Stewardship Sermon Series: Why I Love My Church? Sermon Title: "Hope in Christ" Psalm 77; Matthew 3:13-17; Ephesians 3:16-21 Salem United Methodist Church; September 18, 2016 Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

From time to time we need to stop and think about why we do what we do, and why we love what we love. During the next several weeks we will be looking at why we love church, specifically this church that has been serving many generations since 1833. These generations lived through wars, segregation, economic depression, loss, and many different kinds of personal hardships. What got them through? Their hope in Christ.

In 1828 eleven Methodist Episcopal pastors were full of hope. They had submitted to the General Conference a proposal for the church to govern themselves differently. They wanted the organization of the church to reflect the democracy of our new nation. So they proposed to the General Conference that the church should not have a bishop who rules over the church like a king and they proposed that laity along with the clergy should have voice and vote at General Conference. Their proposal was not accepted. In fact, they were voted out of the Conference. I can't imagine what they were feeling. Defeated? Angry? Alone? Did they cry out to God similarly to the writer of Psalm 77? Did they wonder if God had abandoned them? One of those pastors lived here in Brookeville, Thomas McCormick. From their pain and struggle, these pastors heard God calling them to begin the Methodist Protestant Church in 1830. This newly formed Methodist church had no bishop and both laity and clergy were equally represented at Conference. Three years later, Thomas McCormick began Salem Methodist Protestant Church here in Brookeville. Out of the pain of rejection, these clergy found hope in a new beginning. In 1939 the Methodist Episcopal and the Methodist Protestant Churches joined together to form the Methodist Church. The compromise was that the church kept the position of bishop, but clergy and laity would have equal representation at Conferences.

The actions of these eleven pastors reflect what St. Augustine said in the fourth century, "Hope has two sisters: anger and courage. Anger at the things that hurt you, and the courage to change them." These pastors may have been angry that their proposal was not approved and that they were expelled, but they had the courage to change their situation. This congregation was born out of anger and disappointment, but with the courage to forge ahead. Hope sprouted as people came from miles around in their horse drawn carriages and wagons to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. From the beginning of this congregation, Christ has been and still is our hope. How many generations in the past 183 years of this congregation have claimed their hope in Christ? When we think of hope we are expecting something positive or helpful or constructive to occur in the future. When we look into a baby's eyes we see hope in a new generation. As a grandparent when I look at my grandchildren I have hope that life will continue long after I am gone from this world. While I watch these grandchildren growing and maturing, I have hope that love, goodness, and mercy will continue through them. As I watch their faith in God developing, I also hope and trust that Christ will be lived out in the lives. We trust that Christ will be lived out in the lives of these two who are being baptized today. We claim them for Christ and God claims them through Christ.

Hope and trust could be called sisters along with anger and courage. Hope and trust are more like twins, though. In fact the Hebrew word for hope is often translated as trust. Hope and

trust are like identical twins. We hope and trust in God that all things work for good. But hope and trust are choices we make. The Psalmist understood this choice. Look at Psalm 77. What emotions is the writer expressing in the first half of the Psalm? Anger, rejection, loneliness. There is a sense that the writer is depressed. He has trouble sleeping. He is in a dark place. Nobody loves or cares about him, not even God. The writer states that he remembers God, but he doesn't feel that God is remembering him. This is an awful state to be in and yet many of us have been there. We have hit that low place and cried out to God, wondering if God is remembering us. But the psalmist doesn't stay in this low place. The writer has made a conscious choice and the tone of the Psalm changes. The Psalmist chooses to remember what God has already done. The writer has changed the focus from a sorry, dark, depressing state to one that focuses on God, in particular one miraculous event, the Exodus. God helped Moses deliver the Hebrews from slavery. God parted the waters of the Red Sea for them to escape. The Psalmist concludes that if God can do these great things, then the writer needs to be patient and wait for God.

Waiting and being patient are two more definitions of hope. When we are suffering, when we are in that dark place, when we feel the world and God has abandoned us, we are to be patient and wait. Our hope comes in waiting for the Lord. The Psalmist gives us a great tool to use while we are waiting. That tool is remembering what God has already done. God has been present throughout human history. What miracles has God done throughout history? We are to remember how God has brought us through so many wars, economic and social failures, even ecological calamities. God has been present in our salvation history as well. God sent his Son, Jesus, so whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. We are to remember the miracles Jesus performed in the lives of people. We are to remember the miracle of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are to remember that because of these acts in Jesus Christ all our sins are forgiven and we are given new life. And we are to remember where God has been in our lives. No matter what our age, God is with us. God is with us before we are born. God is with us before we realize that there is a God. The grace of God is always at work in us creating one miracle after another. We each are a living witness of God's miracles. Each of us is a miracle! Our hope in Christ is that God will always be in the miracle making business. God continually wows us through nature, wows us in our relationships, and wows us in our own faith development.

Even with all the wows of God's miracles, there will be times of pain, suffering, loneliness, and despair. Even the Son of God experienced all of these in his human form when Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and tortured. His lowest point was when he felt that God abandoned him on the cross. Yet we remember that at Jesus' baptism, God rejoiced as God claimed Jesus, publicly displayed love for Jesus, and boasted with pride. We also remember that Jesus willingly suffered and died so we could live in hope. Because of Jesus we can have hope for the future even though we don't know what kind of pain, suffering, loneliness, and despair we may still have ahead of us. Why? Because at our baptism, wherever it was and whenever it was, God rejoiced. God claimed us, publicly loved us, and boasted with pride. So we are called to remember our baptisms. Perhaps we don't remember the moment we were baptized, but we can reflect and remember the miracles God has done and is doing in our lives. Because of our baptisms we can put our whole trust and hope in God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For God is still performing miracles in our lives and in the entire world. Amen.