

All My Hope

2 Corinthians 3:12, 17-4:1, Luke 9:28-36

Center Church, Hartford

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The apostle Paul loved the Corinthians, despite the fact that they often made him nuts. A few lines before the part of his letter we read today, he says this, "Surely, we [he and his companions] do not need letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

That's the context for the "since then" that begins our reading today. "Since then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness!" Paul and his Christian companions, traveling around teaching a new faith and often encountered beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, exiles, and rejection, and we are worried about talking to people about our faith because we might be embarrassed! Paul and friends needed to have a strong hope to keep going. They needed to believe deeply that the message they had been given could indeed transform both individual lives and the world for good. They believed the teachings of Jesus could move people away from hatred, division, violence, and paralyzing fear and guilt. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom, and all of us, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image, [one step at a time]." He saw that in the Corinthian congregation by their lives.

We say the same thing every time we come to this table. Taste by taste of bread and juice, we are being transformed individually and together into the likeness of Christ. We are God's letters of recommendation to the world, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of God at work in our lives. Not on paper or screens, but in our very human hearts.

Beloved, God loves us so very much, and even when we are not totally aware of it, God moves around, in and through us to keep hope alive, as Jesse Jackson used to say. Think of those poor disciples who thought Jesus was really taking off in popularity and they, as Friends of Jesus, were now set up to be celebrities themselves, on earth and in heaven as it were. Then he tells them that this all is not going to end well. That he's going to be killed, and that they will need to take risks if they are going to really follow him, be transformed themselves and be agents of transformation.

This is not what they expected to happen.

They must have been confused and disappointed, losing hope. But then, Jesus takes the three top leaders in the group with him up a mountain for what they thought would be a time of prayer together. They got so much more than they expected. They got hope they had not even looked for. They got a glimpse of the wonder and power of Jesus beyond the dear human frame they usually experienced. They got a vision of two of their most loved ancestors, men who also encountered great difficulty as well as the amazing power of God at work to free slaves and bring justice. They knew both hopelessness and profound hope.

Then Peter, James and John got something else they had not expected and which brought them terror at first. The voice of God. Instead of fire and brimstone, though, they actually got hope. "This is my Son, my Chosen (some translations here read "my Beloved.") In this moment, if they could only remember it, they had a glimpse of the possibility that what looked like an end would not be. Because, God.

Paul had also experienced a vision which transformed him from one who diligently persecuted Christians to one who spread the message of the gospel even more diligently. He got it. Two of my favorite verses in scripture are in this piece of II Corinthians. "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this

ministry, we do not lose heart." But even more than not losing heart, Paul writes "Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness." When the Spirit of God, the image of Christ, God's mercy and love, is written on your heart, then you can act for God out of hope with great boldness. As my friend Emily Heath writes, "The impossible becomes just a matter of time when courageous people embrace the call to foster change."

The impossible becomes just a matter of time. Yesterday at our retreat some bold ideas were put forth for Center Church to act as God's letter of recommendation in Hartford. Like Paul and friends, we will have setbacks and challenges, within and without, but bodacious hope embraces us in Jesus, and we **can** act with great boldness.

One of my favorite books is JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In the film made from the final book of the trilogy, our heroes are in a desperate situation, one in which the only way forward to any sense of hope is to march to the gates of death themselves with all their forces arrayed against a much larger enemy army. One of the characters, Gimli, says: "Certainty of death? Small chance of success? What are we waiting for?" But we would say it differently. Certainty of God with us? Empowered by hope? What are we waiting for? Amen.