

**July 10, 2016**

**TEXT: Colossians 1:1–14**

**TITLE: Hope, the Bearer of Fruit**

You just heard the opening verses of Colossians. It is a letter attributed to the apostle Paul, written to a young Christian church in what is now western Turkey—a church of women and men established earlier by a local missionary named Epaphras. Paul graciously lifts up the good work of his colleague and prays with thanksgiving for this little congregation serving the gospel of Christ. Initially it made sense to start my sermon comments with the beginning of this passage. But in light of the events of the past few days, it feels important to start at the end of the passage and work our way back to the beginning.

To say aloud the names of the recent victims and the places of the violent shootings is a soul-wearying exercise, but the names deserve to be spoken out loud: Alton Sterling, African American killed by police in Baton Rouge; Philander Castile, African American killed by police in Minneapolis; white and Latino Dallas police officers Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Lorne Ahrens, and Michael Smith, killed by sniper gunfire by African American Micah Johnson. Race is a big part of these tragic stories. The American gun culture is a big part as well. Not being sure how to talk about these events and even less sure about what can be done to stop the violence is a big part of this story. This isn't a problem just involving Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas. All American communities are captive to violence and racial injustice, including ours.

Because of all that, it feels like we are stuck in a deep hole - trapped in a pit dug deeper by each act of violence happening around us. We could huddle together as Christians in the bottom of that pit and spend our time together in prayer and singing that ignores these tragedies. Or we can take the words of scripture as a place to start considering how to extricate ourselves from this pit – in effect, to hear Paul's words as a ladder of hope and consolation. I'll be honest: one brief sermon cannot erase feelings of anger over racism, injustice and broken social contracts. But with humility, if Christians don't try to talk about a way forward, even haltingly, then in the words of Jesus, "the light that is in you is darkness, and how great is that darkness" (Matthew 6:23).

So on this day, a ladder is lowered before us. Written on the lowest rung, from vs. 11, it says "*May you be prepared to endure everything with patience.*" We can endure things passively, but faithful endurance involves gritted teeth and a faith conviction insisting love is always stronger than hate. It's like the endurance of a soldier who lost a leg in Iraq now enduring physical rehab, or the persons told they have cancer somewhere in their body who must endure treatments to fight the disease. Endurance is the strength to open your eyes and get out of bed after a loved one's death, or as an addiction is fought one day at a time. The first rung of the ladder is hard—but by taking that first step, it means our eyes are lifted up off the ground and we're willing to do what it takes to get out of this pit.

On the second rung is a phrase from vs. 13— “*God has rescued us from the power of darkness.*” In most American cities, between porch lights, streetlights and car headlights, there are almost no places of true darkness. But back in biblical times, once the sun went down and when the moon wasn’t visible, it was pitch black outside. To walk around then was to stumble, to feel helpless and vulnerable because of the suffocating power of darkness. I tried to think of something comparable today, and the closest I got was when you’re stranded and your cellphone has died, or you want to search the Internet but you don’t have WiFi coverage. For teenagers, believe me that can be a frightful thing!

We were never meant to live in darkness. If we find ourselves somewhere where light is absent or where powers of evil and fear surround us on all sides, we hold fast to the promise that we are children of light, not darkness. We trust in Christ who is the light of the world. He rescues us, literally enlightens us, so that we can see and walk and trust once more. His light gives us the strength to climb higher up the ladder, away from despair and the world’s dark power.

As we slowly ascend, we reach the important third rung, upon which is written the double phrase from vs. 14: “*We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” Redemption, liberation, healing grace and the forgiveness of sins, the washing away of unrighteousness. Two sides of the same coin. We oppress; we are oppressed. We wrong others; we are wronged against. Too often in America the scales measuring these things are not balanced. Skin color, sexual orientation, language skills, economics, and zip codes already tip the scale toward injustice. Yet at this point of climbing up the ladder, we recognize that we are not defined by others’ prejudices or by our own failings. Verses 13 & 14 together say: “*God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the realm of God’s beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” Within the community of Christ, there is a tearing away of chains, a fresh start, the seeds of something different, stronger and truer than this world’s reality.

On June 6, 1945, most of America awoke to the news that the D-Day landing on the coast of France had begun. General Eisenhower had given his order hours before, and President Roosevelt had been awakened very early that morning. Historian Stephen Ambrose noted that on that day, “the impulse to pray was overwhelming.” People jammed the pews of churches and synagogues to sit in silence and pray. The *New York Times* wrote, “We go forth to meet the supreme test of our arms and our souls, the test of the maturity of our faith in ourselves and in mankind.”<sup>1</sup> Later that night, Roosevelt gave a radio address that included a simple prayer asking for strong hearts to bear the sorrows that may come, concluding with the words “Lord, give us faith in Thee.”

Our lives are marked by times of brokenness, as the past week’s events remind us. Yet no act of injustice or violence occurs in a vacuum. No war or famine or bloodshed ever arose from individuals acting in isolation. When we are forced to our knees, it is right to follow the order given us in the Lord’s Prayer: *Forgive us*

*our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.* The capacity to pray that way, and to a God in Christ who promises us forgiveness, is the way we must follow.

The remaining rungs on the ladder move us so close to our goal of standing once more on solid ground that we read their inscribed words more in passing than in contemplation. Rung #4 from vs. 12: “*Joyfully give thanks to God.*” Rung #5 from vs. 4: “*We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all.*” Rung #6 from verse 6: “*Bear fruit and grow into the whole world.*” And only then do you notice that on the long sides of the ladder, the wooden parts that hold all the rungs in place, is inscribed over and over again the word “Hope.” Hope is not something that comes to us when all the work is done, when the results have proven to us that we will succeed and so we can hope and trust in the future. No, hope is there when the ladder first touches down near us in the pit and we find the strength to put one foot tentatively on the lowest rung.

Some are far too quick to turn away from hope—saying that it is only wishful thinking, that they’ve been hurt too many times to believe in it anymore, that it is only a byproduct of an opiate designed for the masses. Those cries from a wounded heart are real and cannot be swept under a rug.

But still you need to ask yourselves: Is there truth in this life? Is there goodness? Somewhere inside we have felt those things—in our heart, in our soul, in the core of our self-identity. And if they exist, they come from a source that must be more than just us, because capital T “Truth” and capital G “Goodness” will always be more than one person’s definition and experience. Hope is the voice that calls out to us in that moment and says “truth, goodness, love—they are real. They have been known in this world. They are near.” Hope gets us to that first rung on the ladder of healing and salvation. Hope gets us to talk about what justice looks like. Hope tells about an empty tomb, of resurrections ancient and modern, of sunrises every new day. Michelle Obama once reminded us in a speech that “courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.”

It’s true. Hope bears fruit and then goes further to plant new seeds for new hopes, growing out from us by God’s grace even to the ends of the earth. Hope gets us from today to tomorrow—and thankfully, hope lets us hear the opening of Paul’s letter to the Colossians with fresh confidence, as he writes these words: *To my faithful sisters and brothers in Christ: in our prayers for you we always thank God, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have. It comes from the hope, the word of truth, the gospel of Christ the Lord; and it has been bearing fruit and growing in the whole world. So grace and peace be with you.*

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 1994, pp. 509-510.