



University Christian Church- Austin

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## **Hope Against Hope**

Lent 3, b, March 8, 2009

Romans 4:13-25

An older resident in his Kentucky home who was celebrated for his down to earth wisdom, had a guest. "Uncle Zeke," the young visitor asked, "How does it come you're so wise?"

"Because," said the old man, "I've got good judgment. Good judgment comes from experience, and experience well, that comes from poor judgment."

Let's face it. Isn't this the process of life ?

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Why is it that the biggest disasters always seem to coincide with events on which we pin so much of our hopes? The times we are convinced will be the best often turn out to be the very worst.

Think of how many big family get-togethers – birthday celebrations, season holidays and the like -- start out so delightful , and then turn into disasters? Cousin Bill still won't sit in the same room as Cousin Hank. Aunt Hattie's special blueberry pie is now permanently memorialized by the blue stain in the sofa. Or think of weddings. As Sallie and Harold will tell you, the number of things that go wrong on wedding days – wedding cakes pancaking layer on layer; wedding rings accidentally rolling down air return ducts; air-conditioning units on the fritz in blazing heat; flowers delivered to the wrong town, and the list goes. The number of things that can go wrong

at a wedding is roughly equivalent to the number of people who now wish they had heeded Dad's request and just eloped.<sup>i</sup>

There's no doubt about it, so often it is when we expect the best of times, instead we get the worst of times.

That's the bad news. But the good news is that the reverse is true as well. At Wednesday evening's gathering with Dr. Stephen Tomlinson in preparation for the workshop on Spirituality and Economics that he'll lead here at UCC in late April, Bert Crowson of Univ. Ave. Church of Christ down the street, reflected on his experience growing up during the depression. Bert shared that even though financially it was the hardest time he'd experienced in his whole life, when he thinks back to those days, what he remembers is not financial deprivation. No, he remembers a close knit family, food enough to eat if somewhat restricted in amount and variety; everybody wearing out rather than wearing new clothing; time to play, to celebrate, to pull together as a community. In short Bert reflected later, some of the very best days of his life – spiritually speaking - were those oh so challenging depression days.

What makes our living so rich, so wonderfully complicated, so deep down satisfying is that we can never really separate out "the bad" from "the good" or, "the good" from "the bad." What we get is this curious and endlessly fascinating mixture that holds so much variety that we should never be bored.

A steady menu of similar kinds of experiences should create in all of us the same response as God's promise did in Abraham. Already an old man when he first hears God's call, Abraham obediently begins his long, wandering search for a new homeland based on God's promise. Now, when God promises that he and Sarah shall have their own son, Abraham believes.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Abraham's faith enables him to "hope against hope" – as the Apostle Paul says in our Scripture lesson from Romans 4. And out of the worst conditions -- extreme old age and barrenness -- God brings the best to Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac.

Faith, it seems, is a mind-set that not only believes in God, but trusts that this God can use us for amazing things, even when there is plenty of evidence to the contrary.

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This is the promise of the gospel. All of us, even and especially at our very worst, are promised that God can do with us the best. It is that promise that enables us to live on in faith continually "hoping against hope."

> Out of his worst experiences with a corrupted, dry-bones, institutionalized church, Martin Luther re-read his Bible and breathed the best, the air of the Protestant Reformation back into the church.

> Though stone-deaf in his later life, Ludwig von Beethoven continued to compose music so moving that it brought, and still brings, audiences to tears.

> Feeling called to give back some of the many blessings he had been given, Albert Schweitzer, a gifted organist and respected theologian, took his considerable talents as a healer to a tiny, isolated mission in Africa and persevered there, even in the middle of war.

Why is it so difficult for many, then, walk in faith? In our age, especially, why is it so many make no room for God's guidance?

Try this on for size. Could it be that many, including ourselves sometimes, will not walk the walk of faith, because we fear disillusionment... or because we have been painfully disillusioned already?

I have listened carefully and watched with amazement as members of our congregation have shared their experiences in some of the provocative and challenging study groups that are taking place around here....

- >The Seekers class discussing some deeply challenging issues;
- >the Forum book study reading Marcus Borg and Amy-Jill Levine;
- >the Tue. Bible Study digging into – of all things - the Book of Revelation;
- >Monday evening Spiritual Practices group sifting through the best spiritual disciplines from around the world;
- > The classes that Ted White & Gregg Freeby lead.... Oh, I could go on..

If you think about it, all of these avenues of study and practice proceed from the same **underlying unease** with the simple understandings of our early training in Christianity. Each gathering is an instance of its members' desire to plumb greater depths of possibilities for our relationship with God. Each group is a sign of a growing, changing spirituality, risking disillusionment at every session.

Obviously, such groups are not for everybody. I would hope that folks engage those kinds of studies only if, or when, they are truly ready to wrestle through it... all the way through it.

But many more, of course, would never enter such a group, because they will never again darken the door of a church in the first place.

Some of these feel betrayed by a God whom they believe to have broken an implicit promise. According to their Sunday school teachers as children, God made a bargain with each one of them the moment they were born, or the moment they accepted Christ: **do what I say and I will take**

**care or you.** So they did, and for years it may have seemed to work. They obeyed their parents, their teachers, their coaches, and they were taken care of, but one day their neat little system failed. They did everything right and everything went wrong. Their prayers went unanswered; their belief went unrewarded; their God was absent; and the lie of their deal was exposed.

One man mourning the death of his infant daughter, confessed the depth of his loss, saying, “I don’t know what to believe anymore. I don’t know whom to pray to, or what to pray. I tried to be a good person; I did the best I knew how, and it didn’t do a bit of good. If God is going to let something like this happen, then what’s the use of believing at all?”<sup>ii</sup>

Isn’t his disillusionment emblematic of this post-Christian age in which we live; when the perceived promises of Christendom lie broken and the existence of God- never mind the omnipotence of God- seems a fantasy. And many fall away... never to return to a religious faith of any sort. And many never come to faith because they perceive the danger of such a disillusionment and wish, at all costs, to avoid that pain.

But this morning’s lesson calls us to discover the hope in hopelessness. Down in the darkness below our broken dreams for how God relates to this world; behind the simplified stories of God that made sense at age seven, but seem silly at aged 17, and tragic at age 70, behind the God we think we know, is another God. Behind, beneath our disillusionment is truth, truth, that does not conform to our expectations, but challenges us to learn.

I say, frankly, for many, maybe most, the journey of faith ends here, broken on the hard rocks of life. That, I suppose, is why we need stories of Abraham and Sarah, Peter and John, to point us to the positive possibilities in faith. Lord knows, the negative are all too plain to see. The evening news will make sure we see that!

Those who wish to grow beyond child-like faith not only risk, but will experience, disillusionment.... The painfulness of learning that things aren't as simple as we wished and as we believed.

But be not dismayed, for being disillusioned is essentially positive. It is losing illusions about ourselves, about the world, about God. And while it is almost always painful, it is not a bad thing to lose the half-truths we have mistaken for the deep truth.

There is a lot of attrition along the way, but for those who elect to go on, the best advice is to keep moving, don't stop. Putting one foot ahead of the other is the best way to survive disillusionment, because the real danger is not the territory itself but getting stuck in it.<sup>iii</sup>

For those willing to keep heaving themselves toward the light, things can change. What has been lost gradually becomes less important than what is to be found. Curiosity pokes its green head up through the sidewalk of grief. Fear of the unknown takes on an element of wonder as the disillusioned turn away from the God who was supposed to be, in order to seek the God who actually is.

Every let down becomes a lesson and a lure. As Prof. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

- Did God fail to come when I called? Then perhaps God is not my servant. So who is God?
- Did God fail to punish my adversary? Then perhaps God is not a police officer. So who is God?
- Did God fail to make everything turn out all right? Then perhaps God is not a fixer. So who is God?<sup>iv</sup>

As I reflect over 40 years of Christian faith, time and time again, my disappointments in God draw me deeper into the mystery of God. Every time God declines to meet my expectations, another of my idols is exposed as the idol that it is. Another curtain is drawn back so that I can see what I have propped up in God's place. <sup>v</sup>

But through it all, God has a way of using us... with our blemishes and shortcomings, with faithlessness and confusion. God has a way of using us, because God believes in us and sees the best; sees beloved children, sees likely allies, sees able partners in the ongoing work of creation. In faith, we set out to see the same things in ourselves to live into them, trusting God's vision of us more than we trust our own.

As Prof. Taylor puts it, "Our job is to stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven, with the double vision that is the gift of faith, and to say out of our own experience that reality is not flat but deep, not opaque but transparent, not meaningless but shot full of grace for those with even the least willingness to believe it so."<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Several of the passages in this sermon come directly from the February 27, 1994 sermon from the *Homiletics* journal as found on the 97' digital compilation of resources.

<sup>ii</sup> From Barbara Brown Taylor's "The Preaching Life"

<sup>iii</sup> Taylor

<sup>iv</sup> Taylor

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor's "The Preaching Life," pp. 8-11.

<sup>vi</sup> Taylor, "The Preaching Life"