Sermon – "Holding Fast to Hope"
Sunday, November 17, 2024
Scriptures: I Samuel 2:1-8, Hebrews 10:15-25
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Our first scripture reading, 1 Samuel, chapter 2 verses 1-8, is affectionately known as Hannah's Song. It is a song of praise and thanksgiving following the arrival of a long-awaited child, a son whom she dedicates to God, and who will become the first prophet of Israel. Samuel is the one who will anoint King David and lead the people through times of great difficulty in their transition from tribal confederation to monarchy.

In her ancient song of praise, Hannah becomes the first person in the Bible to declare God's compassion and mercy for the humble and hurting and broken. The patriarchs before her spoke of God's might and power—Hannah sings of God's faithfulness to the downtrodden and despairing. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by God actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; God brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; God brings low, God also exalts. The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them God has set the world." Amen.

In our second scripture reading, Hebrews 10:15-25, the author encourages Christians to live out their faith with confidence and courage. It calls for a new way of worshiping God, where believers can access God directly through their faith in Jesus, without needing a priest. The author shows how Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice. This love that will not let us go is at the heart of the hope to which we hold fast. Listen to the Holy word of God.

And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," and God adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that Christ opened for us through the curtain, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Holding Fast to Hope

The text: Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who has promised is faithful. Hebrews 10:23

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, thank you for the stories of our faith, which give us hope and for the hope of the faithful. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Spera in Dio…*the motto of my alma mater Hope College, is inscribed over the symbol of an anchor. *Spera in Dio --Hope in God.* It comes from Psalm 42:5 *"Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God…"*

The Latin word for hope can also be translated *wait* and it seems there is a relationship between hoping and waiting. Hope gives us the courage and strength to wait. Waiting is a part of hoping. The prophet Isaiah tells us: *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles.* There is resilience in those who hope and wait.

Hannah's song of praise and thanksgiving follows the arrival of a long-awaited, first-born child for whom she hoped. The author of Hebrews reminds early Christians during a time of persecution to hold fast to the hope found in Christ.

What does it mean to have hope? According to one of my mentors, Dr. Joretta Marshall, who served as a Dean of Pastoral Care at Eden Theological Seminary, hope is not naïve optimism. Thinking everything is possible when it is not, destroys hope. It trivializes hope with an unrealistic view of life and the world.

Genuine hope acknowledges a complicated world that is often not fair or just and at the same time affirms that we have a loving God who is totally for us. This perspective allows us not only to accept the challenges and struggles of life but also to receive strength through them.

Hope recognizes the finiteness that is a part of being human and allows us to be grounded, to be anchored in the infinite, Holy One like none other, our Rock who created us, whose love in Christ Jesus will not let us go. Hope trusts in the possibilities of the future and that hope is founded on God with whom all things are possible. Time and time again, God's infinite possibilities are realized through the finite lives of ordinary people, like Hannah, who are faithful in their responsibilities to family, community, and society.

As Dr. Marshall elaborates, the literature regarding emotional trauma suggests it is not the trauma in the life of a child that keeps the child from developing the resilience of hope. It's the fact that no one held the child during the trauma, literally held the child, and held the child's world together.

As the ancient Hebrew affirms in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted in her mother's arms;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore."

The relationships we are born into nurture hope or take it away. Hope comes from the people in our lives who get us through the next day. Hope comes from the continuity and constancy of those who love us and who teach us how to love, Hope comes from our faith community, our brothers and sisters, our siblings in Christ with whom we serve and worship, and who believe in a loving God. Lastly hope comes from our willingness to honor and serve alongside all of God's children.

This past week our Parish Hall was overflowing with young people as Westminster hosted Children of Abraham, an interfaith fellowship initiated in the fall of 2016 The impetus for this fellowship was an Adult Ed Forum Westminster hosted earlier that year exploring the Jewish, Christian, and Islam views of Abraham. Rabbi Barry Marks of Temple Israel and Dr. Maryam Mostoufi of the Springfield Islamic community joined me in weaving together a more unified understanding of Abraham, the patriarch at the heart of all three faiths.

This fall began our ninth year of quarterly gatherings in each of the participating faith communities, building long lasting friendships, sharing in service projects, and communing together in a vegetarian meal. "Celebrations within our Faith Traditions" is this year's theme. In October we gathered at the Mosque and learned about Ramadan, a month of prayer, fasting, and charitable acts. Our service project was food collected for the Illinois Central Food Bank.

On Wednesday, we shared the story of Christ's birth and the celebration of Christmas, were led in Christmas songs by our Children's Choir, enjoyed birthday cupcakes as a part of the meal, and participated in two service projects funded by our Mission and Community Service Committee. Thirty birthday boxes with all the makings for a cake were assembled for our Little Pantry at Graham Elementary School and shared with other Springfield Little Pantries through the PEO food drive Westminster hosted yesterday. We also assembled 50 bundles of joy for infants born into poverty within our community. Each bundle, diaper bag included basic needs for a newborn and will be distributed at local hospitals. Pediatrician and Westminster member Meredith Volle founded the Bundles of Joy non-profit organization in honor of her grandmother and shared her story with the children gathered.

It was a small way to celebrate Hannah's ancient song of praise, and the God who is our Rock, the God who raises up the poor and the God who lifts the needy.

Next month, during Advent, we will hear the echo of Hannah's song from another expectant woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus, who proclaimed with confidence and hope the faithfulness of God and God's faithfulness to the most vulnerable among us and who brought our Savior God into the world.

The hope of our faith has often been against good sense, against the tides in human affairs, but it is always in relation to the promise of the One who shapes the future in specific ways, the One who is faithful, the One who calls us to lives of integrity, and the One whose love will not let us go. Let us speak the truth about who our God is, let us not become weary of doing good, and let us hold fast to hope, Amen.