

Sermon: "Church in the Wild: Holding on to Hope"

11.1.20

All Saints Day & Sunday before election

Psalm 43

I.

I ask God's blessing upon you this All Saints Day, which also happens to be the Sunday before an important election.

Everyone I talk to is pretty much on pins-and-needles about the election. Should we believe the polling? How long will it take to have a clear outcome? Will there be shenanigans at polling places or in the counting of ballots? The anxiety is real. I've heard from folks in the parenting world, trying a "fake it til you make it" approach, trying to manifest stability in a time of upheaval. I get that, it's important for parents to help their children feel safe and held, and maybe sometimes it could work, to project ourselves out of a funk. But 2020 is not just a funk. And it probably doesn't help anyone to pretend when underneath is roiling anxiety. Also, children are experts at sniffing out a bluff. This is where the Psalmist comes in. Generally, the Psalms have a way of not standing for pretending-things-are-"fine" when they are not. They do not "put on a happy face," like ever. And yet, even while naming pain, the Psalms hold on to hope, and we hear this is Psalm 43, our scripture for today: "Hope in God: for I shall again praise the Holy One, my help and my God." So, this pre-election All Saints Day, we follow the psalmist's lead in naming what hurts: It hurts when people we love die; it hurts to face an unknown future. And we name our intention to hold on to hope.

II.

I keep noticing the word "hope" coming up this Fall-- at Noonday Prayer, a book conversation last Sunday night...and, at our Prayerful Gatherings. We held seven of these in-person, small group Prayerful Gatherings, and at each one, we read a Psalm, and then reflected on it together. And at every single gathering, when the Pastors asked what word or phrase from the Psalm stuck out for people, every time someone said, "hope." We even changed the scripture to a different Psalm, because a few folks signed up for more than one Prayerful Gathering, and we wanted to make sure they were spiritually fed. The new Psalm was not necessarily about hope but it's still the word that stuck out for people. I think in general we are attracted to the idea of hope. But in reality, and maybe you feel this way too, I can feel a part of myself holding back from fully allowing myself to hope. I mean, is it possible to cultivate hope when there's a part of ourselves that's afraid of being let down? What is God calling out of us when we long for hope? And, what does it look like to suffer and despair, while grounding ourselves in hope?

III.

For many years I have enjoyed the music of the Indigo Girls. Sometimes in our house when we've had a karaoke night, I have been known to enthusiastically but definitely poorly belt out their song "Galileo." And Saturday mornings you may find me scrubbing bathrooms while rocking out. If you've spent any time loving the music of the Indigo Girls, you might know that Emily Saliers' father, Don Saliers, is a retired seminary professor. Despite what Indigo Girls fans may think, the Rev. Dr. Don Saliers is actually well known for something besides being the father of an Indigo Girl, and that would be for his expertise in liturgy and theology. He's written some about the Psalms, and how they are not really highlighted in churches these days-- maybe sometimes a cantor will sing a Psalm, but people in the pews don't often connect with the meaning, even if it sounds beautiful echoing off stone cathedral walls. Don Saliers says that there are 3 main reasons that we almost never hear Psalms in worship: Reason #1 is that the Psalms aren't really taught in churches in general, so they're not prioritized in the lectionary. Reason #2 is that people think they are boring. Reason #3 is that people often don't connect their own suffering with the poetry of the Psalms, because the language can feel remote. And, not to take anything away from the father of an Indigo Girl, but I might add on to Reason #3: I wonder if sometimes we don't connect with the Psalms because we prefer to ignore or stuff feelings that make us uncomfortable.

The time that the Psalms do come into play in churches quite often, however, is at memorial services and funerals. That's because the Psalms are poetry, which is art. And art is healing, it expresses emotion that words often can't. "You'll get through this" doesn't really tap into the deep pain people feel when they lose someone they love. By contrast, it is consoling to hear that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is our shepherd. We are not alone. If your heart aches with loss, anguish haunts you, or you're seething with anger at injustice, the Psalms offer a word of comfort and support. So let's dig in to our Psalm for today.

Underneath all of Psalm 42/43 (which is really one of a piece) is a deep desire to connect with God. And not just connect, tell God about our despair, and call upon God for soul-help. Throughout this scripture, there is repetition of the word "soul": My soul longs, my soul thirsts, I pour out my soul, my soul is cast down, my soul is disquieted within me. The word here for "soul" in Hebrew is "nephesh" which means a living, breathing, alive creature--but even more than that, it's the whole self. So when the psalmist says "my *nephesh* is cast down," they're saying that the very core of their being is rocked. Their soul, their embodied self, is suffering. And afflicted by what? By loss-- we know this

because the psalmist lifts these painfully beautiful words: “My tears have been my food day and night.” Their tears have been their food. This is someone who is hurting, in deep grief.

And this All Saints Day, we can relate. Many of you came to the church this week and tied a bell onto the tree to remember someone you love who has died. I know you came because we have a graceful tree filled with bells. [taking a bell/tag] You gently unwrapped yarn from a tag, like this one, and carefully wrote your loved one’s name on it. Some of you called to say how hard it was to gather your heart up and step into the pain of loss, how the pen shook as you wrote down a name. Or several names, because that’s the kind of year you’ve had. And if you couldn’t stop by this week, I invite you to imagine writing your loved one’s name on this tag, right now. [pause] And receive these words from the late great Leonard Cohen: “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

The other deep pain felt by the psalmist is a social harm. Psalm 43 begins, “Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!” It’s not clear who the psalmist wants vindication from-- it could be the Philistines or Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar or Absalom. But for us, as we approach a presidential election marred by disinformation, foreign interference, intimidation by armed militias, racist voter suppression, and severe questions about whether all votes will be counted before a winner declares himself and whether both candidates will respect the results, this prayer may feel like it is meant for us. “Vindicate us, O God, and defend the cause of our country from deceit and lies and injustice-- deliver us!” And the next line, “For you are the God in whom I take refuge.” God is the safe place, the sanctuary even with all of the turmoil swirling around. When we are disquieted in our very being, our nephesh, we might take a note from yoga class here and look down and see our feet standing on the ground. Or we might feel our bodies sitting, held up by a chair. Or we might take a breath and feel the sun on our faces. The point is, to pause and notice, and remember that God is here-- God is our ground, our support, our warmth. Our sanctuary travels around with us, a haven of love, because God is in every time and place, a refuge.

You know, the way that the word “hope” kept coming up at the Prayerful Gatherings and Noonday Prayer and a book study made me take notice. And you might say that’s serendipity, but I do think the Holy Spirit places soul-medicine in our path (and often we just need to put our phones down and pay attention, but that’s a sermon for another day). So there's another image that has come to my consciousness, and I have a hunch that it’s soul-medicine. First it came to me when one of the

coaches at my gym talked about her tattoo of it, while she drank out of a mug in the shape of it. Then it came up in an emailed newsletter from another religious community. I don't usually read those emails very carefully but I happened to open this one. And there it was again: the saguaro cactus.

The saguaro is the quintessential cactus that you imagine, standing in the southwestern desert like a tall wise sentinel with bent arms. Saguaro actually live for about 200 years. For the first 8 years of their lives they grow to be an inch and a half tall. They really come into their prime in middle age (I can relate). But to get to a certain age and sophistication, takes a very long time. And during that very long time they have to overcome great odds-- like expanding their cactus skeleton like an accordion to retain water, and surviving lightning strikes, avoiding bacterial infections that cause cactus rot, healing their bodies when other animals burrow into their flesh. It takes perseverance for them to live into old age. And this perseverance is a great metaphor for all of us in 2020. But what I find most compelling is that saguaro can be transplanted very carefully into new surroundings-- as long as they are re-planted in the same orientation to the sun as they were growing in their previous home. A saguaro facing East must be transplanted and face East again in its new home. It has to be oriented properly. And I wonder if that could be a metaphor for us-- that in the midst of turmoil, disruption, and the ever-changing landscape of 2020, we orient ourselves toward that which gives us light and life. What I mean to suggest today is that we orient ourselves toward hope. Not optimism for a certain outcome or wishful thinking, but solid, Christian hope. Hope in Christ, who makes all things new. Hope in Christ, who heals and cares for people on the margins, who himself suffered and died, and then rose again to proclaim new life. Hope in Christ, whose life-renewing Spirit transforms our world in ways seen and unseen for liberation and justice.

Because if we orient our souls, our nephesh, toward Jesus Christ, crucified, then our despair can be in solidarity with his *suffering and death*. And if we orient our souls toward Jesus Christ, risen savior, then our hope can be in solidarity with his *resurrection*. And then, lightning may strike, cactus rot may afflict us, tragedy may settle in our lives, injustice and corruption may flourish-- but we will remain oriented toward hope in Christ. Liberation Theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, once wrote, "Hope is a gift, a grace, and when we receive a gift, it is not for us; it is for our neighbor." And the writer Anne Lamott echoed that this week when she said, "remember to be in service to someone, it helps you heal." Being oriented toward hope in Christ means to care for other people and to keep working toward freedom-- even if you don't see the outcome of your efforts in your lifetime-- even if you are in the struggle for justice for the long haul. Even if you live for 200 years in a desert, stay oriented toward

hope. It may be the little seeds the birds carry and plant nearby that grow into the saguaro who will witness the peaceable kin-dom.

IV.

Psalm 43 ends with the psalmist inviting their own soul to “Hope in God; for I shall again praise the Holy One, my help and my God.” It’s not an easy resolution, which actually makes the tension between despair and hope even more real. Life is like that. Families are like that. Politics are like that-- often the tension stands without being resolved.

So, Church in the Wild, whatever the next days, or week, or month brings, Hold on to Hope! Amen.