

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Don't Be Afraid to Hold onto Hope
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November 29, 2020

Isaiah 41:1-10; Luke 1:26-45

His dream was to be a firefighter. He was eighteen years old and Marvin Anderson wanted to serve his community. But that was about to change. It began with the police asking him about an assault that had happened in this neighborhood. He told the police what he knew; that the neighborhood believed it was done by a man named John Otis Lincoln. The police however were not interested in Lincoln. They were interested in Marvin because the victim said her assailant had a white girlfriend and Marvin was the only black man they knew of with a white girlfriend. In order to get the victim to identify Marvin, the police went to his place of work and obtained a color photo from his work ID. Then they showed several pages of black and white mugshots to the victim, along with Marvin's color picture being on every page. Then in a lineup Marvin was the only person from the mugshots to be present. He was identified, arrested, tried and convicted by an all-white jury. And even though the community continued to believe that the true assailant was John Lincoln, Marvin's attorney refused to call Lincoln or other witnesses who could have put Lincoln at the scene of the crime. The result was that Marvin was given a two-hundred-four-year sentence. Marvin, knowing he was innocent, was caught in that eternal struggle between holding onto hope and being resigned to his fate.

Hope vs. resignation, it is one of the oldest battles that human beings face. Hope is one of the great gifts that human beings have been given. It allows people in even the darkest of moments to see some light, some possibility of escape and renewal. It allows human beings to believe that there is the possibility of life even when death is at the door. Yet resignation is also present. Resignation comes when we humans believe that there are no more open doors or windows; when there is no hope of life when death is at hand. And so, we human beings swing on a scale from hope to resignation and back again. We do so when we hear a dreadful and difficult diagnosis. We find hope when we are promised a cure and then resignation when the cure fails. We find hope when we believe that we are the one in line for a promotion, and then resignation when someone else gets promoted. We are filled with hope when we believe our athletic prowess will get us to the Olympics or allow us to turn pro, only to face resignation when we do not make the cut. The pendulum swings and on any given day we can find ourselves on one end or the other.

The people in our two stories this morning were those who had probably resigned themselves to their fates. The people being addressed by Isaiah were Jews whose entire world had crumbled under the destructive force of the mighty Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians had destroyed their nation, their capital and their Temple. The Babylonians had forced tens of thousands of Jews to walk to Babylon where they had to make new lives for themselves and the Empire appeared to be designed for eternal world domination. There was little room for hope, only resignation. Mary must have felt the same way. She had known nothing but the overarching and dominating presence of the Roman Empire. All of those who had rebelled or resisted were crushed. While there were occasional glimmers of hope, they were quickly snuffed out and resignation ruled. It would take something from heaven itself to change this...which is exactly what happened.

Each of these passages is a story of how resignation became hope. Hope arrived because of a word and a promise. For the Jews in Babylon, there was the word, the rumor, the hint that something was stirring in the East. There was a promise that God was going to judge the Babylonians. Though the power in the East is not named, everyone knew who it was. It was Cyrus the Great of Persia who was to be God's hammer and anvil of judgement. Isaiah puts it this way. *"Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment. Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service? He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot; ... Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last."* These are words to break resignation and ignite hope. The same sort of words come to Mary, and through Mary to a nation that had mostly resigned itself to a slow deterioration and demise. Gabriel puts it this way. *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."* Both proclamations were telling the people to not be afraid and to hold on to hope because the God of the universe was still at work. Both proclamations pointed to concrete realities that would alter the course of history and the future of God's people.

As I said a moment ago, we live on the hope-resignation scale. But what the scriptures remind us to do is to not be afraid to hope. Though there may be those moments when we must be resigned to an incurable diagnosis, or a job that will never be ours, or a career that we desired yet cannot attain, that does not mean that God is done with us. It does not mean that in the depths of resignation there is not still the light of hope shining through. I say this because we are God's chosen and beloved. Listen again to Isaiah. *"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off'; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."* What this means is that whether in this life or in the next, God has plans for us; God has plans for good and not ill. God is not done with us yet. We are to hold onto hope and not be afraid.

There were moments when Marvin had hope that he would be declared innocent. There was the moment when John Lincoln confessed to the crime for which Marvin was convicted, offering details that only the perpetrator would know. But the trial judge refused to set Marvin free. Then when DNA testing was developed, he again had hope that he would be freed. But he was informed that the evidence containing DNA information had been destroyed. Another moment of hope came when a sample of the DNA from the kit was found, but again the judge refused to allow tests to be performed. Marvin's pendulum was swinging from hope to despair. But then the Innocence Project came on board and forced the state to run the DNA through their convicted offender database, which revealed that the DNA matched Lincoln's and not Marvin's. Even then it was five years later that Marvin was finally granted a pardon, after fifteen years of his life was gone. So, what is Marvin doing now? He is the Fire Chief of the Hanover, Virginia Fire Department. Marvin never gave up. He always carried hope; hope even in the midst of impossible odds.

This is what we are called to do. We are called to be people who never lose hope, for we know that God is indeed at work in the world and in our lives. This week my challenge is for each of us to ask, "How am I holding on to hope such that I am not afraid because I believe that God is not done with me yet?"