

Lenten Sermon Series: Surprised By Hope
“Hope of the Second Coming”
Salem United Methodist Church
Daniel 7:13-14; Acts 1:7-8; I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; John 5:22-30
March 23, 2014
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As we prepare ourselves for Resurrection Sunday this Lent, we are rethinking what heaven is, looking at what the resurrection means, and then how this impacts the church's mission. We are using a book and video series by Anglican Bishop Tom Wright called “Surprised By Hope” to give us insights. These topics has sparked some great discussion as well as challenged what we may have been taught. Today's topic may do just that, too.

When I have walked into ancient European churches, I usually have been overcome with a sense of awe and holiness. In these buildings Scripture was not only preached for hundreds of years, but displayed in the stained glass windows or carved into the wood. During this same time period, prayers and songs of praise have been offered up to God in worship. The sacraments of Baptism and Communion have been celebrated for generations in these ancient churches. Bishop Wright gives us a brief history lesson and field trip into Auckland Castle's Chapel. When this chapel was renovated in the seventeenth century, Christians saw churches as a sign post pointing in the mist from the time of the launching of God's kingdom with the teachings, miracles, death, and Resurrection of Jesus to the time in which Jesus would come again to complete what he started: establishing his Sovereign and Saving Rule. Churches were not only the sign posts pointing to this, but they were also the stopping off point where God's kingdom was intersecting with earth now.

There are two basic views on the return of Jesus. One is that when Jesus returns some will be whisked off from this world into heaven and the rest will remain as Bishop Wright puts it, “to stew in its own juice.” The other view is that when Jesus returns the kingdom of heaven and earth will become one holy realm of God where healing, peace, and justice will reign. Both views are interpretations of scripture. Both are just trying to explain something that remains a mystery, something that is difficult to articulate with our confining human language. Since we are studying Bishop Wright we will delve into the latter to which he subscribes.

So what do we know so far? We talked about the Kingdom of God is realized in Jesus, that is Jesus is God's kingdom of heaven that has come to earth. Wherever Jesus went, whomever he touched, whenever he opened his mouth, the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of unconditional love, peace, holiness, hope, joy, and justice happened. He taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We pray this every Sunday. We know that Jesus was brutally executed on a Roman cross. We know that all humans up until that time remained dead, but Jesus being not just human but also divine had the power to overcome death and was resurrected. This was not a bodily resuscitation, but something different. Jesus was in some way bodily the same, but transformed in a new way. We know that Jesus goes back to the Kingdom of Heaven and then sends the Holy Spirit to his followers. They and many throughout the ages including us have become part of this coming-together-movement of heaven and earth to be witnesses, to work for peace and justice, to share God's love to the unlovable, to bring hope to the hopeless, and to create beauty. Why? Because there is a promise. Jesus will return finish what is started, complete the story. Heaven and earth will become one permanently. Jesus returns to as Bishop Wright states to “change everything, to sort it all out, to judge the world... to putting it right, dealing with residual evil, and transforming everything so that it resounds with his glory.” This is Good News, isn't it? Jesus is returning to transform everything, to complete the Good News! There lies our hope. All will be well.

This morning we read scriptures that speak of Jesus' return. The passage from I Thessalonians is called the Rapture passage because Paul tries to describe what he thinks Jesus' return will look like. Paul uses four different metaphors to do this: Jesus coming in the clouds, Jesus coming like a thief in the night, as labor pains, and we aren't to get drunk but put on armor. This is not about real thief, a real woman in labor, nor is it about putting on armor. These are just ways Paul tries to describe something that hasn't happened yet. We will focus on the first metaphor: Jesus coming in the clouds. Bishop Wright contends that Paul combines four images in this passage. First, Jesus comes down from heaven the way Moses came down from the mountain to straighten out the Israelites who began to worship a golden idol they created. Then Paul uses the image from Daniel of the

Ancient One going in the clouds, but here we are the ones going in the clouds. The next image he uses has the sound of God's trumpets. This is an imperial image. When a ruler would go away for some time and return to his city, the trumpets would announce his return and the people would line the roadway to greet him. Paul's use of this imperial imagery makes a political statement in his time. He is saying to the Christians in the Roman city of Thessalonica that Jesus is Lord and ruler of the world, not Caesar. He is claiming as Revelation does that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Then in the next chapter, Paul uses the metaphors of thief in the night, labor pains, and military armor. All these images do not fit together to make one picture, but are different ways of explaining what human language is not entirely capable of doing-explaining what Jesus' Second Coming will be like.

The second scripture that I want to talk about is the passage from John. Here Jesus is speaking about the Day of Judgment. This is not a new concept, but is found in the Psalms, Daniel, and Isaiah to name a few. When the early Christians began to claim Jesus as the Messiah, the belief that he would be the Judge at the end of time seemed like a natural development. So if Jesus is the Messiah, the One who saves, he is the One who will judge. This is not only Good News, but great news! Why? Two reasons. 1) God is making things right through Jesus. And God knows this world needs to be set right! 2) Because Jesus is the One who will judge. He who has experienced human life, experienced human pain, suffering, and grief will be our judge. He loved all sinners and died for us. Jesus gets us. Jesus understands. Even with this hope, though, we need to have some concern. We cannot just sit around playing our video games waiting for Jesus to return or escape into our spirituality in the present, waiting for Jesus to come and take us home. The Final Judgment comes back from the future to the present to convict us now of our sins and injustices. And the Final Judgment anticipates the work we will do in building for God's kingdom now.

Yes, Jesus will bring the world perfect peace, wisdom, love, and justice. In the meantime we have an allegiance to him, a responsibility as citizens of heaven to work for these things now in Jesus' name. How do we do this? None of us will agree totally on how to do this. We each have our own definition of peace, wisdom, love, and justice. For instance these two Freds did: Fred Phelps and Fred Rodgers. Fred Phelps died this week. He was the pastor of Westboro Baptist Church. Members of his congregation would join him in protesting at funerals of slain American service members, notable people, and gays. His view of God's justice, peace, love, and wisdom was one of God's punishment of our nation. According to Phelps' theology, God was punishing America through events like 9/11, natural disasters, and even the Sandy Hook shootings because of our nation's acceptance of homosexuality. One of the funerals Fred Phelps and his congregation picketed in 2003 was Fred Rodgers, a Presbyterian minister, who created the children's show, Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood. Amy Davidson wrote in her article about these two Freds that Mr. Rodgers was "known to children who gained a sense that the universe had some kindly order to it from the way he put on his cardigan sweater." Fred Rodgers' calm manner and great storytelling created a world in which children felt safe, a world in which God's justice, peace, love, and wisdom reign. Two Freds. Two different views of God's judgment. Both believed they were working for God's kingdom.

The example of these two Freds is an extreme example of how we may not agree on how to work for God's kingdom. Even when we disagree, we are to remain faithful to our interpretation of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, of our interpretation of Jesus' Second Coming and the Judgment. At the same time we are to be open to Christ reaching back from the future to convict us of our sin. One thing I am certain, calling each other names and alienating ourselves from the other because we have different views is not bringing in the Kingdom of God to earth. Coming together in love, to pray, to discern, to listen, to agree to disagree just might. As we continue this Lenten journey, I invite us to focus on the One who brought the Kingdom of God to earth, who died and rose for us to experience God's Kingdom, and who will return so God's Kingdom will be completed. Focus on Jesus, his teachings, and his call for the church as we continue to strive to be the stopping off point for God's Kingdom to come now and strive to be a sign post in the mist pointing for the completion of God's Kingdom.

Reflection Question: What is one practical way you can be an agent of justice in a world that can be unfair, an agent of peace in a broken and conflicted-filled world, an agent of wisdom when people settle for shallow answers?

Resources: *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright; "The Two Freds: When Phelps Protested Mr. Rodgers's Memorial," by Amy Davidson, March 20, 2014, *The New Yorker*.

