

“Hoping Skills”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
November 18, 2018
Mark 13:1-9

Last Sunday I re-told a story from my freshman year in college having to do with financial stewardship. Today I'd like to re-tell another story from my freshman year, trusting that, as master storyteller Craig Cobb says, “A good story is always worth repeating!” So if you'll indulge me again -

It was the spring of that year, and I was pledging to a fraternity on campus. We were in the last weekend of the pledge period known as “hell week,” when the actives make life as miserable as possible for the lowly pledges. In this fraternity there was a tradition that at the end of the final meeting of the president's term in the spring, the pledge class would chase him down, and if they could catch him, they would throw him into the college lake – more like a weedy, muddy pond. So, as that late night meeting came to an end we pledges were poised to strike. As soon as the president brought down the gavel he dashed up the stairs from our basement meeting room at the fraternity house. The pledges, as we had carefully planned, divided into two groups – some of us chasing him up the stairs, and some of us going out the basement door, running up the side of the house to tackle him as he was chased out the front door by the others. I was one of those assigned to run out the basement door. I was running full steam in the darkness up the hill when – SMACK – I hit an unsuspecting tree with the side of my face. A chunk of my eyebrow is still embedded in that tree, I am sure. I dropped to my hands and knees with a groan, crawled around for a moment, not sure of what happened or where I was, and then the pain set in. Suddenly all of my attention and energy became completely refocused. I no longer cared one bit about running down the club president to throw him in the lake. It was all about my head and me. That tree got my attention.

Life's traumas have a way of doing that, don't they? Be they sudden physical injury or lingering illness, death of a loved one, a natural disaster or national or international tragedy – they have a way of taking over and overtaking everything else. Everything else loses any sense of priority. It would be good, perhaps, to know that they're coming, or when they're coming, so that we might somehow avoid them – or at least make the traumas somehow less traumatic. But of course we can't, really. There are just too many trees standing fast in the darkness for us to avoid them all.

The way that faith helps us to cope with all of this is by hope – that no matter what “tree” we might run into, there is much more to life than what we might be presently suffering, or difficulty we might currently be going through – that we are in the end safe with God, safe in God. We all have to live with what cannot be foreseen, and we hope, as the Apostle Paul puts it, in what cannot be seen (“for who hopes in what can be seen?”). If you think about it, though, this still leaves us in the dark - and so we need to develop not just coping skills, but as people of faith to develop “hoping skills” – some way to develop “night vision” to find our way through the darkness. Jesus wants his people to be able to “see” in this kind of night – not as people of darkness but of light – in the midst not only of our own dark times, but in the midst of the world’s darkness as well.

Hope is the equipment we need to “see” in the darkness, to see through it into the promises of God – to know them as our own and to proclaim them as the worlds. You have to pay attention, Jesus tells his disciples, because things aren’t always as they seem. We have to be attentive to the world around us, and the life we are living in it, if we are to persevere in hope – to see not through rose-colored glasses, but with a clear-eyed awareness to see things as they are.

Jesus was reminding his disciples of this when they remarked how impressed they were with the magnificence and beauty of the temple in Jerusalem – the center of Israel’s life and worship. The Jerusalem temple, newly constructed by Herod the Great at great expense, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was immense, and the Jewish historian Josephus reports that Herod used so much gold to cover the outside walls of the temple that, in bright sunlight, it nearly blinded anyone who looked at it. The temple complex rose to such a height that it could be seen from miles away by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to worship there.

“Isn’t it amazing?” they say to Jesus, but he didn’t see the temple the way they saw it. He saw it not for its architectural qualities, its grand scale, the beauty of the stonework. He saw the temple for what it had been, and what it had become. The living faith of the people had become as rigid and lifeless as the stones themselves. And he, who had brought the heart of God to give true life, was even now being rejected, soon to die. He didn’t see beauty, only destruction – and he called it as he saw it.

That’s our first hoping skill we can learn from this text, to be alert to the enchantment with human achievement and the enticement of human goals that are portrayed as the destination of history. At the time Mark wrote his gospel resistance fighters were going through the Palestinian countryside calling on all Jews to join the final battle against the Romans that would bring the goal of the age, the salvation and restoration of God’s people. How enamored they were with the temple, the symbol of the glory of King David’s reign, now long past. It beckoned

to them as the goal of their lives. In a few years time the temple would be destroyed by Roman armies as they crushed the Jewish resistance, and the temple would never be constructed again. Only a portion of the western wall remains, also called the Wailing Wall.

How enamored we can become, how enchanted by human greatness and achievement. As in the last few centuries the world has seen such amazing scientific and technological advancements, the world – at least the world most of us live in – has seen less and less need for God, as nearly every poll suggests. We hope and look for a technological fix to nearly all our problems, a way out of all our troubles. Progress has claimed to strip away superstition as it lifts up the genius of human creativity.

In yesterday's New York Times there is a column by Bret Stephens about the Times' lengthy investigation as he puts it "into Facebook's cynical and self-serving calculations as it tried to brazen its way through a year of serial PR disasters: Russian disinformation, Cambridge Analytica, and a gargantuan security breach." He continues, "The story of the wildly exaggerated promises and damaging unintended consequences of technology isn't exactly a new one. The real marvel is that it always seems to surprise us. Why? Part of the reason (he says) is that we tend to forget that technology is only as good as the people who use it. We want it to elevate us; we tend to degrade it. In a better world, Twitter might have been a digital billboard of ideas and conversation ennobling the public square. We've turned it into the open cesspool of the American mind. Facebook was supposed to serve as a platform for enhanced human interaction, not a tool for the lonely to burrow more deeply into their own isolation."

We've built monuments to our own brilliance as we have probed the heavens and unlocked the secrets of biological life. It is all most impressive, but along the way there has been the Holocaust and Hiroshima, polluted environments and global warming, and threats to world security that couldn't have been imagined in earlier times. All our progress – and it is real and significant – has not healed ancient animosities between people, has not healed racial divides, and has not erased the mark in the human heart that brings violence and destruction. Be alert to all of that, Jesus says. Don't place your hope in what can be manipulated by the power of evil and the power of death. Stay alert, enjoying human achievement and seeking to spread its benefits to all – but know that we must look beyond human ends, human goals – to the One who stands at the end, and is the goal.

And be alert to deception, Jesus tells them. "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say 'I'm the one!'" It isn't just the enticing messages of the charlatans and con artists who claim to speak for God. There is also a more subtle deception in the things that draw us away from a Christ-centered life, and from hope in him – the allure of worldly

success and veneration, the draw of achievement over relationships, devotion to ourselves and our own needs over devotion to God and devoted attention to the needs of others.

Churches and clergy have to watch for this in our success and results oriented culture, especially as we struggle against the tide of decline that has gone on now for more than a generation. In a beautifully written article, "A Season of Gratitude, Not Anxiety," Wesley Avram points out how there is a "whole industry of diagnosis and treatment for what is ailing congregational ministry." After speaking to some of them he writes (and I think this may be a gracious and strategic word for Pebble Hill as you move into the next phase of your life):

"So my thought is this: Let's continue assessing our ills. And let's continue experimenting with new ideas. Why not? That's what it's always meant to be the church. But let's allow ourselves to be chastened, even a bit humbled, as we do that – less ambitious, more hopeful; less anxious, more grateful. For the church goes on, and congregations grow and decline, and folks find faith, and fields are tended, stories told, and lives are lived for Christ all over the world." And to leaders, both lay and professional he counsels: "Let's stop building walls of demand and expectation as we argue about the future, and start giving grace and sharing hope – with God's help." Giving grace and sharing hope – that's how many of you have testified to the character of this congregation, and that's how I have experienced it over the years.

A final hoping skill our text offers is to be alert, but not alarmed. Jesus warns his followers that there will be wars and earthquakes and famines, threats of destruction on all sides. Many are the deceivers who have declared that the end is near, claiming even more knowledge of it than even Jesus himself. This apocalyptic sense has entered our political rhetoric as well, how everything seems to be falling apart! In Eugene Peterson's rendering of this text Jesus says, "Keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history, and no sign of the end." The disciples want to know the signs of the end – where the trees are – so they can avoid them and still be saved. Instead, Jesus points to the troubles themselves – how he submits to them, in solidarity with us. Such signs are still part of the world, the normal state of affairs. Christians should expect trouble, but we should expect Christ more.

To hear some talk about it, it's as if God has already given up on this world, and it's only a matter of time until the final act is played out – and it's only a matter of biding time until then. As if the present time was not already redeemed, as if hope for this world God created in love and sustains by grace is lost, as if God does not search us out when we are lost amidst the trees and bring us to himself – as if we are not commissioned to share the living, loving gospel of Jesus Christ or work for the peace and justice that God's love demands.

Our hope is not just in what God will do some day, but in what God is doing now. Be alert, but not alarmed. God is still working among us, bringing peace and nurturing fresh growth. Live into that hope. Keep your eyes open – and also your hearts, hands and minds.