

Lenten Sermon Series: Surprised By Hope
“Hope of the Church”
Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
Salem United Methodist Church
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Today is the last of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Surprised By Hope.” Based from a book, by Anglican Bishop, N. T. Wright, we have explored the hope we have in the Resurrection, in Heaven, in Jesus’ Second Coming, and in our salvation. Today, we will look at the Hope of the Church.

“Surprised By Hope” has been a study on the theology of the Kingdom of God based on the scriptures. As a democratic nation, we do not submit to a King or a Queen, so kingdom language is foreign to our understanding. For us, everyone has rights and a voice. So how do we understand our faith than in terms of Kingdom language? N. T. Wright offers this: “What would the world look like if God ran the show?” To know what it would look like, we can read the Gospels. Jesus told the stories about it. The Kingdom of God would look like... a father welcoming home a wayward son... a tiny seed growing into a tree that is a home to animals and birds... a place where those who are hungry are fed, where those who are thirsty are given something to drink, where those who are in prison are visited, where those who our society forgets are remembered and cared for. The Kingdom of God is not about getting more power, more land, more wealth. The Kingdom of God is contrary to our human condition. We yearn for more and more and more, and we will do whatever it takes to get it. Even Jesus’ disciples, James and John, ask to sit on his left and right when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus’ response is that in God’s kingdom there is no room for tyrannical rulers who let power go to their heads. Jesus tells them in Mark 10: 43-45, “But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” To participate in God’s Kingdom is to serve God and God’s creation.

We see from the prophet Micah that Jesus is not putting a new concept out there for us. God has always expected us to do what is right and just, to be compassionate, and to honor God in all that we do. But humanity failed at doing this. So Jesus was sent to earth to further develop this concept of justice, kindness, and love of God. Jesus came to show us what the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven really is like. These two terms are interchangeable. The Gospels use both. What Jesus brings to us that is new, is the concept that heaven and earth can be one now in him and will be one at the end of time. He taught us to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus is the intersection of heaven and earth. He bodily taught us about and lived God’s kingdom. He died our bodily death for us, and was raised from the dead in bodily form so we could see him as the beginning of a whole new creation-an appetizer of what life will be like for us in our own resurrection when heaven and earth become one when he returns. This is the hope of our salvation. We are saved from the decaying, deteriorating, and evil of this world. The hope is that God has something better, something more just, something more beautiful, something that shouts to the world, “You are loved.” However, this is nothing that we are to put on the shelf and say, “Won’t this be great when it happens some day.” This is something that we can actively participate in now, and in fact, we are commanded by Jesus to be doing it now. We are to be servants of the Kingdom of God in this world today. This is the mission of the church. Jesus’ last instructions to the disciples weren’t, “Hey, guys, we had a nice gig while it lasted. See ya!” No, Jesus, knowing he would be heading back to heaven, entrusts the work of the Kingdom over to his disciples and told them to “Go, make disciples... Go, baptize, Go, teach people to obey my commands of love God and neighbor.” And this work continues today. This is Resurrection Living. This is what Easter is all about. We who believe in Jesus, we who are the church, are called to work for the Kingdom of God. We are to build for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth today.

Ever wonder what the world would look like if Jesus never came to earth, if there was never a Resurrection, a Christian faith? It’s impossible to imagine, isn’t it? Admittedly, Christians have not always done the right thing. Historically, the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition have not been our finest hour. These are representative of how the church can abuse its power and has. But what would the world look like without Christians naming injustices down through the centuries and working to right the wrongs? One of the reasons I

am a United Methodist is because as a denomination, we understand that the Kingdom of God is something we are called to build now. It's part of our DNA. In the 1700's our founder, John Wesley, with other Methodists assisted those in debtor prisons and offered medical care to those who were getting sick from working in the mines and factories. He mentored William Wilberforce in his work to free the slaves in England. Here in the United States, Methodists have worked for women's right to vote, just labor laws, and the minimum wage to name a few. As a denomination we organize ourselves for building God's kingdom. For instance, the General Board of Global Ministries not only offers acts of mercy to those displaced by war or natural disasters, but supports missionaries throughout the world. These missionaries are involved in community development through education and medicine as well as work on issues that keep people oppressed in these countries. Another agency, the General Board of Church and Society's mission is to uphold a vision of justice throughout the world. This agency works for human rights and dignity both in our country and around the world. It also upholds our human call to be stewards of God's creation so it can sustain life for generations to come. As a global church, The United Methodist Church has churches in almost every country in the world. This diversification is a blessing, yet as humans we have much to learn from each other. The General Commission on Race and Religion was created to ensure that we as a church will respect and embrace each other's cultural and racial diversity so we can witness to the world that all people regardless of race or culture are one in Christ Jesus. Another organization in the church that is working for God's kingdom is The United Methodist Women. They provide opportunities for spiritual growth for girls and women as they support and equip them to become leaders. UMW are advocates for justice throughout the world wherever women and children have little to no rights and dignity. The United Methodist Men are committed to developing the spiritual lives of men and boys so they can best model Jesus in their thoughts, words, and deeds. They believe that spiritual men will be a blessing to families, churches, and their communities. This is such a brief overview of what each of these organizations do so the church can offer hope to the world, so we can be builders of the Kingdom of God today so others can experience the love of Christ, a piece of heaven on earth.

When these agencies of the church, Salem as a congregation, or each of us as followers of Jesus are committed to being kingdom builders we are upholding the Sacraments of the Church: Baptism and Communion. Take for instance the vows we make at our Baptism. (UMH, p. 24) We commit to renouncing the spiritual powers of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sins in which we have embraced these. We commit ourselves to resist evil, injustice, and oppression with God's help. We confess that we will serve Jesus as the Lord of God's Kingdom, trust in his grace as we serve him through the church that is made up of all peoples. This is kingdom building language. We do not exist for ourselves, but for God's kingdom. We commit to Jesus that we will be builders of God's Kingdom. Our lives become a witness to our commitment. The Sacrament of Holy Communion also has Kingdom building language, too. Every time we take Communion, we pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on us as we take these simple elements of bread and juice. We pray that they may be the body and blood of Christ so we can be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood. This is an intersection point where heaven and earth meet. These elements become God's grace, God's love, God's kingdom on earth in which we ingest physically as we pray to be this intersection point of heaven and earth for the world, others. We then continue to pray for the Spirit to make us One- with Christ, with each other, and in ministry to all the world. This again is Kingdom building language. This isn't about me or you. This is not a Democratic agenda or a Republican agenda. This agenda existed long before Republicans and Democrats. This is God's agenda. We are working on a building for God one little piece at a time. This is Resurrection Living.

The Apostle Paul in his explanation of the Resurrection to the Church at Corinth speaks to sin and death being overcome by Jesus. And then he states: "Stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort." (I Corinthians 15: 58, *The Message*). We are all called to be servants of God's Kingdom, to work for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. That may be a surprise for some, but it certainly is God's hope.

Resources: *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright; General Board of Global Missions-
<http://www.umcmission.org/>; General Board of Church and Society-<http://umc-gbcs.org/>;
General Commission on Race and Religion-<http://www.gcorr.org/>; The United Methodist Women-

<http://prod.umwomen.org:88/>; The United Methodist Men-<http://www.gcumm.org>