

We Had Hoped

By: Karen Scherer

June 16, 2019. After Jesus' death, two of his disciples spoke what are maybe the three saddest words in scripture: we had hoped. We had hoped Jesus was the one to save us, to restore Israel. Instead, Jesus is dead and we are defeated. Guest Pastor Karen Scherer preaches today on a hope that does not disappoint.

*** Transcript ***

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't know if any of you know or have heard of Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Any of you know of her? Good, a few of you. Pastor Bolz-Weber is shockingly pastoral. She has tattoos and sleeves all up and down her arms, telling the story of the Trinity on her body. She wears nose rings and earrings, and periodically a lip ring, and her hair stands up straight. And she uses language in church -- that you probably would ask me not to use -- to express the reality of her faith and to proclaim the gospel to others. Young people love her because of her genuineness, and because of the love that God has placed in her heart and the faith that she has. She was pastor of a church called House For All Sinners and Saints. That name was chosen specifically to have Sinners be first and Saints be second in that title.

I recently read a story of how Pastor Bolz-Weber would meet with new people who were wanting to join her church, a congregation that was exploding in membership. And she would meet with them at this welcoming meeting with newcomers, and she'd ask them to tell why they came to All Sinners and Saints. And they would share and give various reasons. Some would say they heard that she was very funny and inspiring, and very radical. Some shared that it was a compromise, because one side of the family was Baptist and the other side was Roman Catholic, and they thought maybe they could sort of meet in the middle at this Lutheran church. Others said they really liked the music. And another said that they felt it was a very welcoming and inclusive church. At the end of a meeting, she makes a point of always telling the people who are wanting to come to this church and become part of it: it's great to have you all here and it's great to hear of what has brought you here. But I need you to hear something from me, and that is that the church will disappoint you, and I will fail to meet your expectations or I'll say something stupid and hurt your feelings. It's not a matter of *if*, it's a matter of *when*. Welcome to the congregation, we will disappoint you.

And is this not true? That's why Saint Paul makes an absolutely astounding statement in our reading for today from the letter to the Romans. He says that hope does not disappoint. Hope does not disappoint. Now, think about that for a moment. How many times have you hoped that something would happen and were sorely disappointed when it did not? Everyone of us has. But remember the story at the end of Luke's gospel, when three days after Jesus' death a couple of his disciples were walking down a road to Emmaus trying to make sense of what had just happened in Jerusalem: the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, the shared meal, the betrayal, the arrest and the trial, and the crucifixion. And as they were talking about all of this, a stranger walks up (and of course -- spoiler alert -- it was Jesus, but they didn't recognize him). And he said to them, "Hey, what are you guys talking about?" So they told the story of Jesus' life to him. They told the story of his ministry and death, at which point they then spoke what are maybe the three saddest words in scripture: we had hoped. We had hoped Jesus was the one to save us, to restore Israel. Instead, Jesus is dead and we are defeated.

Those two disciples started out with hope and ended with deep disappointment. Why? Because hope as a starting point for us looks like Palm Sunday. It looks like the crowds entering triumphantly into Jerusalem shouting "Hosanna!" But Palm Sunday always turns to Good Friday eventually. Think about it in your own life. We had hoped. We had hoped that the time and money spent on the graduate degree we had would mean we'd have a job by now in our field. We had hoped that our parents would love us unconditionally. We had hoped that by this time in life we would be happily married, or we would have a meaningful career, or we would be able to retire, or we would feel like we at least knew what we were doing. We had hoped that the Blues would win the Stanley Cup. Oh yes, they did! But what if they hadn't, which was highly possible? Our hopes would have been dashed. Disappointment. We had hoped that our children or our loved one would not have to suffer. We had hoped that what we had worked for so long would finally come to fruition, and that didn't happen. So it's a little hard to hear Saint Paul say that hope does not disappoint. What world is he living in, anyway?

Well, the world humankind has constructed and strives to live in, we know, is filled with disappointment and pain and suffering -- because our hope, you see, is built on us and what we think we want. Our expectations, our hopes. But what about God's hope for us? You see, our hope is built on something less, on less of what it is that God has planned for us. That is, sharing the glory of God was God's intention for humankind, being in the full presence and in deep, solid relationship with God in the garden of the earth. The cosmos, following God's will for us, not our own.

But our hope disappoints because we place our faith elsewhere. We place it on our own work, our own fate, our own hearts' desires. And you know what happens? That turns into an idealistic hope that somehow we can make things happen. And those things are about us, about what we want. And when something happens to dash that hope which has now become our goal, we find someone to blame. And so often, God is about the handiest person we have -- or ourselves, or others -- which is maybe why not only does Paul speak of a hope that does not disappoint, but he connects it to suffering. Because of those three saddest words -- we had hoped -- he connects it to the suffering and death of Christ Jesus. To the redeeming work of a God who seeks reconciliation with us and who seeks to give us peace and connection with God and with one another.

The Easter hope we have, brothers and sisters, the hope that does not disappoint, has nothing to do with idealism or naïve optimism -- like when God shuts a door, God always opens a window. It has nothing to do with the avoidance of suffering. The Easter hope that we have is a hope that can only come from a God who has experienced our life, our suffering, our world -- who has experienced love and friendship and lepers and prostitutes and betrayal and suffering and death and burial and a descent into hell itself. Only a god who has borne suffering can bring us any real hope of resurrection. Only a god who is with us, and who has been with us and for us and among us and known the suffering of our lives, can bring us real hope. And that is the hope of new life, the hope of being raised up, the hope of resurrection. And if ever given the choice of optimism or resurrection, I'd go with resurrection any day of the week.

And this is the god of whom Paul speaks and in whom we place our hope. This is a hope that does not disappoint, that looks less like being idealistic about ourselves, and more like being realistic about God's redeeming work in the world. It's a hope that comes not from naïve optimism, but from being wrong and falling short and experiencing betrayal and being a betrayer, and it comes from a suffering and the grave and what feels like a night from which dawn could never emerge, and then how God reaches into the graves we dig ourselves and others, and again loves us back to life.

The Christian faith is one that does not pretend things are not bad. This is a faith that does not offer

platitudes to those who've lost loved ones to violence or tornadoes or floods or terrible terrorist actions. This is a faith that does not take us out of suffering, but assures us of God's presence in the very midst of suffering. And we know this through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit. So maybe the way suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, is that suffering, endurance, and character actually free us, free us from the burden of having to be naïvely optimistic and more to be absolutely realistic about the God who is with us and for us and among us.

Maybe if hope isn't a very reliable starting point, then hope is not something we strive to muster up ourselves. Maybe real hope is always something we are surprised by. Maybe hope is that which is left after all else has failed us. This is an Easter hope. Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "This is not a faith that produces optimism. It is a faith that produces a defiant hope that God is still writing the story, and that despite darkness, a light shines. And that God can redeem our crap," although she didn't use that word. "That God can redeem our crap, and that beauty matters, and that despite every disappointing thing we've ever done or that we have ever endured, that there is no hell from which resurrection is impossible." We have a hope that does not disappoint, given to us through the Father, through his son Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have a hope that raises us and gives us hope for new life. And a hope that does not disappoint.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2019, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Karen Scherer, Romans 5:1-5, Luke 24:13-35