

*Lenten Sermon Series: Surprised By Hope*  
*“Hope For the World”*  
*Salem United Methodist Church*  
*Matthew 17: 1-9; Psalm 96; Revelation 21: 1-5*  
*March 2, 2014*  
*Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling*

This coming Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent with Ash Wednesday. We will gather to repent of our sins and to recognize that our life on earth is finite. Our foreheads will be marked with ashes in the sign of the cross as we are told to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. It is a somber time of worship. It is also a humbling time in that we are reminded that we are not gods, but there is only One who is the Almighty, only One who created all that is in heaven and on the earth, only One who reaches down to our level to touch us, to be with us. And that One came in human form named Jesus who brings us hope for today and hope for eternity. During these forty days of Lent we will be exploring the hope we have in Jesus. We will explore the meaning of heaven, the Resurrection and the mission of the church. There are two questions we will ask. What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime? During this Lenten season our sermons and a class on Tuesday evenings will be based on a book called “Surprised By Hope,” written by an Anglican bishop, N. T. Wright. His writing is based on a biblical view of these themes.

All one has to do is connect to any news media and one wonders if there is any hope for the world. With terror threats, bombings, mass shootings, wars, genocides, natural disasters, political and economic disasters, one can quickly become despondent and feel grave despair. When so many die, when there is so much destruction, we ask, “Is there any hope? Is there anything positive that can come out of all this? Is there anything desirable to look forward to?” Today the church celebrates the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration on the Mountain with Moses and Elijah. For Peter, James, and John, it was a day like any other day. Then Jesus takes them for a hike. Soon they find themselves on top of a high mountain when surprise! Have you ever experienced a surprise? Perhaps it was a birthday party that your family and friends planned without your knowledge. How did you respond? Some cry. Some begin to shake. Some respond by saying, “Oh, my God!” over and over again. These three disciples were totally shocked when they see heaven appear before them here on earth. They see their teacher is no longer just a man. They see the glory of God shining through him. And he is not alone. The two great prophets, Moses and Elijah, are standing next to him. Only heaven breaking through to earth would allow for these prophets of long ago to appear. And then the voice of God announces to the disciples that Jesus is the Son of God with the instruction, “Listen to him!” Just days before, Peter had declared to Jesus that he knew him to be the Son of God. This moment confirms Peter’s belief. On this mountain peak these three disciples saw the glory of God in Jesus. They experienced heaven on earth. They experienced hope in that God is present with them. But as they came down from the mountain despair set in when Jesus reminds them yet again of his impending death. Even with this news, Jesus offers hope through the telling of his impending resurrection.

In their wildest imaginations these three disciples couldn’t have dreamed up moment like this one. It was a moment that words like surprise, amazement, and astonishment couldn’t even begin to explain it. Because of this moment, they now had hope that Jesus, their teacher as God’s

Son had the power to make all things right. He had the power to right all the injustices in their world. God had promised this. The Psalmist stated that God rules the world. God judges fairly. God will take all the wrongs and make them right. Those who have been oppressed and bullied would have their lives restored. This was the hope they saw in Jesus. This was the promise of God they knew from scripture. God will make all things right. Not just with humanity, but with all creation. Remember the passage in Isaiah that is often called the Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah 11: 1-9)? “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (NRSV) This is what God’s intent is for our world for heaven to be on earth, a restoration of peace and love.

This does not translate that heaven is a place that we go to when we die, but that heaven comes to earth. We see this in John’s Revelation. God creates a new heaven and a new earth. The New Jerusalem comes from heaven to earth and God dwells with us. This passage is often read at funerals. It gives us hope because it claims that death is no more. There is no more crying, mourning, or pain. God makes all things new! This is the hope of things to come, but also the hope for now. In the midst of pain, sorrow, and suffering, God is making all things new. In the midst of winter, spring is already at work. That is the great hope that runs through the whole Bible. In the midst of our sinful, destructive nature, there is hope that God in the image of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit breaks through like a crocus pushing through the snow to bring beauty, peace, and light into our icy cold, dark world.

Jesus didn’t teach us to just bide our time until we leave this world. He taught us and showed us that the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God can be present. Jesus began to make things right with his healings, feeding many from little, and his miracles. We don’t understand the term kingdom in our 21<sup>st</sup> century vernacular. We think of the Middle Ages when kings were tyrannical or the present day royalty who are mere figureheads. N. T. Wright interprets Jesus’ concept of God’s kingdom as this. “What do you think it would look like if God is running this show?” So Jesus answered this question with stories. It might look like this or that. It might look like a mustard seed that grows into a tall tree. It might look like a father welcoming home a disgraced son. While Jesus was on earth, he began to make things right and echoed the promises in the Old Testament that God would finish the job. Then he instructed us what we are to do in the meantime. We are to be agents of hope, live as people of hope, live as people by that hope. Christians are people who are to make hope happen.

Living as people of hope often bucks up against the system. The early Christians found this out right away. Choosing God’s way rather than the way of their political system got many of them persecuted and killed. Living as people of hope in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is challenging, too. People will criticize and even ignore us. But that is what the church is called to be. We are to be a people of hope to those who live in despair and fear, for those who are broken, for those who are hurting, for those who are lonely. Being bearers of God’s hope is not about everyone for themselves. The church does not exist for itself. We are to be people who reflect as Bishop Wright states, “the creative, loving, wise power of God into the world.” Think back through your knowledge of church history. How has the Church been a beacon of hope in the world? How has Salem in our 180 years of existence been a place of hope to our community? Our leadership is developing a new vision for Salem. So I ask all of us to contemplate this question, “How is Salem offering hope to the Town of Brookeville and Olney? Or how can Salem offer hope to the Towne of Brookeville and Olney?”

**Resources:** *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright

