The Long Thread of Hope

TEXT: Romans 5:1-5

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on December 10, 2023

"The Long Thread of Hope" is a phrase I discovered early last month, while reading Steven Charleston's latest book of devotions. He used it while writing about the experience of his Choctaw forbears, specifically on how they were able to endure and go on during the attempted ethnic cleansing and relocation of the Choctaw Nation, in a government-ordered atrocity in the 1830's we've come to call the Trail of Tears.

All in all, approximately 100,000 people from the Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands in the southeastern US to less desirable land west of the Mississippi in violation of US treaties. About 15,000 died during the journey west. The Choctaw were the first to leave with thousands dying from exposure, malnutrition, exhaustion, and disease on the forced march. That was not the first or the last treaty violation or atrocity against Indigenous peoples in this country.

Charleston, a retired Episcopalian bishop, now lives where his people landed, in Oklahoma. I tell you that to emphasize that when a Native Elder like Steven Charleston describes a "long thread of hope," he's not speaking in Christian platitudes. He's not describing a Hallmark moment with a loving couple sitting under a moonlit sky hoping that their children and grandchildren will go to Harvard, find true love, and live happily ever after. He's talking about what it takes to hang onto hope throughout the most desperate circumstances that humans are forced to endure, when the only light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train.

He's talking about being able to retain hope, even when those hopes have not been realized for centuries and show little sign of coming for centuries more. Hope of being seen as fully human—worthy of having food and shelter; hope of being recognized as part of God's sacred creation; hope for a government that will operate in good faith; hope for a society that might one day view the cold-blooded murder of yourself, your family, and your people as a crime.

Since the start of the pandemic, I have been looking for ways to help us cope with the many existential threats we face—the "monsters" we talked about earlier this fall. And the question I've been living with is, "How have other people done it? How did Jews hang on during the Holocaust—whether in hiding or in the death camps? How did enslaved Africans hold on for four centuries? How do people endure the worst of life's circumstances, when even the technical end of an atrocity is still not the end? When slavery just becomes Jim Crow? When the Holocaust is just one flare up of rampant antisemitism? When the breaking of treaties and genocide against Native peoples repeats in a bad-faith loop across the centuries?

His phrase, "the long thread of hope," speaks to the thing our culture does not tolerate well: The realization that anything worth hoping for takes effort, sacrifice, and almost endless patience. Such an idea is not popular among those of us with privilege in the United States. If our hopes of today aren't realized tomorrow, we readily give up, declare them false hopes, and decide on any number of mind-numbing, and ultimately destructive paths to deal with our situation—from war and violence to substance abuse and suicide, to cults and outright denial of the truths we can't bear to face.

There's a reason why, when Dante portrayed the gates of hell in the *Inferno*, the words inscribed at the entrance were, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." Hell is not just the place without hope; hell is the life we create by abandoning the substantial efforts that hope for something better demands.

Charleston's phrase, pulled from flowers watered by his ancestor's trail of tears, echoes his Christian faith as well, despite the immense damage that Christians have done to Indigenous peoples across the centuries. That echo, I think, can be found in the passage Kim read at the start of Romans 5—a New Testament passage that is the Word of God for Christians, written to the church in Rome by the Jewish Pharisee, Paul.

The Jewish Temple here in town is called Temple Shir-Tikvah, which means Song of Hope. The word *tiqvah*, is Hebrew for hope *when it is used as a noun*, and its literal meaning is a cord—a long thread or rope that you can

physically hang onto. The first time "*tiqvah*" is used in the Old Testament is in Joshua 2:18 where it describes a physical cord of scarlet thread used to help Israelite spies escape from a tall tower. So *tiqvah* is not thread that you sew or weave with. *Tiqvah* is strong enough to use to rappel down a wall. For the Israelites, hope as a noun was a strong, dependable rope that could help you escape danger.

The Hebrew word for hope *as a verb* is *yachal*, and it means to wait, to be patient. The first use of *yachal* in the Old Testament is in Genesis 8:12 where Noah must wait for the dove to return a third time. The first two times Noah sends the bird, each a week apart, Noah's waiting is described by a different word—a word that implies pain and suffering. But by the third time, three weeks in, Noah's waiting is no longer painful, although his circumstances haven't changed. Now his waiting is *yachal*, patient.

The language that shaped Jesus, Paul, and almost every character in the New Testament imagined hope as a cord, spun with threads of suffering and woven by time into a strong, dependable rope.

That's all well and good, but Paul's New Testament writings are in Greek, so when Paul wants to talk about hope in his letters, he has to translate the ancient notion of hope that's in his head into a language that didn't even exist when the Israelite spies escaped that tower with a scarlet tiqvah. There is no Greek word for hope that describes what Paul wants to say to the Roman church.

Back when Paul was on his missionary journeys, he went to Athens. Acts 17 describes it. Trying to find a point of connection with the Greek people, he finds a statue dedicated to an unknown god. Paul is quick on his feet, and proclaims that he knows the identity of their unknown god and then proceeds to tell them about Jesus. In his letter to the Roman church, I think Paul pulls the linguistic equivalent of that by choosing the Greek word *elpis* to describe hope. It's an interesting choice, given that there were at least six other Greek words Paul might have chosen.

In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman and she is given a gift of a jar from Zeus with the instruction never to open it. Sound familiar? Of course, she opens it and out pour greed, envy, hatred, pain, disease, hunger, poverty, war, and death. Horrified, Pandora scrambles to close the jar, and when she does, there is still one thing left inside. *Elpis*. Hope.

In the story, it's totally unclear whether *elpis* is one additional curse that didn't escape the jar—we'll let you have hope, but you'll be constantly disappointed—or whether it remained as a kind of consolation prize for putting up with all the suffering that was just unleashed. Greek literature often portrays *elpis* as unreliable, something both alluring and treacherous, so the fact that it remained inside Pandora's jar perhaps meant that hope, for the Greeks, was viewed as both blessing and curse. You would just never know which one at any given moment. It is, in its way, the unknown god that Paul seeks to make known.

When used in the Bible, *elpis* keeps that ambiguity. It describes a state of expectation, but whether it is translated into English as hope or as fear is dependent on the context. If the expectation is for something good, it's translated "hope;" if it's expecting something bad, it's translated as "fear." That's why Paul has to clarify in verse five that the particular kind of *elpis* he's talking about does not disappoint us because God's loving spirit has been poured into us. It's a good expectation. It's hope, which for Paul had no ambiguity at all. It was a cord strong enough to hold the weight of a grown man, and Paul needs the Roman church to understand that.

But Paul has yet another cultural hurdle to overcome. The stories of patient waiting that form the strong cord of hope for Israel are all stories of suffering. Four hundred years of slavery in Egypt before God sends Moses. An entire generation wandering in the wilderness before arriving at the Promised Land. Seventy years of painful exile in Babylon. Forty days and nights on an ark. The book of Job.

For Jewish scholars like Paul, hope's very strength is forged in suffering. The Greek philosophers didn't pay a lot of attention to hope; but when they tried to figure out what to do with the thing at the bottom of Pandora's jar, they found it in pleasure and the "good life," finding it in reason, memory, and imagination—the opposite of the evils that poured out when the jar was opened.

To be sure, when Paul and other Jewish writers talk about hope, they are hoping for all those good things that God has promised. The promised land was the land flowing with milk and honey after all. But for Jewish thinkers, those

good things were not separate from the bad, as they were for the Greeks. They hoped for streams *in* the desert, not *instead of* the desert. It was not a binary—they were not opposites. The Hebrew verb *yachal* doesn't meant to *expect* something; it's the result of having *endured* something, resulting in our ability to wait patiently as the situation unfolds. That patience then pays off with *tiqvah*: The strong cord of hope; the unshakeable trust that, if you look around closely and for long enough, God will prove to be a very present help in trouble.

Paul is writing to the church in Rome, the capital city of an empire that has just elevated Nero as emperor. Nero's cruel and infamous persecution of the church was just starting to build; which means Paul is writing to people who are beginning to suffer, something he references later in the letter. While many if not most in the Roman church were Jews, they were more culturally Greek than the Jews in Jerusalem and Syria; and that means they had almost polar opposite views of suffering. For the Greeks, you hoped to avoid suffering by living the good life of pleasure, reason, and imagination. To suffer was, in many ways, a failure. For Paul and those on the eastern bounds of the empire, you willingly—and even joyfully—endured suffering to produce hope.

With that context, it is easier to see why Paul has to spell out for the Romans how suffering connects to hope, here at the outset of chapter five. Many of those who heard Paul's letter would have thought that suffering was either a moral or a mental failure. To that Paul says, no, no—don't be ashamed of suffering, "boast" of it. Many translations use the word "rejoice" or "glory" instead of boast. Why on earth would you do that?

Paul goes on to explain: Suffering over time builds endurance, patience. And patience, which accrues over time by definition, produces character.

The Greek word for character here only appears seven times in the entire New Testament, all in Paul's writing, and it means "proven." It implies that someone or something has been tested and proven to be pure or genuine. It's not just a word about human character. The same word is used in secular Greek texts for proving the strength and purity of metals, a process that those who forged metal in both Greece and Rome well understood.

But Paul adds one more thing. It is that proven character that is the necessary precondition for hope, the thing at the bottom of the jar, only visible when all the evils of the world are let loose. Hope is the expectation that God's love stands with us, in and through all things. An expectation that for Paul is not unreliable in the least. Grabbing onto the cord of hope and holding on for dear life, will not be in vain.

Paul wants the Roman church to know that if they will bear up, they will learn to endure and cultivate patience, allowing the refiner's fire to do its work in them. On the other side, they will find that the cord holds, their hope is secure, God's love does not fail. The bush can be burned but not consumed. They can kill the body, but not the soul.

Earlier in the service we lit the candle of peace on the Advent Wreath. To do the real work of peace on earth, peace in our nation, peace in our families, or even peace in our own hearts, we need a firm grasp on the long thread of hope. To learn to hang on in the fire, to push on through the trail of tears, without regard for whether we personally live to see the fruit of our labor.

To be successful, we have to understand going in that the earthly end of the long thread of hope is tied to the Cross. We rejoice in our suffering, not because we're thrilled to be suffering or because it magically doesn't hurt; but because it will produce endurance and endurance will refine our character to the point that we are able to see at last the very strong cord, the *tiqvah*, that will bring us home, that will allow God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Most commentaries on books of the Bible contain a thematic outline of the book. Commentaries on Romans mark chapter five as the beginning of a new section that ends with the concluding verses of chapter 8. The first five verses that we read this morning act as a summary of the four chapters that follow. From faith comes the courage to embrace suffering, which produces hope. That hope does not disappoint us because we enter it with God's love flowing through us.

Is that love strong enough to carry us through the trials we face? In case we missed it in the first five verses of the section, Paul sums it up in the last five at the end of chapter eight. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, the answer is, "Yes." It is strong enough. There is no situation where the long thread of hope will not hold. There is only the question of finding the courage to reach for it, and renewing our willingness to hold on. Amen.