will get better. Optimism is a nice thing and a healthy perspective to bring to life. But hope is not an assumption, hope is a deep trust in the promises God has given us. And this text from Isaiah sixty-five paints a vivid picture of what should give us hope each and every day. We receive this eloquent portrayal of a remarkable existence. It is as if every element of anguish that exists in the midst of our mortality is addressed and healed. It is nearly overwhelming in its sweep of transformation.

I wonder how it fell upon the ears of those folk who were born of people who had lived through the agony of exile and found themselves still suffering from its aftereffects? They were still literally living in the remaining rubble of the conquest of their beloved city.

I bet it was heard in a variety of ways. There were some who inevitably scoffed. They reminded each other of how perfect it was supposed to be when their grandparents returned from exile. They heard these words as yet another pie-in-the-sky empty promise. They refused to allow hope entry into themselves for fear of the potential disappointment.

Then I am sure there were some who wanted to take hold of this enormous hope but were too cautious to do so. It was like a hot potato they tossed back and forth between their hands, too fearful to fully grasp.

And then there were those who, as those words from God poured out of Isaiah's mouth, cupped their hands together, gathered those words of hope up, pulled them close to their hearts and cherished them.

Now these words of promise from God did not remove the rubble from their midst; they did not cure all their ills; they did not heal the trauma passed on to them; they did not solve all of their problems.

What these words did do for those people is give them something to grasp, a strong hope; a hope grounded in God's plan and promises for all that is to come. Whatever woes were wearing them down, they knew the current situation was just a step on the journey to the transformation God has promised them. Their destination was assured.

In some ways the vision those initial returnees from exile had was too small. Obviously, the immediacy of a completely rebuilt city was a wonderful thought. But their vision of God's restoration was that things would go back to how they were before the exile. We often think this way when we imagine the ways in which God will heal and restore us. We think about getting back to how things were before.

Well, God has bigger plans than that. Forget about focusing on rebuilt houses. All the heavens and the earth will be new. Forget about defeating our enemies. Those who were enemies, the wolf and the lamb, now feed side by side in harmony. All of creation has become completely fulfilled.

We have only known existence in its broken form. We live as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are scattered and jumbled together. And God is lovingly and painstakingly positioning each piece of us in exactly the place we are supposed to be. Everyone and everything will fit together perfectly. And the picture it will form is of a symmetry and beauty of which are beyond our comprehension.

This is the vision we are being offered by Isaiah. A vision that is so big it is beyond our imagination to fully comprehend. A vision that presents us with the gift of hope. And we have three basic choices about how we may respond. The first is to be the cynical people who are afraid to allow such a big hope in their lives so they put up their hands and push it away before it can even begin to find a home within them. The second is to be hot potato people who would like to grasp the hope but they cannot commit to taking hold of it so they juggle it back and forth to little effect. And the third choice is to be the people who cup our hands before us and let these words of hope fill our hands so we can take strong hold of them. We can feel the weight and substance of them. We can use them as ballast against all the winds of misfortune which may blow.

Recognizing that these words and this vision come from our God there is only one choice that makes any sense at all. If we as the church are to give a one word answer as to what kind of business we are in, that word is hope. We are in the business of hope. We are the people who believe that God in Jesus Christ turned death into life. And if death can be transformed into life, there is nothing our God cannot or will not do for us.

The minister, writer, and professor, Richard Lischer shared this story with the students at Duke Divinity School...

"My wife and I know a Duke oncologist who specializes in some of the worst kinds of cancer. He is a world-class physician with a string of degrees and fellowships after his name. Like all professionals, he has a card. It has his name, but where you

might expect a list of his degrees and even "I've been on '60 Minutes,'" he has only this in boldface type: "THERE IS HOPE." I have a feeling it's the *card* that keeps his patients going. It's the *card* that brings them and their relatives back to his little clinic again and again. It's the *card* that lifts their spirits when nothing else can. It's the message on the *card* that keeps you and me marching forward and climbing upward.

"If I had the resources, I would have a stack of them made for each of you to take into your ministries, workplaces and daily lives. Only I wouldn't mention Duke or list your degrees - only your name, the name of Jesus and THERE IS HOPE.

"That's all."

And now a word from Fred Buechner, "So in Christ's name, I commend this madness and this fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that in some way we cannot imagine holiness will return to our world. I know of no time when the world has been riper for its return, when the dark has been hungrier. Maybe the very madness of our hoping will give him the crazy, golden wings he needs to come on."

Indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.