



We Had Hoped (A Sermon)

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To celebrate my seventy-seventh birthday this week, the planning committee said, “We’re scheduling you head-to-head with Otis Moss III, just to see if anybody shows up to hear you preach.”

I know that you are here for Jesus, not me. Still, I need you more than Otis Moss III needs you. Thanks!

If for this life only we have hoped, preaching in vain... If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.

Isn’t that a bit harsh, Paul, telling us preachers that preaching is potentially pointless, vain, otiose, *hopeless*?

Our theme: “Preaching Hope for A Weary World.”

Careful, now...

A few weeks ago, you preached this story: Easter evening, two disciples (who thought the proclamation of the women was nuts) traveled to Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, putting seven miles between them and the trauma of incarcerated, tortured to death, flop of a messiah, Jesus.

Running away from Jesus, surprise, resurrected Jesus joins them on their journey.

“What’s up?”

“You the only person in town who hasn’t heard the news?” Cleo-
phus asks the stranger.

Meaning: Stranger, how ignorant, and insensitive of you to be
oblivious to our trauma! Stranger, where’s your empathy?

“News?” (Jesus messin’ with their depression.)

They replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.” His powerful deeds and words,
recognized as a prophet because of his culturally relevant preaching
on sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and vegetarianism, empathy
slightly to the left of the Democratic Party. A prophet.

“Our chief priests and our leaders sentenced him to death, cru-
cified him.” That’s what people of privilege and power do to trouble-
ers of the establishment. As for us? We were merely bystanders. Our
thoughts and prayers go out to his family.

*We hoped he was the Messiah we had hoped
for. But the system, powerful, privileged
people, systemic injustice, whiteness, said NO.
Now, we’re hopeless.*

Then, the saddest, most-relevant-to-this-festival of preaching
words: *Hemeis de elpizomen*. “*We had hoped he was the one who would
redeem Israel.*” We hoped he was the Messiah we had hoped for. But
the system, powerful, privileged people, systemic injustice, whiteness,
said NO. Now, we’re hopeless.

“We had hoped attendance would be back to pre-covid levels”

“I had hoped that virtual church was as good as church.”

“I hoped if I go vegan and got an Elon Musk car I could save the
planet.

“I had hoped Republicans would allow us to have a little gun
legislation.”

“I had hoped that the Manhattan DA would at last deliver us of
our serial adulterer.”

We had hoped Jesus would run the Romans out, give us the govern-
ment we deserve. Then Jesus went and got arrested, thrown in jail

because he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Got himself on death row. Some Savior of the World. We had hoped.

We had hoped. Then Jesus dashed our hopes.

Oh, some women went to the tomb early today and said it was empty. Trauma makes some people delusional.

Or as Paul would put it: *If you hope for this life only, your preaching gospel is in vain*" (1 Cor 15:19).

Please note that it's after they said, "We had hoped" that Jesus said (in love), "You *anoiatoi kai bradeis* fools. Your dull minds keep you from believing the prophets." Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he taught them. And true to form, even when Jesus was leading the Bible study, the disciples—known to Jesus affectionately as annoying, slow-witted fools—don't understand anything.

To their "we had hoped," Jesus goes ballistic. "You stupid, slow..." Earlier Jesus had shown amazing patience with their misunderstanding. But when they admit, "Well, we had hoped..." Jesus gets the maddest they'd ever seen. Hoping for "this life only," all they saw was omnipotent Death; couldn't see crucified/resurrected Jesus.

You thought Jesus was mad with the money changers in the temple. His worst ire is reserved for how his own disciples who had hoped. "Fools!"

(By the way, when you minister to hopeless, weary, grieving people it's not a good idea to address them as annoying, slow-witted fools. Even though Jesus does.)

Our theme: "Preaching Hope for A Weary World." Careful...

Ludwig Feuerbach told nineteenth century German Christians that what they call "religion" was merely intellectual deceit produced by human desperation. What we call "God" names our craving for some entity who gives us what we think we've got to have and in the way we want it. Religion as wish projection due to human longing, aspiration, fear, and self-absorption. Tell me your *hope*, I'll tell you your gods.

Karl Barth said atheist Feuerbach, more truthfully, knew the idol-smashing Christ than most Christians.

Hope is the parent of idolatry because false hope is easier to worship than real Jesus. False hope is undemanding because it's self-devised, but, alas, at the end of a violent week—as shadows lengthen, and you're seven miles from nowhere—is self-deluding.

I'm never more deceitful than when I'm traumatized, wounded. Pastors spend much of their time with fearful, wounded, people who, in their pain, devise false, culturally approved gods who are easier to get along with than Jesus.

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Whatever these two traumatized disciples were hoping for, it wasn't for an incarcerated, tortured-to-death Jew who lived briefly and died violently, forgiving his gentile torturers.

So here's what impresses me this time through this passage: It wasn't their hopelessness that made Jesus mad. He cursed them *for their hope*.

"We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel." We had hoped that he would save us without pain or tragedy, his or ours. Hoped that Pontius Pilate's incipient liberalism would blossom. Hoped that six out of ten Americans would admit that they can't secure their lives with a gun, or a cross. Hoped that Jesus would love us without telling us the truth. Hoped we could be saved without being judged.

Joan Didion's memoir of her daughter's long dying and her husband's unexpected death is, *Year of Magical Thinking*.

Our theme: "Preaching Hope for A Weary World." Careful...

Some of your congregation's present despair is wise realization that their hopes were false.

If we can just get the right person in the pulpit, we can grow.

If we concoct the best online platform in Presbyterianism, we'll survive.

If our pastor would be more loving and caring, we wouldn't be in this pain.

If our preacher could just find a way to talk about Jesus without sounding as mad as Jesus...

If your folks now have buyer's remorse (otherwise known as hopelessness for this life only) it could be a sign that they are at last paying attention to the gospel. Don't be too quick to assuage their grief.

A preacher is never in a more dangerous position than when a congregation asks, "Is there any hope?" If you love them, and if you're empathetic, caring, and concerned (which all of you are), the temptation to lie from the pulpit is irresistible, peddling false hope. And you will lie, not because you're so compassionate, caring, and concerned but because you know that congregations reward their pastors for aiding in their deceits and punish their preachers for rebuking their false hopes. Or as Paul puts it, "If for this life and its solutions, programs, and infatuations only you have preached, your preaching is in vain."

I tell budding preachers, "The test of ministry is the funeral sermon. It takes guts not to preach false hope": "She'll live on in our memories," "His achievements are immortal," "He was one of the nicest guys you'd ever hope to meet." Pagan drivel always goes down easier, and is easier to swallow without choking than the gospel. False hopes for "this life only" are easier to preach than the truth, otherwise known as the One who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly, rejoining on the way to Emmaus the same dimwitted fools who stood at the foot of his cross.

We had hoped...we could choose our way into the life worth living, could manufacture a good reason to get out bed in the morning, that given the right financing and legislation, we could save ourselves by ourselves. We had hoped.

I teach classes in Pastoral Leadership and Administration at Duke Divinity, which I fear Paul would dismiss as "Wisely Working the Worldly Efficient Methods of the Measurable, Achievable Goals of 'This Life Only' and Calling That 'Church.'"

Paul, give us some hope: "If we have hoped only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, first crop of the harvest of those who have died... and then the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he brings every form of rule, every authority and power to an end... to rule until *he puts all enemies under his feet*. Death, the last enemy."

Heard a sermon recently. Preacher did a great job of reciting the history of the horrors wrought by America's whiteness, honestly depicting the ravages of our racism. "So what's our hope?" the preacher asked rhetorically.

“The white church must follow its better angels, must at last get its act together and do right in regard to race. Reparations now!”

Really? If the first half of your sermon is true, which I think it is, your ending is absurd. What else does the white church in North America have to do to convince you that we’re not the hope for the future? The hopelessness of Ta-Nehisi Coates makes sense; your false hope doesn’t.

We hoped for the return of the robin in the spring, the butterfly emerging from the cocoon, or Jesus living on in the disciples’ memories, the triumph of life, fulfillment of human potential, a democratic majority in the senate, people doing right if they’re prophetically told by their preachers to do right, immortality through eating kale.

To which Paul smirks, “If for this life only you have hoped...”

Our empathetic listening is a joke. I believe that if God can raise crucified Jesus, God can ultimately redeem what North Carolina has ruined. I couldn’t do this without hope that what the church taught me about God is true.”

Can’t stand for preachers to talk about their children in sermons, but I asked my daughter what she had learned after her first year as a psychiatric social worker. She replied, “I’m so thankful that I’m a Christian. How do my non-Christian colleagues do it? Social workers spend all day, every day in conversation with desperate people who have been disposed of by an economy and a society that deems them expendable. Our social worker talk, our drugs, or disbursements do so little to fix their lives. Our empathetic listening is a joke. I believe that if God can raise crucified Jesus, God can ultimately redeem what North Carolina has ruined. I couldn’t do this without hope that what the church taught me about God is true.”

And I said, “The girl has had good preaching.”

Be honest: Your life would be easier if Jesus had let the two disciples walk on to Emmaus alone. The salary of every preacher here would be adequate if Jesus had allowed the world to shut him up and we clergy were permitted to go on empathetically massaging the faithful with false hopes “for this life only.”

But that’s not the way that Jesus saves.

Here's your hope, in life, in death, in any life beyond death. Jesus is not only raised from the dead, he refuses to let us walk alone with our vain, false hopes. He comes not only to die and to rise for us, but also angrily to judge us. Therein is our hope. Holding us accountable, dashing our false hopes, working for good with us when we're up to it, working in spite of us when we're not, opening the scriptures, continuing the conversation that pries our fingers loose from our false gods, until he "brings every form of rule, every authority and power to an end... until *he puts all enemies under his feet*. Death, the last enemy."

Got a friend who says that the only thing that keeps him in ministry is his dogged hope that, "God is going to get back what belongs to God."

Jesus shows up to us while we walk away from him, he keeps talking to us, death be damned. And the best you can say about us is that we keep walking and listening and preaching about him. If this story isn't true, if the women on Easter morning were lying or the dimwitted fools' eyes were not opened at Emmaus, despair is a sign of your intelligence.

It was not my best effort. Look, I'd had a busy week. Two parishioners had thoughtlessly died. The church treasurer told the Board, "Our preacher's left-wing sermons are having a powerful effect on our finances, all bad."

So I threw something together on Acts 9, apologizing to Luke, "I've had a busy week."

The risen Christ shows up on the Damascus road. Gives Saul a job to do. I told them something like, "If God can show up to a religious terrorist like Paul, keep looking over your shoulder. You could be next. And when God shows up, it's not to make you better adjusted or happier, it's to give you an assignment. Now, let's stand for the last hymn."

Not profound, not interesting, but not wrong either. Right?

Third person out after service was this guy I never cared for, a self-important, braggart who peddled condominiums and who thought he was somebody because he was the vice chair of the county Republicans. That kind of guy.

He lunged at me, grabbed me, saying, "That sermon!"

Before I could say, "Er, uh, I had a busy week," he shouts, "Preacher, if I die right now, it's okay. I'm not the same person I was at the beginning of the service."

My Lord, he's weeping. "Did God tell you to speak to me? 'Cause God told me stuff in that sermon I didn't like to hear. I'm changed. Like I say, if I die right now, I've seen it. Godamighty it's real after all!"

And I muttered, "So? The women weren't lying. He shows up anyway. So, even for a sorry preacher like me, there's hope."

Post Sermon Reflection:

Since its inception, I've loved preaching at the Festival of Homiletics, talking shop with fellow Servants of the Word. I was gratified that, in spite of my fears, a nice throng showed up at 8:30 in the morning to hear my sermon on Hope. (Take that, young, vital, more-popular-than-I Otis Moss III.)

Above is the manuscript of what I said in the sermon, but who knows what my listeners heard?

"Once again, you've managed to preach on the Festival theme without approving of it," said one preacher at the door after the service. A compliment?

I was fascinated that four people wanted to talk about my story about my social worker daughter. Three lamented that their adult children were no longer believers. "Well, not yet, anyway," I corrected one.

"What did you do that kept your children from not resenting the church?" asked another. Answer: Not sure we did or didn't do anything. For whatever reason, they're still in the church and we are grateful. My story was about my daughter, not me.

Don't you find it interesting that these listeners seized upon that story as the main takeaway from the sermon? It's a reminder that while I'm up there preaching grand concepts and sweeping doctrines, they're out there wondering, "Why do my kids not attend church?"

One disgruntled listener grouched, "That was the most hopeless sermon we've heard this week." Oh well. I was trying to give my fellow preachers biblical encouragement, believe it or not.

The guy behind him said, "Don't listen to him. It was the only honest sermon I heard all week."

"You get away with murder in the pulpit," said one perceptive participant, "your humor saves you every time." I can't decide if my humor contributes to the sermon or perhaps trivializes the subject matter. You make the call.

"How many years have you been presenting at the Festival?" asked someone. I took the question as an ageist threat.

The majority of people filing out of the sanctuary for the refreshment break said nothing, which, while disappointing, leaves me a blank canvas to paint as many positive responses as I please.

As I recall, no one commented on my sermon's theme. No one challenged my exegesis or my theological interpretation of uniquely Christian hope. Perhaps that means that sermons are not primarily about ideas, concepts, or interpretation. I love Bonhoeffer's definition of a sermon as allowing the risen Christ to walk among his people. When and if that Christological epiphany happens, sometimes it's hard to tell the preacher about it.

Besides, God refuses to let me and my sermon be the sole determination of the significance of a sermon. I preach, they listen, but only the Holy Spirit determines what is heard. To preach is to be out of control of the communication between God and God's people. Whether the sermon was ultimately hopeful and helpful or not, is up to the Lord, who, if Luke 24 be believed, enjoys showing up and pressing uncomfortable conversation upon hopeless, helpless, dimwitted fools like us.

As preachers, therein is our hope. ☩

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