



*Hope and Fear*

Joshua 24:1-3a & 14-25; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

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First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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If you have attended very many funeral that I officiated you noticed that there are two texts that I almost always include in the sermon-eulogy-homily, depending upon your tradition. One is from the gospel of John. I use the King James version because I like the poetical images. Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you. I go now to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will meet you unto myself so that where I am there you may be also.

The other text is the epistle lesson for today. We would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who have died, lest you should grieve as those who have no hope. For we believe that Christ Jesus died and rose again and so it shall be for those who have died in him. Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

I like those texts because they fill me with a sense of hope and comfort.

So what was going on in the Thessalonians community that would cause Paul to write since a letter? Well, the early Christian community, the first followers of Jesus, believe that his return would be imminent; within their lifetimes. Jesus even said as much when he told his listeners that some of them would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man in his glory. They never considered that the glory was his resurrection.

Hope. I Thessalonians speaks of hope in the face of loss. Hope pushes us forward. It gives us courage for the Present moment and pushes us into God's Future. It helps us carry on. But Paul also told the Thessalonians not to think that Hope does not negate grief for what is loss.

A few days ago one of my grandsons told me that he wanted to light a scented candle in the living room of my house. Being eight years old, and a mature eight year old at that, I went to get a lighter, but he stopped me.

"I want to use a match."

"Have you ever used a match before?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, you could get burned." He was unfazed. So, I got a book of matches, showed him how to get the match out of the book, close the cover and strike that match against the book. First match, first strike and a flame. I'm an old hand at this. I handed him the book. He carefully tore one out and closed the cover of the book. Four matches later he finally lit his first match but as he brought it to

the candle he burned his finger. He managed to light the candle before blowing out the match but the charm of the moment was gone, swallowed up in a very slightly burned finger.

A few seconds later I heard water running in a bathroom sink. I suspected what was happening but just wanting to confirm my inkling, I peeked in. He was holding his hand under the faucet. “Are you running cold water over your finger?” He nodded. One look in his eyes said that he wanted to cry but didn’t think that he could. “Do you want to cry?” He nodded again. “Then go ahead and cry. It hurts. It’s okay to cry if something hurts.” And the tears flowed. We got a couple of ice cubes to put on the finger but it was sore for a day or two.

Stoicism is neither biblical nor stoic. The Stoics did not deny emotion. They simply did not let emotion rule their lives. When they were hurt, they cried. When they were happy they laughed. But they knew that life is not lived in the glory of the Past—which is always 50 years before now. Life is lived in the Present which always leads to the Future.

Paul was not a Stoic. But he would have agreed with them on this point. Grieve for your lost loved ones but do not let your grief hold you captive. As serious followers of Jesus we believe in the Resurrection, we believe that though tears may tarry for the night, in the words of the Psalmist, joy comes in the morning; the joy of Easter’s promise.

But there is a shadow side to Hope and it is called Fear. Fear holds us back. It even pulls us back. Newton’s Third Law of Motion says that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Counselors trained in family systems call this reaction to change “sabotage”. Sabotage may be intentional or unintentional but it will appear as the “organism” or body tries to maintain a certain homeostasis or status quo. In the old system I know my place and everyone else knows their place. But trying to maintain the old way is like putting new wine into old wineskins.

In our Old Testament lesson, Joshua and the people are about to enter the Promised Land, the land promised to Abraham long before. Their parents, a settler generation, could not enter because deep in their hearts they “longed for the fleshpots of Egypt.” So they experienced wilderness years until a new generation, a pioneering generation, perhaps, could complete God’s Promise to Abraham. But as they were about to enter, Joshua issued a warning. The Israelites had to decide whom or what they would worship. Would the God who led them to the Promised Land be their “North Star”, their guiding light or the ways of their ancestors? Would they worship the ways of the culture in which they found themselves or would they be a new people, people of a New Way. Generations later Jesus called the new Way the way to Truth and real Life.

The parable in Matthew of the 10 maidens or bridesmaids reminds us that the decision of who will be our God, our Guiding Light, our North Star, is time limited. The decision cannot be put off. When opportunity and times for decisions come, they must be answered.

Chose this day whom you will serve...but as for me...I will serve the Lord.

To God be the glory. Amen.