

“The Cross of Hope”  
February 25, 2024  
Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Have you ever been in a situation that was hopeless? I mean utterly, completely, absolutely hopeless? Honestly, I don't think I have. I have felt like things were hopeless but I've always found alternatives, other options. It seems to me if you have choices, even if they're not great but livable, then there must be some measure of hope. But I can understand how at times a person can feel as though they have no options. As they look at their life and their resources, their circumstances, they might feel as though there's no hope.

I get the feeling Abram and Sarai may have felt that way. They wanted to have a child together but after many, many years it never happened, until finally they were just too old. It's possible to learn to live with hopelessness, to close off that dimension of your life and accept it will just never happen. I think that's where Abram and Sarai were. Until one night, out of nowhere, Abram hears a message from God, “Don't give up hope.” That happened a few chapters before the one we heard from today but it sets the stage for everything else. God reaches into a hopeless situation and gives Abraham hope. Did I mention he was really old? When Paul talks about Abraham in his letter to the Roman Christians he says of Abraham, “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old!).” What we discover in the story of Abraham and Sarah is a God who gives hope when it's all run out.

Hope is the essence of the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah. What's promised is anticipated; it all lies in a future they can't really imagine from where they stand. That's why in the very next verse following our reading we find Abraham rolling on the floor laughing. And a little later Sarah will do the same thing, because this is all a little nuts for both of them. They're so used to living with disappointment and unfulfilled dreams, they can't imagine anything else. But God insists their future is not empty. The God of Israel is the giver of hope.

That's a theme that runs throughout scripture. We hear it in the stories of Moses and later through Samuel and David and in the words of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Hope is always being offered, held out to them like a rope to someone drowning. And they cling to it with their lives; they sing about it in their psalms; they lift up praises for it in their prayers. With God no door is ever shut, no story is ever over.

It seems Peter found that hard to believe. In this scene from Mark's gospel we find him confused by Jesus' description of what's to take place for him in Jerusalem. Peter has just identified Jesus as Messiah. In this gospel, Jesus' response to that isn't to commend him but to swear them all to secrecy. But he doesn't dispute it. What he does is tell them what being Messiah means. It means arrest and torture and death. Peter is shocked. He tries to talk Jesus out of that way of thinking. He thought it meant there was no hope.

And think about it...it's not surprising he would react that way. Here he and his colleagues have turned their backs on everything they once knew to become Jesus' followers.

They thought Jesus would usher in a new era, that everything bad about their society would be corrected. Namely, the Romans would be driven out and they would be put in charge. That's what the Messiah was supposed to do. But here Jesus is telling them that the Romans are going to win. The forces of evil will destroy him.

When Peter tells Jesus to stop that kind of talk, Jesus pretty harshly puts him in his place. I've always taken that to be Jesus using hyperbole to shock Peter. But it was suggested the other day in a Bible study that maybe Peter is voicing some of the doubts Jesus himself holds. We know later he'll struggle with this in Gethsemane. Maybe Peter's hitting a little too close to home for comfort. Peter has a tendency to say out loud what everyone is thinking. If something happens to Jesus, they're all doomed. It means this whole exercise, all their sacrifices, was pointless.

This past week I've been thinking a lot about Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who was murdered by Putin. I realize not everyone believes that's what happened, but when you confine someone to the prison where they were holding him you can bet they weren't interested in keeping him alive. Over the years, Navalny had been targeted with death threats and assassination attempts for his work exposing Putin's corruption. He had gained quite a following, filling a lot of people with hope. We don't get to hear much from Russian citizens who oppose Putin. Any interviews from there are untrustworthy because there's always someone from the government monitoring. The people of Russia are ripe for change, no matter what Tucker Carlson might think.

But Navalny's death may have put an end to any hope for change they held. One person interviewed the other day in Moscow on NPR said he felt like any possibility for democracy in Russia died with Navalny. That's the reality people are struggling with. How do they regain any sense of hope when their one champion is killed by the system that controls all their lives? How could Peter and the other disciples have been expected to feel hopeful when Jesus tells them outright that the system they live under is going to kill him?

Before Navalny died, in statements he made to folks through social media, he once told them, "If they decide to kill me, it means we are incredibly strong....We need to utilize this power to not give up, to remember we are a huge power that is being oppressed by these bad dudes." In other words, if something happens to him it falls on them to carry on. The day after his death was announced, Navalny's wife Yulia Navalnaya told the world, "I will continue the work of Alexei Navalny. I will continue to fight for our country. And I encourage you to stand by my side." Killing Alexei cannot kill what he stood for. There are others who will take up his cause.

When Jesus tells the crowd to take up their cross if they want to follow him, to lose their lives if they want to save them, he's telling them they are incredibly strong. The cross represents Rome's ultimate threat, execution for those who defy them. Jesus transforms the cross from a symbol of oppression to a symbol of hope. By joining him in carrying the cross, by risking the wrath of the powers that be through acts of compassion and justice, Jesus' followers carry hope into the world. They demonstrate that Rome has no power over them and cannot control the future.

In a world where violence and intimidation are used to keep people quiet and acquiescent, Jesus' followers are told to risk their lives to stand against oppression and reject its power over them. Because God is the giver of hope, those who respond to God's call become agents of hope in the world. That's what it means to take up your cross. We're called to carry the cross of hope into hopeless circumstances through acts of love and compassion, generosity and justice. There will always be forces in the world that want to silence the voices of people who are considered less than. There will always be forces in the world, in our society, who want to lock up asylum seekers at the border, bully lgbtq people in schools, criminalize people for being poor and homeless. Their goal is to rob them of hope, to convince us all there's nothing we can do and we should stop trying. But we have a cross of hope to carry into the world. We have hope to bring even if it means putting our own comfort, our own reputations, our own lives at risk.

Jesus knew that his arrest and torture and death at the hands of Rome meant he was incredibly strong. There is nothing more threatening to the forces of bigotry and hatred in this world than hope. And he tells those who want to follow him that they, too, can be strong. We can be a threat to the forces of violence and control that keep people oppressed. We just need to pick up our cross, let go of our lives and walk his path to freedom. That's how hope lives in the world. It lives through us, God's agents of hope.

Amen