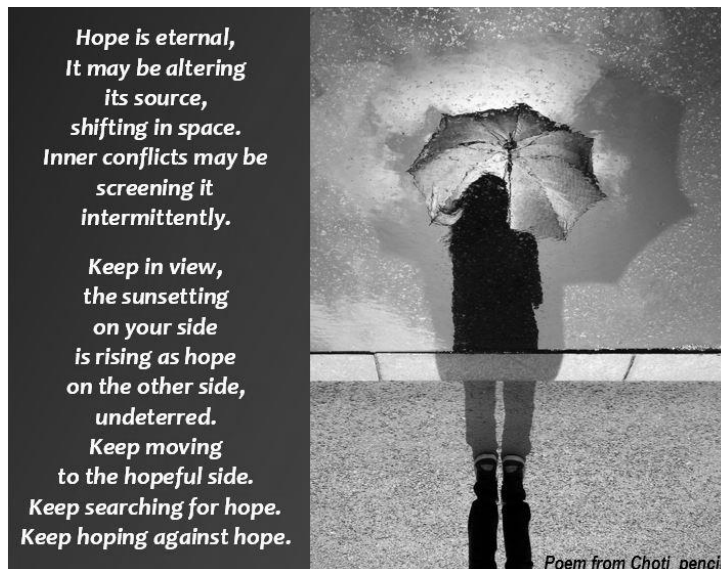


HOPING AGAINST HOPE



Scripture:

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring^[a] after you.

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

This passage reflects on the life of Abraham.

Romans 4: 13-22

¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already^[a] as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



HOPING AGAINST HOPE

A year ago last March: The snow kept coming, but the dog didn't. Wandering the woods near his Plattsburgh, New York home on March 13, Ron Martin shouted for Murphy, his nine-year-old yellow Labrador in the midst of one of the biggest snowstorms in memory.

On the day Murphy went missing, Ron had let the dog out to go to the bathroom with the snow of Winter Storm Stella falling faster by the hour. The Martins usually kept Murphy on a leash as he did his business, but Ron figured the lab would be eager to come back in out of the snow. So he let him out the door without a leash that day. As Murphy trotted off, Ron called to him, but the Lab just kept going after some scent he smelled.

Heading out after him, Ron spotted the dog's footprints and followed them, shouting Murphy's name into the storm until the tracks stopped.

"I kept walking around and calling and calling and calling, and then when it got so bad, there was just nothing I could do, and I came home,"

By the time Ron headed out the next day, the storm had dropped twenty inches of snow. Their daughter started putting the word out online with posts on Craigslist and multiple Facebook groups.

The Martins said they couldn't be more thankful for the support that came from so many people, both online and offline.

Ron said, "I can't tell you how many people came up and asked, 'Have you found your dog yet?' People I don't even know,"

One important source of support for Pat and Ron was Pastor Teri Monica of the local Episcopal Church. She offered them a lesson in keeping the faith. She had lost a puppy for a few days and it turned up in a photo on Facebook. But as a week passed with Murphy still missing, the pain of loss began to weigh on the Martins. "There's no closure; he just disappeared," Pat said. "I can't imagine what it must be like to have a child disappear. I think I'd be wandering the woods forever looking for them."

With doubt creeping in, Pat kept one thought in mind. A prayer that went: "Dear God, let somebody just pull into the driveway, open the door and let Murphy out. We are hoping against all hope, Lord. Please."

Ten days later, on the afternoon of March 23, sitting in a home dotted with dog hair that she refused to vacuum up, Pat heard the sound of tires on her driveway.

Since their home was far off the road, the Martins didn't get many random vehicles pulling in. So she

called for her husband and peered outside. Suddenly a familiar furry head poked out from a car door.

"Pat screamed and screamed: 'It's Murphy!'"

The Labrador must have been a bit confused to see his owners acting so wild. Pat said, "We were puddles of tears in the driveway, two puddles, on our knees, sobbing." The pair was so overwhelmed that, at first, they didn't even recognize Murphy's saviors.

"Finally, when I looked up, I said, 'Oh my God, it's you,' and she said, 'Yes, it is.'" The pair of good Samaritans were the neighbors at the end of their street.

They had spotted Murphy running across their yard and thought they recognized him from the Martins always taking him for walks down the street. But they weren't sure it was Murphy because he looked so thin and haggard after ten days in the wild.

What amazed the Martins was that someone had been looking out the window at just the right time to spot their dog. "They could have just as easily been somewhere else when he went by their window and never saw him," Ron said.

While watching Murphy take big relaxed breaths as he slept on his first night back, Ron reflected: Now we know what "hoping against hope" means.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Do you know what hoping against hope means?

In today's Romans 4 passage the apostle Paul is describing the faith of Abraham when he says: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what God said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."

**The passage goes on to say:
"He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."**

So here when it says people are "righteous," we aren't meaning righteous in a greater than thou boastful way but in a faithful way. Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. In other words,

Abraham's faith was deep, and solid. Unwavering to such a point that some may have thought it was foolishness.

But when God fulfilled his promises to Abraham, and gave him many children, Abraham remembered where his blessings came from and did not take them for granted. He praised the Lord!

FATHER ABRAHAM HAD MANY SONS

Do you remember the old Sunday school song: Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons had father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord!

The song calls us all "sons" in an all-inclusive way!

Since only sons were important back then, we don't know how many daughters Abraham had. After Ishmael was born from his servant Hagar, and Isaac was born to his wife, Sarah. She later died, and Abraham had six more sons with his last wife, Keturah. And those sons had many more.

HAVING FAITH

My family knows what it is like to hope and pray for a child and still not be able to have one. My cousin Brian, who is a captain for United Airlines, was diagnosed with testicular cancer soon after he married. Brian was told he would not be able to father children after the radiation treatments. Brian and his wife Sheree grieved and shared with me how it felt heart wrenching to see others with children and not be able to have your own. Then they found a way to adopt a beautiful baby girl from Mexico. A few months later, Sheree became pregnant, not once, but four times. Now their five children are grown with their own kids!

Hoping against hope is what we do before giving up. We grasp for that one more thread of hope to hold on to. This passage says that Abraham received his promise of all the descendants not because he obeyed the law, but because he had faith. That would have been earth shattering news for the Jewish leaders to hear this statement from Paul at that time. They idolized the Jewish laws above all else. Paul, on behalf of Jesus, challenged their system of power and control by saying that God kept promises based on faith not based on how well they followed the rule of law.

GOD'S WAY

Where do we lean on our faith more than the law today?

Where do we feel God is calling us to righteousness even if it contradicts our current government's policies?

Your answer might be, when God's way is clearly challenging the current law's way. Compare the laws and policies to God's love, compassion, and advocacy for the oppressed. Analyze the laws according to the way they show mercy, promote the healing of the sick and the feeding of the hungry.

In general, check to see if the laws are breaking down the bonds of oppression or building the oppressed up economically and spiritually.

Wherever and whenever we have an opportunity to help someone who is hoping against hope to feel the love of God through our advocacy, protesting on their behalf, or standing up beside them when they are being beaten down, then we are called to do just that and reckon it to our faith and God's righteousness. This is what God's people have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to do since the beginning of the world.

LENT

The church season of Lent is a good time to hope against hope and also to "live into the rhythms of the Gospel and reflect on the story of redemption that God has been writing throughout human history. On our Wednesday evening Soup and Study Lenten Bible study on the book of Mark, Kelsey Holloway says: Living in the rhythm of the church seasons such as Lent, "sets us apart from the world in a way that reminds us of our true citizenship in God's kingdom and our calling to be the aroma of Christ in a broken hurting world."

Ash Wednesday ushered in the forty day season of repentance. Holloway thinks of the Lenten journey as a renewing process like washing your car after the effects of a long Chicago winter. In the springtime, the winter weary soul decides to wash her car and begins to strip away the layers of salt, grime, and dirty snow. Holloway encourages us to imagine Lent is like that first car wash in the spring.

Over the winter our hearts and minds can become coated with fears, prejudices, isolationism, and despair. Holloway says, "The repentant nature of Lent can be likened to taking a power washer to the soul."

As we approach Easter we want to strip away what is not of God in order to reflect on the new creation that is enabled through the work of Jesus. We can do this important stripping away of our old crusty selves through prayer, confession, spiritual disciplines and a new focus on learning more about the one whom we owe everything.

The season of Lent is also a good time to stand up for God's righteousness. Join the students marching for safer schools. California already has the strictest gun laws in the United States, but we can still loudly call out for a change in the federal laws to better protect God's children of all ages in all places.

Each day I pray for my grandson Chase and his preschool in Alabama, which has the least restrictive gun control laws in the nation.

I also pray for our preschool and for us in the church when we gather. I worry that those who think they lack power will grab a powerful gun and target another vulnerable group for the publicity.

The massacre shooters at Sandy Hook, Columbine, and Parkland all had one thing in common. They had lost hope. They thought they had nothing to lose because they had no more hope for their own lives. So they took away the lives of others because they had the means to do so.

HOW DO WE GIVE HOPE TO THOSE WHO NEED IT?

So how do we give hope to those who need it before they lose it all? That is our job as Christians. Our faith in God gives us good hope that we are called to share widely with others. If Abraham didn't have Hagar, Sarah or Keturah he would not have been able to build the nation of Israel by himself alone.

We can be hope for and with one another. If the Florida shooter had been given the healthcare and network of support he badly needed when he was young, he may not have turned to guns for his answer to hopelessness.

Florida is the sixth easiest state to purchase a gun. Allowing a mentally disabled orphan to possess a firearm should be a crime.

Hope against hope and be hope for those needing faith in God's love through the help you can give them. May your faith in God promote healing and wholeness. Jesus protested against the abusive Roman

government and the selfish religious leaders in power. I encourage you to do what your faithful soul tells you is righteous at this time in our nation's history, whether it is:

- Protecting a dreamer from being deported,
- Visiting someone who needs hope in prison, so when they are released they don't give up again
- Or
- Joining with the voices of students as they demand safer gun laws.

And during this Lenten Season let's all make a concerted effort to be Good Samaritans like the people who found poor old lost Murphy. When you awaken each day, hope against hope that you can make a difference against the negative forces in the world. And your faith will be reckoned as righteousness in the sight of God. Amen.

References: *Hoping Against Hope*, article from the Plattsburgh, New York paper called the *Press Republican*, By Ben Rowe, Mar 25, 2017Holloway, Kelsey, *Lenten Bible Study* presented by the Center for Biblical and Theological Education at Seattle Pacific University. 2012.

Benediction:

(A Billy Graham video was shown to the congregation.)

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



**Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405**