

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC  
10:55 a.m. Sunday, May 29, 2005

"Our Hope for Today and the Ages"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Text: Jeremiah 29:10-14    Romans 15:1-13    NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, who has loved us through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, open our hearts and minds to your message of hope. Amen.

#### GOD IS ON OUR SIDE

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their schoolwork during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. The teacher became upset at the sight of the boy. She stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever

since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale once wrote, "You know the old saying that where there is life, there is hope. But I know a better one. Just turn it around: Where there is hope, there is life. You're never defeated, you're never beaten down as long as you have hope."

God is the source of our hope. We live in an uncertain world – where sometimes a teenager murders his parents, where sometimes children are kidnapped and murdered. We live with economic uncertainty. How much will gasoline cost next week? We live with threats of terrorism and with the war in Iraq. In an uncertain world, God gives us hope.

God wants to give us a future with hope. The prophet Jeremiah is a spokesman for the Lord when he says, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) God is for us. God is on our side. The God who created our world and all that we know, the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is on our side!

Hope is one of the essential characteristics in the renewal of the church. Last Sunday we studied faith. Next Sunday we will examine love. Today we focus on hope.

I am convinced that the church can be a place where every Christian can experience the fullness of life for which Jesus died, and where every participant can find healing and transformation. That is a great hope! The church can become a place, where for every participant, relationships become the core value of life – a relationship

with God and relationships with others. The church can help the lonely find acceptance, and those without Christ experience unconditional love.

Kim McManus was eight years old when her parents abandoned her in a house in Asheville. Left without food or supervision, she and her brothers and sisters ate nothing but turnips and ketchup. Within days, an older sister found the six children unsupervised. Eventually social services intervened. Those who were old enough were left on their own. The rest of the ten brothers and sisters were dispersed among foster homes and adoption agencies. She spent her childhood as an orphan and a ward of the state of North Carolina.

The foster home in which she was placed was an open field away from a small church in the mountains. Now nine years old, Kim would walk to church every week. Her foster family never went.

Kim trusted in Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She developed a relationship with God and with others at the church. At the age of 14, she told God she would do anything and go anywhere in the world for Him. She dreamt of perhaps going to Africa as a missionary.

Many of her brothers and sisters followed the path of their parents and turned to lives of alcohol, drugs and promiscuity. Kim began to walk a different course. Defying the pattern of a family of junior high and high school dropouts, she went on to college. She earned awards for her work. Kim proceeded to receive a master's degree in theology.

Isn't that incredible?! The gospel is a message of hope. When God's love is born in our hearts, it gives us a picture of who we can become in Christ and what God can accomplish through our lives.

A world without Christ is a world without hope. A Christ-filled world is a hope-filled world. God commands us to stand in a desperate world and offer hope.

## THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS

The gospel, given to us by Jesus, is supposed to be good news. Jesus himself said, "I have not come to condemn the world, but to give the world life." (John 3:17) Jesus, the Son of God, the only one who could cast the first stone, would not accept a ministry of condemnation. That is not our ministry either.

The gospel is good news. It is a message of hope to a world full of despair. We are God's voice of hope. Those who have known nothing but condemnation and shame will find a new beginning in Jesus Christ.

Beyond being a voice of hope for the individual, the church is a place of inspiration about the future. We are to be a voice of hope because we are a people of hope. A follower of Jesus Christ has no excuse for pessimism. Remember, God is for us. God is on our side.

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a player in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind."

"Boy," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

That baseball player was hopeful! When hope permeates a church, optimism and enthusiasm prevail in the church. The church of Jesus Christ is always looking forward. It always believes in the promise of tomorrow and is never overwhelmed by the difficulty or even the failure of the present.

Viktor Frankl was a Viennese psychiatrist who was captured and imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he described the torment and violence that the Jewish prisoners experienced. This inhumane treatment was designed not only to kill them but also to cause them to despair.

Dr. Frankl discovered that there were some prisoners who had an unusual resiliency and an unexplainable ability to stand under the weight that crushed so many others. These prisoners all had something left to do in their lives. In some ways their dream and their hope allowed them to live through the nightmare.

God wants to give us hope. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "By steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4) The Bible, a record of God's faithful dealings with people for thousands of years, gives us hope. God wants to give us joy and peace through faith in him, so that we may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13) Finally, we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. (Romans 5:2) We have the assurance of eternal life. The greatest hope is the hope of living forever with God in heaven after we die.

#### HOPE EMPOWERS THE CHURCH

On my desk in my study stands a triangular card with this quote from Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, "Have great hopes and dare to go all out for them."

Faith, hope and love are more than simply poetic words. They are more than religious jargon. Faith, hope and love are the fuel that ignited the first-century church.

They are the promise that the church of Jesus Christ is unstoppable and that even the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

Erwin McManus argues that faith, hope and love are wellsprings. They supply the church with essential ingredients for its mission. The deeper the church digs these wells, the more rich and resilient they become. Faith, hope and love build in the church that which is necessary to face not only the challenges that lie ahead, but also the onslaughts of the evil one that are sure to come.

Faith, hope and love empower the church to be an unstoppable force. It is a mystery that there are some baseball teams that just can't be stopped. They will find a way to score a run on you. There are some families that just can't be stopped. Even when tragedy strikes, even when their home burns to the ground, some families will regroup and become stronger. There are some churches that just can't be stopped. There is no problem too great for them to overcome. Hope in God makes the difference.

Paul writes in Romans, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31) As long as God is for us, it doesn't matter who is against us. Put all of the negative circumstances and problems in the world on this side and God on the other side, and who will win out? God will!

When I lived in Hampstead, I came to know a man named Spero. Spero is a little older than me. Spero has type 2 epilepsy, so he lives in an assisted-living facility. Spero is a faithful Christian, and he loves to worship at church. Every Sunday someone from Hampstead United Methodist Church will pick him up and bring him to church.

Spero's father had died of heart trouble. His younger brother died of injuries

suffered from an accident at work. His sister shot herself in the head and committed suicide. His older brother basically drank himself to death one night, with five bottles of vodka.

A couple of years ago, Spero's mother died of liver cancer. I visited Spero in his room at the assisted-living facility. We both talked about the wonderful assurance of life after death because of Jesus' resurrection. I read some passages from John 14. I prayed with Spero. After the prayer, his eyes filled with tears, and he told me, "Christ is on our side."

That is the thing to remember today. We can have hope because Christ is on our side.

Today, if you need some hope in your life, I invite you to come and kneel and pray at the chancel rail as we sing our hymn of dedication. I will be praying here. If you would like me to pray with you, simply kneel beside me.

God is for us. God is on our side. God is ready to grant us hope. Come and pray as we sing.