

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, Guest Minister
August 11, 2013 at 8:00 and 10:30 a.m.
Lessons: Isaiah 1:1,10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16, and Luke 12:32-40

OUR COMPASS

What is hope? Is it just a daydream? Does hope really expect something good, or does it just keep repeating, “If only . . .”? “If only things would get better.” Is hope more like working toward a goal or like buying a lottery ticket? Suppose my goal proves wrong for me, what is hope then? And if I never win the lottery, well, did I really expect to?

The Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall contends that these days the youth and young adults of North America are not so burdened with guilt as were our Victorian ancestors. They still feel their share of guilt, of course – it never goes away completely – but it’s not their great burden or their burning question of life. Most of them do not lie awake at night worrying about wrong things they have done or right things they have left undone. For the young, Hall suggests, the question lodged inside them like a dull ache is not, “What have I done wrong?” but, “Is anything that requires sustained effort really worth doing at all?” or, by extension, “Is anything worth caring about very much?”

For most of the young, there will be no gold watches for forty years of work with the same company; they may have ten or more jobs before they reach forty. What’s a college degree worth these days? A master’s degree? A doctorate? And it’s not just a matter of work and income security. What is a relationship? “I’m in a relationship” it says on Facebook, and, “It’s complicated.” What is stable? What is secure?

As the church of Jesus Christ, we represent him and all he embodies on his cross of the compassion and mercy of God. He calls us to represent God’s unyielding commitment to us and this whole created world God loves far more than we can even imagine. So, we need to listen to people, letting ourselves understand and feel their confusion, doubts, resentments and, yes, even their cynicism about the Christian faith. Jesus meets us where we are, with respect rather than scorn, with understanding rather than judgment, and with hope we can’t find in life or in ourselves or even in each other. He meets us where we are, just as he met lepers, beggars, ladies of the evening, fishermen, and Pharisees (the super-religious of his day) where they were. Think about it. Where else could he find us? Even Christ can’t find me where I am not, and if he were to look for me only where I should be, I would be lost because I am not there. As his church, we must meet people where they are, not where we think they should be, and we need to listen especially to their questions and doubts. We need

to accept their bitterness toward churches they believe have failed them, used them, lied to them, or rejected them. We need to respect even their bitterness toward God, which they may not be willing to admit. We need to listen without scolding or turning away in disgust.

Jesus never turns away from people in disgust. Sure, he gets angry, especially at the very religious but stone-hearted who will not stop judging long enough to empathize with people in distress or humiliation. He reaches out to the untouchable and even, in the eyes of the pious, soils the holy name of God by associating himself and his truth of God with the unworthy, the stained, and the broken including the self-broken. I think it is vitally important that we realize Jesus does not turn away from people in disgust.

It is also important that Jesus does not offer people easy, slick answers or quick fixes for their problems in life. My mother learned a lesson from a neighborhood friend when I was just a little boy, maybe three years old, and she told me of that lesson more than once or twice over the years of my growing up. My mother and the other young woman, Nancy, had had a spat and probably had said some things with claws in them. Nancy came over to offer an apology. My mother apparently was not quite ready to forgive and make up, and so she said, "It doesn't matter." Nancy brought her up short by replying, "I want it to matter." Though we moved away, my mother and Nancy were still friends into their eighties.

Though all our explanations of Jesus the Christ are, of necessity, only partial, one way of understanding his coming is to realize he embodies for us God's insistence, "I want it to matter." Why? Because we matter so terribly much to God that God has rejected the idea of having a future as God without us. Nancy didn't want a friendship gone cold. God has refused to settle for losing most of us. That's the way love is, and Jesus has showed us in his own suffering, humiliation, and death how terribly much God's love is that way.

Before GPS, our Global Positioning Systems that locate us from satellites, we used the compass to find our way along winding trails through unknown woods. An important part of my being a boy scout was learning to use a compass to plot my course. But, you know, I have never seen the Magnetic North Pole. Never. I believe it's "up" there, and I believe strongly enough to be guided by something I've never seen. The compass points me toward that unseen place far distant so I can orient myself where I am. I use the compass to look way out there beyond my sight so I can know which way to walk and which turns to take along the ground that lies right there before me. If I trust the compass, then I can find the right direction and hold my course.

From the very beginning with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses and the prophets, God has come to us human beings, not first or foremost with demands and commandments, but with promises that offer hope. Really, all of the commandments are given to help us follow

and help each other follow the compass of hope that comes from God's love for us. Jesus did not come merely to get us into heaven when we die but to get heaven into us while we live so that God's unyielding love for us and all this world will keep orienting us and, when necessary, reorienting us every day and every year that we live.

God has promised us a world in which nothing hurts or destroys. God wants a world in which people do not enslave each other with chains or with sub-living wages, a world in which we do not associate ourselves into groups that hate, exclude, and exploit other groups of people God sees as our sisters and brothers. God wants a world in which we recognize all the children as our own daughters and sons because God loves them all.

An outsider looking at Christianity might think Jesus came to divide us. Is that not the impression we Christians give? We're Christ's in-group – right? – whether we call ourselves the elect, the born-again, the saved, or just the “normal.” It seems Christianity needs a reorientation from the hope Jesus calls us to share: God's hope for this world.

Isaiah speaks God's anger and frustration at the religious who will not seek justice for those denied it but are quite content to continue prospering from their misery. Wow, does he speak to the 8th Century B.C. or to us these days? The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that our faith in Jesus Christ orients us toward a homeland we do not yet see – not so we will abandon earth in favor of heaven, but so our hope and trust will keep orienting us toward God's love for this world and its people. There are some lines in the gospels that burn themselves into my mind, and this is one of them. Jesus warns and keeps warning me, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What I care about will orient me toward itself, will become the compass I actually follow. If it is security (a real temptation these days), then I will play it safe, and playing it safe will make me timid and selfish, and my hope will fade from sight as I cling to what I have now.

Hope is neither a daydream nor a sad “if only.” Hope is the compass Jesus Christ gives us to orient our lives, our choices, and our values toward the promises that come from God's love for us, for our neighbors, and for all this world. “Do not be afraid, little flock,” he says, “for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” So, we don't need to be guided by our fears, not even in this world of bitter competition for resources kept deliberately scarce to keep prices up.

Finally, please let us understand that hope is not just a “someday” thing. No, it is the daily expectation of God's love and care in the present. For the Christ who is our eternal future also walks with us today, and God's redeeming love is something we experience all along the trails of this life. Jesus reminds us to keep awake to that redeeming love so we won't miss it in our preoccupation with other things. Amen.