

*The Meaning of Hope*  
A Sermon on Romans 8:22-27 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 23, 2021

We need to be hopeful. For us as individuals, and as a community, we need to have hope. But first we need to remember what hope is.

Let's remember hope is one of several words from sacred scripture that have been incorporated into common speech. *Hope, love, peace, freedom* and *justice* are part of our sacred vocabulary. They express powerful ideas, so people have used them more often in daily life. During the past 150 years, as advertising and commerce have become continuous elements of life, these sacred words have become commonplace.

Of all of these sacred words, *hope* is my nominee for the term we are most confused about. *Hope* is the term that has lost its original meaning as we have used it more and more. If you pay attention, you will notice that many people, including me, use the word *hope* many times each day. It is good to say to your friends, "I hope you have a good day." But hope has a different meaning in sacred scripture. We need to bring a deeper meaning of hope into our lives.

St. Paul helps us remember the meaning of hope. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: *Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?* We hope for something we cannot see. Hope is fundamentally connected with God's vision and God's work in the world. Hope is ultimately about something that is bigger than us, and our vision, and our lives.

For Jesus' first disciples, the season leading up to Pentecost was a season of hope. In other words, the disciples have no idea of what the future will look like, and how they will get there. In the days and weeks following Christ's death and resurrection the disciples have only glimpses of the risen Christ. They cannot see the way forward. They cannot imagine what their lives will look like in six months. They cannot even imagine what they will be doing in six weeks, when Christ ascends into heaven.

The day of Pentecost was ten days after the ascension. Pentecost had been a festival day for Jews for centuries, which is why Jews from all over the world had gathered that day in Jerusalem. On the morning of Pentecost, the eleven disciples gather together. Jesus is gone. They don't have much idea of how to carry on his mission. They are unsure of what to do next. So they gather in prayer. This is what it looks like to be hopeful.

We need to be hopeful. We need to understand the power of our sacred vocabulary. A large part of understanding the meaning of hope has to do with timing. Hope belongs to a specific part of the process. We have the greatest hope when we cannot see the way ahead, but we move forward in a spirit of love.

Let's consider hope in terms of a piece of work many of us have been paying attention to in recent weeks and months: the *Open Doors* project. In case you haven't read our May newsletter, I'll just say *Open Doors* is a \$1.7 million renovation project to prepare St. Paul's for a third century of ministry in downtown Syracuse. *Open Doors* is the largest capital improvement project at St. Paul's since 1958, 63 years ago. *Open Doors* includes major accessibility improvements, such as a new entrance from the parking lot into the church and an elevator to make our Parish House building fully accessible. *Open Doors* includes significant improvements to the old Samaritan Center portion of the building, to provide space for *The Caring Place* ministry to flourish and grow. *Open Doors* will make the exterior of the Parish House beautiful, weatherproof and more efficient, with repairs to the windows and masonry, and replacement of all of the roofs.

Now I am going to say something that may surprise you; I am not hopeful about the *Open Doors* project. I am not hopeful about the *Open Doors* project because we have moved past the time when we could not see the way ahead. We can see clearly all the work that will be done.

In order to make a point about what it means to be hopeful, I would also say I am not hopeful about our funding for the project. That's because we have already received more than \$1.4 million

dollars in pledges and commitments for funding. We see clearly that our members are supporting this project with their pledges. With your support, there isn't any question we will reach our goal of \$1.7 million. We are beyond the time to be hopeful about receiving enough funding. We are confident; we can see clearly how all of the pieces of the funding are coming together.

We are not in a hopeful time when it comes to the *Open Doors* project. We are in a time of celebration and commitment and resurrection. We can see clearly the work that will be done. We pray and trust that our work will be God's work. We pray that our vision is part of God's vision. But when it comes to the *Open Doors* project we are beyond the time of hope.

We need to remember and understand the power of hope. A large part of understanding the meaning of hope has to do with timing. The hopeful time for *Open Doors* was five or six years ago, before we received \$800,000 in national and state grants, before we had architectural drawings of the project. Today there are at least forty people working on one of the task forces to get the project done right. The time of hope was six or seven years ago, when there was no task force, no budget plan, and no name for the project.

Seven years ago, two of our members had a conversation about our buildings and about St. Paul's. This was not a conversation filled with confidence and expectation and visions of future success. This was a conversation that looked at the hard reality of our situation. Seven years ago, the reality was that our Parish House building was becoming more empty. The reality was that our Parish House building would require significant repairs and improvements to prepare it for a third century of ministry. This was a conversation where there was space to talk about loss and grief. This was a conversation about the details, about the realities of our downtown neighborhood, and about the challenges we face as we prepare for a third century of ministry.

Seven years ago, Becky and David had a conversation about the possibilities and the challenges. They had a conversation that was honest about the hard realities and the dangers of our situation. They had a conversation about things they could not see. In other words, it was a hopeful conversation.

In order to be hopeful, we tell the truth about our situation. In order to be hopeful, we take time to examine the difficult details. In order to be hopeful, we ask the difficult questions. In order to be hopeful, we move forward in love, though we cannot see where we are headed. We attempt to move forward into God's vision of the world, because our vision is failing.

I'm taking time to articulate the precise meaning of hope, because I'm guessing there is some part of your life that feels kind of hopeless right now. There is some part of your life where you are almost ready to give up, or where you have already given up. There is some part of your life that is really important to you, but you cannot see the way ahead.

When you come to the place where you feel like giving up, I encourage you to move forward in hope. It's mostly about vision. It's about God's vision. It's about our lack of vision. When we feel hopeless, we cannot see the way to move forward, so we feel stuck. Acting with hope requires us to consider what we can see and what we cannot see.

Hope begins with getting a clear, accurate view of our reality. Hope requires us to learn the details. Contrary to common misconception, people who act in hope know the details of their situation. They gather information and data and use scientific methods in order to get an accurate view of reality. Once we have an accurate view of reality, we move forward in hope by acknowledging the limits of our vision and the limits of our power. After we have acknowledged the limits of our vision, we move forward in hope by striving to conform our lives and our actions to God's vision. We make space for God's spirit to be active in our lives, leading us into God's vision.

So I encourage you to remember what St. Paul teaches us about hope when you get to that place where you are groaning inwardly. In hope we were saved. If we hope for what we do not see, we will be patient. We will learn and acknowledge the truth about our lives. The Spirit will help us in our weakness. Make a space for God's spirit to journey beside you. That very Spirit will intercede for you with sighs too deep for words.