

December 17, 2017

TEXT: Romans 15:1-7, 13

TITLE: Advent Waiting: Personal Hope

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In 1965, Elvis Presley was driving a camper outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, on his way back home to Los Angeles. I know this sounds like a set-up for a joke, but it's a true story. While he was driving, he looked up and saw a cloud that looked like Joseph Stalin's face. Stalin was the epitome of evil so this sight was unsettling to Elvis. But as he watched the cloud, the winds transformed it into the smiling face of Jesus. Elvis pulled the van over and ran out into the desert weeping and saying, "Oh, God, oh, God." He told one of the people with him about what he saw and how Jesus' smiling face seemed to touch every fiber of his being. Then, ever the showman, Elvis paused and said, "Can you imagine what my fans would think if they saw me like this?"

I don't know how this experience affected Elvis Presley during the remaining 12 years of his life. But in describing this vision of Jesus in the clouds, it sounds a bit like when the apostle Paul had a vision—an encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul fell to the ground and rose up a totally changed man. Elvis, well, he got back in the van and kept driving to L.A. Even though both Paul and Elvis had profound personal experiences, only one truly became a different man because of it. Only one of them didn't worry what his friends would think. Only one of them would go on to write the words found in the letter to the Romans, such as this: *We are not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor... living in harmony with one another for the glory of God.*

Last week I talked about what happens when hope is lost—how we are to walk forward by faith toward those border places where we find communion and move from despair to hope. This week I want to talk about what it means to personally embody hope. Now, one way to do this is to ask you what your personal hope is based upon. Is there an experience from your life that reinforces for you that hope is real and God is near? Was there a Damascus road moment for you, or perhaps a time when you saw Jesus in the clouds? Maybe there was and that is worth reflecting on, perhaps sharing with someone you trust.

But what happens when you can't think of a personal experience, a Damascus moment in your own life? That's OK too. In today's self-focused culture—and frankly, in today's self-focused evangelical church—we have placed too high a value on personal and transformative faith experiences. There may be mountain-top times when you felt your spirit soar and when God's love was palpable and real. But no one lives on a mountaintop. Most of our days are spent down here in the flat places and river valleys, the streets and sidewalks of the ordinary. Yet God is here. Christ is nearby. And more importantly, you are that image of Christ for someone else, just as someone is likely the image of that personal Christ for you.

When the apostle Paul talks about hope, he talks to us face-to-face—not about transcendent mountaintop experiences but about faith right here and now. Paul quietly, firmly, looks us in the eye and says “*Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. Each of us must strive to live in harmony with one another so that together you may with one voice glorify God. Each of us must welcome one another just as Christ welcomed you.*” It doesn’t get more direct than that. As we personally build one another up, live in harmony and welcome one another through our daily words and deeds, God is glorified.

There are lots of ways to think about this. Here are three. First, years ago the psychologist Erik Erikson outlined the process we follow from the moment of our birth until we develop into mature, well-rounded human beings. Many of the steps in this process are self-focused, but the very first step—the stage that lasts from the moment of our birth until we’re about 18 months old—is other-focused. It involves learning to trust—believing that there are others around me who will watch over me and keep me safe while I’m a helpless infant. That trust—that personal hope—is something that comes to us from others—others who love us, want to build us up and welcome us into this world of God’s making and Christ’s redeeming. Without that personal hope and trust, we cannot grow into healthy and capable human beings.

Second, Jay Leno (the former TV late night talk show host)—his wife’s father was once buried in a mining accident. He was eventually dug out and was fine, but he told his family that while he was buried, the hardest thing was that he had no way of being sure that anybody was looking for him. Maybe they thought he hadn’t gone to work that day, or that he was buried beneath the rubble and already dead. His deepest fear was that they weren’t looking for him at all. That thought almost made him lose hope. Now imagine all the people in America and around the world who think no one knows what they’re going through—the nameless victims of the Rohingya genocide; the people starving in South Sudan; the homeowners going back to pick through the ashes of their California homes or the homeowners still recovering from Texas and Florida hurricanes now that all the TV cameras have left town. Or think about the girls emotionally scarred by abuse, the mothers whose son were lost to gunfire or suicide, the fathers who lost their job and can’t find a way to support their families. What makes all this unbearable is if you think no one cares—that no one is looking for you buried in your personal mine disaster. One ordinary person can make all the difference here, which is precisely who Paul is calling us to be and what Christ is guiding us to do.

Third, I mentioned that the song Jon Erik sang has always reminded me of my father. Frank Richard Bush was not one to hold office or lead a committee or claim the spotlight for himself. But he was always one you could fall back on. I’ve shared this story before, but when I was young and we lived on a farm outside Paola, Kansas, I remember my Dad getting a phone call one evening from a neighbor telling us that someone had just run into the fence on the far side of our property. We had a small herd of Angus cattle grazing in that part of the farm, so Dad grabbed some tools, called for me, and we headed over to see what had happened. As we topped a hill, we saw a car with a badly damaged front grill slowly trying to limp away from the scene. My Dad stopped them

and got out of the truck. I wondered how he'd handle this situation. He didn't yell, but simply asked "Are you the ones that just ran into my fence?" Clearly guilty, the teenage boy and his girlfriend said "yes." Dad paused and then said, "Well, I suppose you'd better get out and help me fix it." Which they did. In that moment, Dad was no avenging knight in armor, no lordly prince demanding restitution from underlings; he was someone who simply asked for integrity by others and provided a way for literally broken things to be healed. To me and to many others, he was always someone you could look to when you wanted to know how to act—someone you could fall back on.

Any hope you have is a gift from God. It is a gift God sends to you through people from whom you've learned what it means to be faithful, to take responsibility, to trust others in this difficult world. That is how God works—this God who is glorified when we come together and our lives offer one voice, one common witness to what it means to have hope. You may not feel like a leader. You may not see yourself as a knight in armor, a queen on the throne, or a saint inspiring millions. But to someone, you are part of what it means to trust—to hope—part of what it means to be filled by God through the Holy Spirit with "joy and peace in believing."

Hope is always personal. Just look at the Christmas story itself. Joseph—the man who personally stood by his betrothed even when her story seemed impossible and his culture would have him divorce her. Mary—the young woman whose courage was evident from her "Yes" response to the angel and her bravery in bearing a child of hope openly in a time of darkness and oppression. Theirs was a personal hope. Add to that the willingness of an innkeeper who had no room inside, but who personally made arrangements for them to find some shelter, however meager, alongside the animals. Then came the quiet testimony of shepherds and magi—outcasts and outliers—who personally traveled to see a miraculous baby boy and add their presence to the Christmas tableau of faith.

Every positive character in the Christmas story embodied personal hope—hope with which they encouraged someone else. That was true then—it is still just as true today. You don't need to wait to see Jesus' face in the clouds. You don't need to believe the voices that tell you you're not a knight or prince or saint or anyone's wildest dream. You are part of how God tells every newborn baby that, yes, this world is trustworthy. You are part of how every person in crisis knows to hold on, because someone cares—someone is looking for them. You are part of how others learn what integrity and responsibility looks like. You and I personally are instruments of hope for someone else.

So personally, individually, build up those around you for Christ sake. Live in harmony with one another. Welcome as you've been welcomed. And may the Christmas God of hope fill you with all joy and peace that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit now and always. AMEN.