

"Hope Floats"
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This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the beginning of the year on the Christian calendar, the four Sundays before Christmas, the time the church awaits Jesus' birth. Each Sunday has a theme. The theme for this day is HOPE.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I served Mayflower Congregational Church for 15 years, there is a place called the Home of Hope. It is a wonderful agency that offers shelter and care to persons in the very last stages of terminal illnesses—that is to say . . . dying. The name of the place is ironic, since no one who goes there has the slightest earthly hope of recovery. One might see it, rather, as a way station *en route* to the graveyard. The atmosphere of the Home of Hope is quietly upbeat, as if the staff and the residents know something we don't.

The ambience of the place is anything but hopeless. The staff is friendly and competent,

and the atmosphere is quietly upbeat. The tasteful rooms are well-appointed. The Home of Hope does not broadcast the odor of death. Families sit with their loved ones or chat over a cup of coffee in the dining area with members of other families . . . while they wait.

A large work of art dominates one wall. It is a tree crafted from real wood, with mobiles of plastic leaves and doves that seem to flutter in the moving air. A small wall plaque spells out the significance of the piece. A tree, it says, is a symbol of life, with roots that go deep into the earth and limbs that reach for heaven, symbolizing the connection between earthly and heavenly life, embodying grace and perfect freedom. The renewal of the tree each spring is a symbol of eternal life.

Anyway, one Friday morning I asked the church secretary to call the Home of Hope to inquire about the condition of Iva Bailey, whom I had seen a couple of days previously. The response was that her death was imminent. Within a half-hour I was walking down the corridor to

her room. I paused at the door and peered in. The bed, empty now, was being stripped by one of the caregivers. I faltered.

How could Iva have died so quickly? The woman changing the bed looked up with a questioning expression. "I was looking for Iva Bailey," I said. "This is Iva's room," she replied. "Where's Iva?" She nodded toward a chair, where sat a woman under the hair dryer. Incredulous, I crept in, and there sat Iva, having her hair done!

I was seated next to Iva, holding her hand, when her husband, Kenneth, walked through the door, greeted me, looked toward the bed and asked, "Where's Iva?" I nodded toward the lady in the chair, under the dryer. We shared a laugh.

What was going on there? At Home of Hope, nobody is in the business of trying to mask the reality of death. Nobody pretends that every resident won't die, and soon. So what was the aim of a lovely hairdo for Iva Bailey? Was it a courtesy to the funeral home? Not in this case.

Iva was to be cremated. It was surely a statement that Iva Bailey was God's child and that, therefore, she was to be treated with dignity and loving care to the last moment of her life. Maybe they were getting her ready to see her heavenly Father. I thought to myself: This is great! Let's polish her nails, too!

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, says: *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all persons most to be pitied, for in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (II Cor. 15: 19-20).*

Her name is Hope, Kristine Hope, which means "Christly Hope." Janet, her mother, gave Hope her name. It is doubtful that the name was chosen consciously from the Bible (I Tim. 1:1—Christ, our hope). Nevertheless, Kristine Hope was an aptly chosen name. When Jan was pregnant with Hope, she contracted non-Hodgins lymphoma. Her physician urged her to begin radiation treatments immediately. Radiation would have zapped the fetus that became Hope. Jan decided to delay the

radiation therapy until after Hope was born, thereby putting her own life on the line. So, Hope was a miracle baby (aren't they all?). Jan beat Hodgkin's, but became an alcoholic in the process.

She moved out, abandoning her daughter and husband, drifted from job to welfare, into a second marriage and out of state. One day, drunk, Janet collapsed, hit her head, broke her neck, and died. Hope, by then in her mid-twenties, was feeling hopeless, for the death of her mother was her sixth loss in nine months. The previous December Hope's wedding engagement was broken. In April she was rear-ended and lost her car, her mobility, and her part-time job. In July her grandfather died. Now she was trying to deal with losing her mother for a second time.

What would you say to Hope? "Everything happens for a reason." "Your mother is in a better place." God never sends us a burden heavier than we can bear." "Things will work out for the best in the end." "Life goes on."" You just have to be strong." "This is

God's will." "We are not meant to understand these things."

While all these statements may be true, they are also banal—drearily commonplace, predictable and trite—and none of them was working for Hope right then. She heard them all from people who wanted to help, but were powerless to do so, and for two reasons. First, Hope had grief work to do. Only she could do this work, which had nothing to do with platitudes. Second, although most were motivated by a genuine desire to help, but not knowing what to say, they still said something, even if it was the wrong thing. Those who speak thus are unclear about the **nature**, **source**, or **function** of Christian hope.

THE NATURE OF HOPE

First, understand what hope is not. Hope is not the same as wishing. Wishing has to do with want, lack, need, desire. Now hear what hope is. Hope is confident trust in and of what's coming next—faith in what does not yet appear.

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what they see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Romans 8:24, 25).

The capacity to hope is part of human nature and of no other creatures in nature. That is because hope is rooted in memory but imagines the future. I believe we humans are constitutionally disposed to hope! I believe that to act hopeless is to go against nature! And when I say (as I will momentarily) that the source of our hope is Christ alone, what I mean to say is that Christ only restores to us what is naturally ours. He does not magically give us what was not there in the first place. Christ opens us to the hope that is in us, that God intended we should enjoy. When we claim Christ, we reclaim hope. If we seem to be going against nature to claim hope in the face of death, in fact we are simply taking human nature to the next level, where Christ has been living all along.

What a gift it is to be able to live and die in the Christian faith! As the Apostle Paul wrote so

long ago, *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die (in) the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Romans 14:8).* This hope does not disappoint us. One suspects that those folks at the Home of Hope know that for us Christians, hope is our home.

THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE

Kristine Hope, if she is to be saved at all, will not be saved **out** of her trouble, but **in** her trouble, in the very midst of it. This is part of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, for Christ is the source of the Christian hope, or we have none. Christ wasn't saved out of his trouble, either. He lived, a persecuted and misunderstood man. He died a horrible, tortured death, suspended above the earth, until he strangled on his own phlegm. And he was God's only begotten Son! If Christ suffered so, what makes us suppose we will be spared?

End of story? Not quite! *If for this life only we have hoped on Christ, we are of all persons most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been*

raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (I Cor. 15:19, 20). Our hope is not to be spared suffering and death, but to triumph over them. *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive!* (I Cor. 15:22). Listen to that! **In Christ shall all be made alive!** Christ is the source of Christian hope.

Now here's the hard truth. For Kristine Hope and the rest of us. We can't be found unless we're lost, can't be saved unless we're in peril, can't be given a new life unless and until we've died to the old one. That's the way it works!

THE FUNCTION OF HOPE

Paul again: *Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us* (Rom. 5:2-5).

Today, as I speak, I imagine that some members of the House Judiciary Committee are not in church. They are busy preparing Articles of Impeachment, soon to be levied against the President. But memory carries me back to an earlier time, the era of Bill Clinton, the man from Hope, who despite other failings did help move America toward hope. I tell a story of yet another president, Ronald Reagan.

Identical twin brothers are anything but identical in temperament. One is a pessimist who complains about everything. The other is an eternal optimist. One Christmas the parents decide to play a prank on the boys that will make each change his attitude. They ask the boys to spend Christmas Eve in the family room, and while the boys sleep, the parents fill the pessimist's room with wonderful gifts. They fill the optimist's room with horse manure.

On Christmas morning the pessimist is first allowed into his room. He finds something wrong with every gift, then complains about what he didn't get. When the optimist is allowed to open the door to his room, he

immediately begins to dig through the manure shouting, "Oh boy! Oh boy! With manure piled this high, there has to be a pony under here somewhere!"

Hope is optimistic, but it differs from optimism in that it goes far beyond simply putting a happy face on present difficulties. Hope is patient and persistent, outlasting the stoic's determination to tough it out without complaint. Hope is expectant. It looks toward the future with anticipation, in spite of all the in-spite-ofs. Hope never gives up, and it never gives in. It is more visceral than mental, more in the bowels than in the brain. We hope because we cannot help it. Sometimes we are overtaken by hope, for it is a force outside and around us. Sometimes we hold fast our hope, for it is also a force that is within us.

It is not an accident that Advent begins with the theme of HOPE. Christ may be the ultimate harbinger of hope, but he was not the first. For 750 years before Christ, Israel had been called to hope. The prophet Isaiah envisioned a day when Jerusalem would be a sort of huge,

magnetic mountain, drawing all nations unto itself in peace. That hope remains unfulfilled.

Isaiah is not talking about present reality, the world as we know it. He is talking about hope, the world as God sees it. Those of us who are called by the name of Christ are called to put on the prophetic imagination and live toward that vision.

CONCLUSION

Oh. You may be wondering about the title of this message: *Hope Floats*. It's from the 1998 movie, of course. The movie stars Sandra Bullock, Harry Connick, Jr. and Gena Rowlands. If you have seen it, you know that it is not just a "chick flick." I've never been sure exactly what that means, but I think it means "sappy, sentimental, and romantic." *Hope Floats* makes a rather eloquent statement about the human condition and how hope works in the midst of it.

Near the end of the movie, Grandma is tucking Bernice snugly into bed. Bernice is feeling as if her world has been destroyed. Her

grandmother tells her about a time during her childhood when she watched ants rebuild their destroyed colony.

GRANDMA: The ants work together. They are a colony, a family. We're a family too, and we'll get through this together. That's why families were invented, just to make sure "hopeless" doesn't have the last word.

In the film's last scene, Bernice is walking hand in hand with her mother as the sun sets.

Birdie (Sandra Bullock): You're a fine girl, Bernice. I never said no different.

BERNICE (speaking to the camera): My dad says that childhood is the happiest time in my life, but I think he's wrong. I think my mom's right. Childhood is what you spend the rest of your life trying to overcome.

BIRDIE: That's what mama used to say. She said beginnings are scary; endings are usually sad; but it's the middle that counts most. You

need to remember that when you find yourself at the beginning. Just give hope a chance to float up, and it will, too.

