

"Hope in the Midst of Suffering"

Date: 26 May 2019

Text: Job 19, Hebrews 13.1 - 6

Rev. Peter Coutts

John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the maine." . 450 years later we talk about there being only "6 degrees of separation" between any two humans in the world: I know someone, who knows someone, who knows someone...and through six such leaps I've got a connection to the Dalai Lama. Well, Facebook decided to see if this was actually true, by looking at connections among its 1.6 billion users. Turns out it is not 6 degrees of separation; it is 3.6. Humanity is like a giant spiderweb, spread throughout the world. Touch it anywhere, and you set the whole of the web vibrating. Both these thoughts speak of the interconnectedness of people: relationships and mutual dependence. An anonymous teenager has a chance encounter with the Prime Minister and is inspired to enter public service and politics. The owner of a giant corporation, seeking to maximize his profits, sells his company, and 15,000 people face lay offs.

In the Frank Capra movie, "It's a Wonderful Life", we see the life of a caring and helpful banker who is facing financial ruin. He is so distraught he wishes he had never been born. But a guardian angel comes to him to help. He lets the banker see what the town would have been like if he hadn't been born. Through the experience he discovers that not only is everyone different in this world without him, but he has had a great positive impact as well. No one is an island.

Yet there is another parallel truth: each of us IS an island. Each of us is independent, and can be very alone. There is the loneliness of the shy, who sit unobtrusively in silence in a group, hesitant to speak up. There is the created loneliness of the person who puts on a false face, who hides behind a created personality, unwilling or unable to reveal the true person within. There is the self - imposed loneliness some assume for self - protection (as Paul Simon wrote, "A rock feels no pain, and an island never cries"). But there is also the loneliness imposed by others, like the loneliness of the prisoner. A chronically ill person once told me, "when you've been sick for a long while, people forget about you."

Frederick Buechner, a contemporary Presbyterian theologian in the US, calls this a great paradox. "The thing that binds us close together as human beings" he writes, "and makes it true that no one is an island is the knowledge that in another way everyone is an island". There is some deep wisdom in that, I think, and we spend our lives oscillating back and forth between that sense of connectivity on the one hand and isolation on the other. And it's those times of isolation which so frequently bring pain.

Our passage from Job this morning represents the latter case ☐ a case of profound isolation. In the loss of his family and possessions and stature in society, Job longed for someone to come to him as his friend ☐ his redeemer ☐ and yet he found no help. He turned to God for help but found that God wouldn't respond to his pleas. Instead of bringing comfort to his misery, Job said God left only darkness and walls blocking his ways. Job's anxiety was such that he even speculated that God himself could be the cause of his misery. Nor did he find solace in those around him ☐ they offered neither help nor support. His

associates repelled him, his acquaintances ignored him, his closest friends forgot him, his relatives failed him. He even says, “my breath is offensive to my wife”. Now he’s not talking about that “jungle mouth” problem that one hit of mouthwash in the morning can fix. “Breath” in the Hebrew world represented one’s spirit, one’s being, one’s life. Job was so cut off from those around him that even his wife was repulsed by him. “Estranged... removed... failed... forgotten... foreigner... loathed... uprooted...”, these words of Job are the words of the lonely, the isolated, a person who feels forsaken. All he can say is, “Pity me, pity me, O you my friends”. Yet despite the depths of his sadness, Job retained one, bottom-line conviction: “But I know that my Redeemer lives!”. His certainty was such that he said this assertion should be inscribed by an iron pen on a rock forever ☐ so absolute was his hope. In the very end, he said, when my flesh is destroyed, I will see God. My eyes will behold him at my side, and none other. Even in the apparent absence of God now in his life, Job was convinced that God would not be absent forever. And, as we know from the story of Job, God ultimately acknowledged that unshakeable faith and blesses him for it.

The hymns of African American slaves continue to hold a place of fondness for the North American church, for they are a testimony to this kind of belief. These people suffered the tribulations of Job in their way: enslavement, the forced separation of families, harsh working conditions and brutal punishments. As legalized freedom expanded in the north in the first half of the 19th century, slaveowners in the south responded with greater oppression. Yet in a situation that killed the spirit, these Black slaves kept their spirit alive by holding onto the same bottom-line conviction as Job: “I know that my Redeemer lives!”. Often that hope was pinned on Christ’s second coming, as in these lyrics: “No more de child cry when he come back... No more de sickness when he come back... No more de gunshot when he come back... He dry de teardrop when he come back”. The witness of their hope in the midst of slavery and suffering is still inspiring to us. Their bottom-line hope has empowered many who have found nothing else to cling to in their isolation or suffering.

A man I knew about 20 years ago was diagnosed with brain cancer, and his doctors had given him no hope for recovery ☐ and very poor prospects for the quality of life he would have in the time to come. Fortunately, he overcame the disease. Yet in facing the uncertainty of his future, and the possibility of death, he felt cut off from his family and friends around him. They were with him, trying to support him in that desperate situation, but they really couldn’t take the isolation from him. After all, they were healthy and continuing in their lives. This gentleman told me that it came down to himself and the end of his life. But also to God. He shared Job’s conviction, and that brought him peace and hope. “Without his presence with me at that time” he said, “I don’t know if I could have pulled through”. This hope should be inscribed by a steel pen in our hearts and minds as well. As Christians we have been given the same expectation and hope by our Lord, who said at his ascension, “And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). If all else fails us, like Job, we have this to cling to.

But this hope need not simply be found in God ☐ it can come from any of us. Christ encourages us to share that word of hope with others, and contribute to the well-being of others, so hope may become real. We are even called to act to reduce the isolation that comes through suffering. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews closes with this message, naming people who are isolated: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained

angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.... for He has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (Hebrews 13:1,2,3,5,6). The implication of this passage is important. It's saying that we can become a sign of Christ's presence to those who suffer. As we help those who suffer – offering that help in Christ's name – we not only help them in their need, but we also help them know that they are not forsaken by God. For Christ is incarnate in us and our actions when our lives make hope a reality for others in their suffering. In one of his great commissions Jesus called us to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and visit the imprisoned, "for truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). Our hope in Christ is real. And by living as Christ did, we make hope real for others.

As Presbyterians here in Canada we have a heritage of doing just that. We've all heard of the Underground Railroad which brought escaped slaves to Canada in the 19th century. The Presbyterian Church had a significant role in that. Rev. James MacGregor came to Canada in 1786 as one of the very first Presbyterian clergy to arrive in this country. His stipend for the year was 26 pounds, but he was also given 20 pounds to aid runaway slaves. The founding President of Canada's Anti-Slavery Society was Dr. Michael Willis, the first Principal of Knox College. One of the most influential public advocates for emancipation in the United States and for Canadian efforts in the underground railway was George Brown: founder of the Toronto Globe newspaper, Father of Confederation, and Presbyterian Elder. The largest settlement of Black slaves coming to Canada through the underground railway was the Buxton Settlement, a farming community of 2,000 runaways located south of London Ontario in 1850. It was a Presbyterian mission that settled people on 3,700 hectares of land that we helped purchase. Led by Rev. William King (a former slave owner), the runaway slaves were helped to become landowners, and thus achieved the right to vote in Canada in the 1850's. Highly respected public schools were established for their families by the work of Presbyterians and the new landowners, from which some Black graduates went on to study at the University of Toronto. For the runaway slaves, embarking on the dangerous journey of the underground railway, Canada was for them a promised land. Canada represented hope for a people who had suffered much. And our history was to help make that hope a reality, through the end of suffering, through the promise of a new life, by bringing isolation to an end in a new community of possibility. These Presbyterians knew that they were connected to the Black slaves in that spiderweb of humanity. These Presbyterians knew that everyone was diminished in some way (in the sense of John Donne's poem) if slavery was allowed to continue. Compassion, and justice, and real response, worked to make hope real.

If I could presume a moment to edit John Donne, I would write, "no one need see themselves as an island", for the cure for isolation and suffering is around us. It is Christ, who provides that bottom-line hope when all other hope is gone. And it is us, who bear that hope and enact Christ's love. Island living need not be lonely.