



# Ravensworth

## BAPTIST CHURCH

---

**Sunday, January 23, 2022**

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year W**

Zephaniah 3:14-20, 1 Timothy 4:1-6, 9-10

Rev. Dr. Michael Catlett

*Falling into Hope*

I begin with a story of hope, a slightly painful, personal story of a fall, not from grace but perhaps into understanding. It wasn't an epic fall, like the fall that begins with a capital *F* recounted in Genesis. This was a fall in the fall when leaves covered the ground and concealed roots that can grab one's shoes.

I was taking my regular walk on a paved and concrete pathway around our complex when I encountered a couple coming toward me who showed no interest or inclination in forming a single file. Shoulder to shoulder they approached me and I stepped aside at pace onto the leaf-covered grass. With eyes focused on the future, on what was ahead instead of what was below, a root caught my toe and I went down hard. My Apple watch politely asked me if I had taken a hard fall and needed to call 911. My watch was more concerned about my wellbeing than the couple who never paused, stopped or asked if I was okay as I lay sprawled to the side and, by that time, a bit behind them. A walker travelling my direction did inquire, helped me up and watched as I assured myself and my watch I was all right.

I suppose the incident could provide an opportunity to talk about hopelessness. Hope would appear to be in short supply if a couple can ignore the plight of another. Just ask the man beaten and robbed and left in a ditch about the two religious leaders who ignored him before the Samaritan didn't. My account could provide a glimmer of hope incarnated in the fellow walker who came to my aid. But those are illustrations for other sermons. This morning I'd like to talk about the nature of hope.

Knowing falls are a danger to all of us, especially as we age, I set out on my walk hoping I wouldn't fall. That's my hope with every step I take and I have a multitude of evidence and steps to support that hope. I had my eyes fixed on the sidewalk ahead, on the first of two laps that would yield three miles. My vision was on the future, near and far. What I failed to do was look carefully at the present moment. For hope to have any hope at all it must be connected to the present as well as the future. To reach for what is to come I have to be cognizant of the here and now.

I think that's a difference between a wish and a hope. A wish is untethered to the reality of the present moment. A wish envisions a tomorrow without adequately taking today into account. I could wish to be a professional golfer, but I have no hope of becoming one. I could wish to be taller, but I have no hope of growing an inch. A wish isn't burdened with reality or the truth.

A wish doesn't require anything of the one who makes the wish, except, perhaps, to blow out the candle on the birthday cake. Wishes don't cost anything. I don't have to do anything to make a wish come true except make it. Hope, on the other hand, is costly. Hope is an investment of one's self in an uncertain future. It's a commitment to do what I can to fulfill the hope knowing its fulfillment does not solely depend upon my efforts. Hope doesn't look over its shoulder, which is a sure way to stumble on one's way to the

future. Hope appraises its surroundings, understands where it stands, what it faces and determines to do all it can to move forward. Hope isn't passive; it might quietly stand in place for a moment but never for long because it longs for what is ahead more than it is satisfied with what is at hand.

The journey of hope is rarely linear. It's far more cyclical, or perhaps it is more like a wave with great highs and lows. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice. I believe the arc of hope, with its vicissitudes, ultimately bends toward God for God is the source of hope.

That's what Zephaniah thought. His proclamations occurred in a present fraught with international troubles, political struggles and sinful people. The children of God had made a mess of things and were unable or unwilling to extricate themselves from adversity. God's judgment was coming and would bring about a new day, a new beginning. Ultimately God would heal the wounded and restore the homeless to their homes. A day was coming when God would turn painful partings into glad reunions. God was present with the people now and would continue to be with them in the future. That was their hope.

Zephaniah and other prophets had pled with the people to change their ways, to invest themselves in the unfolding future of God rather than be overcome in the present. A few years after Zephaniah's proclamations Josiah, Judah's king, initiated a reform movement that was too little too late. In a generation Judah and Jerusalem were conquered and the people sent to exile. With their hopes dashed they began the search for new and different ways of envisioning a future that acknowledged the tragic present.

Zephaniah spoke of hope as if it could be bestowed upon people. I am convinced God gives us hope, but if we don't invest ourselves in it, do what we

can to participate in and with it, hope becomes more illusive than substantive.

But if hope is what we conjure up from within ourselves, a desire of our hearts divorced from God's desires, I think it is ethereal and ultimately powerless, unable to deliver on what it promises. Jesus encourages us to ask for what we need or want but qualifies that assurance by reminding us our asking should be in his name, in accordance with who he was and is, connected to what he stands for. Jesus asks us to stand with him, to be like him, to reflect the image of God we bear. I think it is important to have hope, but the hope that empowers me is hope that is in keeping with God's essence. God is our hope.

That's what the writer of 1 Timothy conveys to the fledgling minister. *For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.* Christ is our hope; Christ is the incarnation of hope.

We and Timothy need to keep that in mind because there are plenty of folks who will say deceitful things and intentionally attempt to mislead us into setting our hope on circumstances, plans and people who ultimately offer no hope at all. Liars untethered to truth and reality can make bold wishes and promises but cannot partner with us in a hope that lasts.

I believe hope is a partnership connecting the present with the future, joining the temporal to the eternal, uniting the human and divine. The Kingdom of God has come and is coming, according to Jesus; God's kingdom has arrived and is still on the way. Jesus, who existed before creation, took on flesh and dwelt among us and abides with us still. The timeless One physically lived for a time in our midst, the eternal temporarily breaking into time to provide us all hope for eternity. Hope partners with life and death to offer the fullness of life.

The one who showed us how to partner with God, how to live fully as God's child, was crucified and resurrected and as a consequence we are assured we are never without hope for God is with us and we are never alone. Nothing can separate us from the love of God – not even death; we always share God's image and God's love. Our partnership with the Almighty is our hope.

We aren't always faithful partners. Zephaniah's prophecy was a devastating denunciation of the sins of Judah's leaders and their followers. The wayward people of God invested themselves in other deities, possessions, power and prestige. There's always something or someone requesting our involvement, offering to be our hope.

The one who wrote to Timothy knew there would be those who would try and convince him hope could be found in twisting God's words for ungodly purposes, dividing people into *us* and *them*, to those who have hope and those who don't. God is the Savior of all people, but those who believe that truth are the ones who are most convinced God is the hope for us all.

If we are to live in hope – to live in that partnership with God where the future touches the present, the eternal breaks into time, and death leads to life – we must live as God has called us to live. We cannot hate our neighbor and live in hope. We cannot be owned by our possessions and live in hope. We cannot ignore our neighbor's need and live in hope. We must invest our lives as Jesus invested his life believing all of us are God's children and bear God's image.

These past months I have struggled with hope. I found despair far easier to take hold of even though it offers no comfort and no future. I said on occasion, *If you aren't depressed you're not paying attention*. That might be accurate, but it isn't helpful.

I have decided to renew my partnership with the Almighty and invest myself in those endeavors and relationships for which I have hope. If I hope everyone will be treated with justice and equity than I must treat all people with justice and equity. If I hope our nation can somehow find a way to be more compassionate and less divisive then I must invest myself in compassion and healing. If I hope our nation can get beyond Covid I must do all I can to stop the spread of the disease. Otherwise I might as well wish upon a star.

Hope isn't a guarantee of success. Hope doesn't protect us against momentary setbacks or defeats. This past Tuesday I again became better acquainted with the pavement. This time I was aware of ice beneath my feet, and though I hoped I wouldn't fall, I did. No one was around this time, so I had no need to apologize for what I said when the ground rose up to meet me. I again answered my imploring watch, got up, climbed into my car and went on my way. Hope is the voice reminding me I have places to go and things to do, ways of investing myself in partnership with the One who gives me life.

Hope does spring eternal, but that's because God is eternal, and God is my hope, our hope. Amen.