

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: Walking in Hope
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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1 Samuel 1:1-2; Luke 1:5-7

It was time to start a family. Whether they knew it or not Bill and Suzanne were part of the Greatest Generation. Bill had survived D-day and the march across Europe as an infantryman. When the war ended, he began his transition to civilian life. Part of that transition was to join a church. At the Presbyterian Church he joined, he met a cute and fiery redheaded young woman named Suzanne. They dated, fell in love, and then married. After a time, it was time to start their family, as it seemed everyone was doing. Time went by and nothing happened. First it was months, then years. The doctors had no good advice for them. The years then turned into decades. I first met Suzanne when Bill was dying of cancer in his late 70s. I got to know them, conducted Bill's memorial service, and then was "adopted" by Suzanne. After several years of weekly visits, the subject of children came up. She said they had wanted them, but that it simply wasn't to be. She was not angry or bitter. It was for her, part of her life journey.

I am not sure if Suzanne ever pondered it or not, but the fact was, she and Bill were not alone. They were joined by tens of thousands of other couples past and present who struggled and still struggle with conception. I'm not sure if Suzanne pondered it or not that her struggle put her in that great cloud of Biblical women who found themselves in the same situation. Women such as Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, Tamar, Hanna, and Elizabeth. These women all desired children and it did not seem to be happening. I have to say that I was hesitant to preach on these women today, because over the years of my ministry I have found that of all the struggles church members face, from issues of employment, health, family, and aging, the struggle to conceive is one of the most painful. And I did not want to bring up painful memories, or present pain, yet I chose to move forward for a single reason. And that reason is that these women show us what hope looks like. They show all of us what it is like to walk in hope, and through their shared hope we can find hope for ourselves in any area of our lives.

What I want us to understand this morning is that Biblical hope is not an emotion, or a longing, but it is a process. It is a journey, which is why we can speak of walking hope. It is a process that has three stages...each necessary for hope to live. The first stage is believing that tomorrow can be better than today because God is at work in the world. Some people might call this a sense of optimism, but it is more than optimism. I say this because optimism almost wants to believe that the obstacles in life aren't real. That if we believe hard enough, or simply have a positive attitude, that the obstacles will vanish. Hope, on the other hand, knows the obstacles are real. It knows the obstacles cannot be wished away by positive thinking. Instead hope believes that even though the obstacles are real, there may be ways around, over, or through them...with God's help. Biblical hope is always rooted and grounded in God's continuing activity in the world. It is rooted and grounded in God's continuing promises to embrace life. We can see this belief with both Elizabeth and Hannah because they each had a firm belief that God was on their side, even when things were not going as they pleased. And so, walking in hope begins with a belief that, because of God's loving grace, tomorrow can be better than today.

The process of hope continues with its second stage, our taking action. I say this because there can be no real hope unless those wanting to embrace hope are willing to do what they can, regardless of how great or small, to bring about a better tomorrow. Otherwise, what people have is not hope but a wish. A wish simply says, please happen. Hope says, how can I help make this happen. This concept of action can be seen in the lives of all the women who hoped for a child. Some like Tamar, go to remarkable lengths for a child. She was willing to trick her father-in-law into sleeping with her. Hannah, as we shall see in future sermons, essentially bargained with God by promising to give her first born to God. I would probably not recommend either of those courses of action. But the fact is that these women, along with the others in our cloud of women witnesses, continued to do what women do to conceive. None of these women gave up. And so, walking in hope continues where we are willing to take action.

The process of hope then leads to the final, and most difficult stage, which is letting go. Letting go does not mean that we cease believing that tomorrow can be better than today or that God is at work in the world. Letting go does not mean that we cease our action. It is not let go and let God. Letting go means that we let go of the outcome of God's work and of our action. It means no longer clinging to the object of our hope but instead focusing on the trusting and the acting. What this does is allow us to keep on walking in hope when the object of our hope does not come to us on our timeline. What I mean by this is that we as human beings become discouraged. The more we try to overcome the obstacles in our lives, and we don't, the more likely we are to give up. We are more likely to give up because we are focusing on the outcome more than the process and thus, we feel defeated. But when we let go, we give ourselves permission to keep trying. I believe that this is where Elizabeth was. As the story says, she was very old. Note, not just old, but very old, meaning she should have given up. Yet what we will discover later in her story is that she did not cease acting. She did not stop believing. The same is true of Hannah. After she bargains with God, she simply lets the future unfold. Walking in hope then, asks us to let go of the goal, while not giving up on God or ceasing our actions.

If you want to see how this works on a larger scale, all we need to do is look at charity walks. Each year across this nation there are thousands of charity walks. People hold these walks to support finding cures for cancer, or muscular dystrophy, to end domestic violence or homelessness, or any number of other causes, because they believe that tomorrow can be better than today; because they believe it is possible to beat cancer and other diseases; because they believe that it is possible to stem domestic abuse or find people homes; because they believe that there are people out there who can help solve the issue at hand. They act, meaning they walk to raise money and awareness. They let go, knowing that the solutions they desire may not happen this year or next year, but that they cannot give up, but need to keep striving to solve the issues that matter to them. This is walking in hope. This is the journey taken by Suzanne, Elizabeth, Hannah, Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, and Tamar. They each were willing to walk in hope. Was it always easy? No, it wasn't. Yet they persevered.

My challenge to you then is to ask yourselves, how am I walking in hope like Hannah, Elizabeth and the great cloud of witnessing women of scripture?