

Text: Psalm 42
Date: January 10, 2010
Title: "Finding Hope"
Theme: Christian hope is based in God, not circumstances.

Why this series?

The need for a conversation about hope – personal, national

Economics exacerbates other difficulties

Even if everything is going well, fear/anxiety over issues like terrorism are a burden to us

But before we can get to a place where we can talk about hope

We first need to honor despair – sounds strange, but it's real

We've got to acknowledge difficulty, acknowledge anxiety

Lots of people will tell you, "get over it"

That's great advice – you already know that

But first, it's not easy to do and second, it's clear that person never really listened

So we've got to honor despair

Musicians know this: it's part of the great American musical tradition

The African-American community gave us blues

Right along side that though, is a white southern tradition of country music

If you look at the themes – they're very similar

My baby left me, there's not enough money, I've got a restlessness that won't go away, just got out of jail

(In country music, you might add, my truck broke down and my dog ran away!)

The point is: the sadder a song is, the better it makes you feel

You've honored despair

Despair is a reality, even for Christians sometimes

I am amazed in my ministry at the level of difficulty some people deal with every day – health, family, relationships, addiction

I struggle with this as someone who brings a faith perspective to my observation of people's lives

I know they can't help but wonder where God is – I can't either

Because some of the folks I see hurting the most are great, godly people

We wonder why it seems God is turning away

That's the beauty of the scripture from Psalm 42 – because it simultaneously honors despair AND expresses a profound, deep sense of hope

I want you to take a look at this scripture with me: p._____ in your Bibles or 777 in the hymnal

I want you to see what I'm talking about – because I want this passage to stick with you as a model for how you can do this yourself – I hope you'll keep coming back here

A couple of the most mournful lines:

v.3 - "My tears have been my food day and night"

v.5 – "My soul is cast down" – literally that means laid low, on the floor

But even more importantly, we need to see how the psalmist directly implicates God in what has happened: worse than any of the external circumstances is the thought that God is not visible from where he stands

v.2 – "When shall I behold the face of God?"

v.7 – Even God is implicated as the source of what's happened – "all your waves and billows have gone over me" – I feel like I'm drowning here, God, and it's your fault

v.9 – "Why have you forgotten me?"

It's important that we learn we can talk this way to God – to express anger toward God – to admit that we will be angry at God sometimes and that's ok – that's normal

In any relationship, you're going to be mad at the other person sometimes

The mistake a lot of folks make is to get mad at God and just walk away

That's like getting mad at your spouse and not going home

It doesn't make any sense

Acknowledging your anger, even anger at God, is part of honoring despair

So first thing we have to remember about hope is that it couldn't exist without despair

In other words, hope implies a sense always that things right now are not as they should/could be – despair and hope are always close together

Paul in Romans 8:24: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?"

I think a lot of people blame themselves for not being able to stay upbeat all the time

We see people around us who are optimistic, even to the point of being annoying – and we wonder why we aren't that way (not annoying, but relentlessly optimistic!)

Those who have read Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:22) know that joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit – why can't I have that?

But hope is different from optimism: optimism is a tendency to always look on the bright side of the circumstances – optimism is a noble trait
Here's the catch: it may or may not be rooted in reality!

Hope though is different

Yes, there is a dictionary definition of hope that talks about “a feeling that things will turn out for the best”

But Christian hope is much deeper than a feeling

Christian hope is a conviction rooted in faith

It fits the dictionary definition of “grounds for this feeling”

In other words, Christian hope is grounded in something

Something that survives regardless of circumstances

It's a conviction grounded and rooted in a person – Jesus Christ

It's a conviction rooted in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is real:

that we are forgiven,

that we are beloved by God,

that he offers us eternal life through the cross

that he is with us always

that he will return to set all things right

This is our hope – and it's based in a person

So hope for us is really a close ally of faith

Paul has a famous triad: “faith, hope, and love abide, these three”

(1 Cor 13:13)

We see all that in Psalm 42:

faith / trust in God

v.6 “my soul is cast down, THEREFORE I remember you”

v.8 talks about God's steadfast love, God the God of my life

hope that God will yet step in to help,

and a love for God so strong that the psalmist describes it as thirst

Hope, in the Christian sense, is grounded in something deeper than circumstances

This is why a Christian can face death with hope – optimism is not enough to help us look on the bright side of death

(The only thing an optimist can really say is, “well, at least in 2010 there’s no estate tax!”)

But Christians look at death with eyes of faith and hope

When hope is rooted in God, in the person of Jesus Christ, it means that hope will survive regardless of circumstances

When we look at the gospel, we see that our God is in fact a God who has specialized in those cases where the circumstances seem hopeless

Lazarus – John 11

Lazarus is already dead 4 days

Both sisters approach Jesus with similar expressions of faith and hope fixed in Jesus:

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But Martha goes one step further: “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” (11:22)

Or consider the story of Easter: think about the tomb

Or think about the Old Testament story of Ezekiel, looking over the valley of the dry bones in chapter 37 of his book

Our God specializes in hopeless cases

Because our hope is not rooted in circumstances

It’s rooted in a person, God come to earth – Jesus Christ

Our God identified with us as hopeless cases from the cross: didn’t he himself cry out, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So remember that your hope defies your circumstances

Your hope is based in your God who offers you everything in the person of Jesus Christ

Your God specializes in hopeless cases – even you, even me

Today I pray you find your hope in God

Amen.

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