Holding on to Hope

Lately when we look around our world it is very challenging to be filled with hope and optimism . It is an elusive emotion when we dwell on the constant repetition of negative news . The headlines are alarming with exposure to violent and fearful events in real time . Let me invite you to a place of peace and hope in our sanctuary . Let me share this brief poem by Shirley E. Murray as we begin .

Come and find the quiet center

In the crowded life we lead

Find room for hope to enter ,

Find the frame where we are freed :

Clear the chaos and the clutter ,

Clear our eyes that we may see

All things that really matter

Be at peace and simply be.

This morning I would like to reflect back on our extremely difficult year ,while looking forward with hope and faith in the future. Each of us need hope . It is essential .The bible uses the word hope over 129 times .It is vital for us as a congregation and individuals to hold on to hope .In Jeremiah 29: 11 it says , “ For I know the plans I have for you “ declares the Lord , plans to prosper you and not to harm you ,plans to give you a hope and a future “. This is a wonderful verse to claim as God’s promise to us as we adjust to a new chapter in our journey as a congregation . The word hope is often used in our everyday conversation as a synonym for wish . In my message , I am focusing on biblical hope which is very different . The definition is the confident expectation of what God has promised . Its strength is found in God’s faithfulness . We can trust in this kind of hope ,relying on God not our circumstances . I heard Pastor A.R, Benard interviewed about hope after surviving a serious bout of covid . He said people right now are looking for hope . It is an optimistic state of mind based on positive expectations . to live in hope is to live with the desire and expectation that good will always come your way and there is light at the end of the tunnel. It makes you also decide to refrain from despair and things that will have a negative impact on you . What I like most is divinely inspired hope because it gives a realistic , sense of optimism .As a Christian our faith is not blind . It’s a reasoned trust and that trust is anchored in our beliefs about the character of God …..That He is consistently good . There are times when we have to move through the dark …Whether it is the darkness of circumstances , situations or the darkness of incomplete information .. An interesting thing happens to us when we enter a dark room . Our pupils open to let in more light . It is the same thing with hope . Hope opens the mind to new creative possibilities . Hope motivates the will to take positive actions , hope empowers you with joy that leads to courage and hope helps you to heal faster . “

I wish that I had kept a diary to remind myself of the ebbs and flows of my emotions during the past year .I remember last march the shocking news of the shutdown . We were having lunch with our grandchildren at Olive Garden . Then we learned that night that Governor Lamont was closing all the restaurants for in person dining . I was deeply saddened because I treasure spending time with Maggie and Nolan .There was the overwhelming uncertainty of when would we be able to see them again . Would our family remain healthy ? It took us awhile to come to terms with the fact that we were in the high risk age group .A kind younger neighbor texted us offering to do our grocery shopping for us . I watched the covid briefings and news stories with stunned awareness and shock at the worldwide suffering as it spread killing indiscriminately .There were so many rapid changes in our daily lives . We have found unity in one area. We all hate wearing the masks . Bob and I were homebound with lots of togetherness . We watched lots comedy movies as well as Hallmark movies to keep up our spirits up and avoid the news . Finding humor daily was vital . Life became more challenging as we experienced the scavenger hunt for cleaning products , masks , hand sanitizer and the highly coveted toilet paper . One of the humorous things that happened was that my friend was shopping in Walmart in Shelton one day . She texted me urgently , “ Come now they have toilet paper “

There was so much fear and uncertainty surrounding this highly contagious unseen enemy as the infection and death numbers increased .

The darkness of 2020 expanded as we witnessed the horrific murder of George Floyd and racial tensions throughout the country . At a time when we should have been unified , there was a great political divide .It created division in families and friends with varying viewpoints .Anger , frustration and resentment reached a boiling point .There have been senseless , random acts of violence targeting innocent Asians and Jewish citizens in 2021 . I wish that I could tell you that I maintained a consistent level of hope through these long months . There were days when I experienced discouragement .The book of Psalms partially attributed to David is full of his accounts of his emotional rollercoaster from fear and terror to trust and praise in the Lord .

Psalm 42:11 in the amplified translation says :

Why are you in despair , O my soul ? And why have you become restless and disquieted within me ? Hope in God and wait expectantly for Him , for I shall yet praise Him , the help of my countenance and my God .

The Enduring Word commentary says and I quote “ the psalmist paused from his painful memory to challenge his own soul . He did not surrender to his feelings of spiritual depression and discouragement . Instead , he challenged them before God . He said to those cast down and disquieted feelings , “ Hope is in God . He will come through again , because He has before . “

I too gave myself pep talks to combat the darkness of last year .Psalm 130 : 5b says “ In His word I put my hope . “ I immersed myself in inspiring scripture , prayer and meditation . Our weekly zoom church services were a lifeline to hope and connection to our beloved Pastor Cho and church family . I rejoiced at the good news from our members and friends and grieved along with those who were in sorrow . Often I reminded myself of our many blessings . Our faith is an incredible gift as well as our health and family and friends . We have material blessings and provisions while others around the world were struggling to have minimal daily sustenance . 2020 was a reminder to not take anyone or anything for granted . On facebook , there was poignant message that tomorrow is not promised .

I feel as though maintaining hope involves staying close to the Lord while living in gratitude one day at a time . I found that God spoke messages of hope through nature to me . Think of the gardener who plants a brown plain looking bulb in the fall . It is entombed in the darkness and cold of winter without light . But miraculously a green shoot emerges in early spring gradually growing and budding with a small hint of yellow . Next it transforms into a glorious , magnificent daffodil in full bloom . Another encouraging and powerful message is found in the life cycle of the butterfly . The monarch butterfly begins it’s early life with a segmented body crawling along . Who could ever imagine that this ordinary creature could fly ? The transformation occurs after the caterpillar hangs upside down forming into a chrysalis . Then the metamorphosis process is completed after two weeks and a spectacular new creature emerges with wings and takes flight . Truly nothing is impossible with God.

There were glimpses of light that I found daily in the inspiring acts of kindness and sacrifice from people of all ages . A broadway actor , Brian Stokes Mitchell having recovered from covid wanted to pay tribute to the hospital workers . Each evening he would open his N.Y. window and sing “To dream the impossible Dream “from Man of La Mancha .The first verse says “ To dream the impossible dream , to fight the unbeatable foe , to bear with unbearable sorrow , to run where the brave dare not go “. One Sunday Andrea Bocceli sang Amazing Grace in front of the Milan Cathedral . It was broadcast throughout the world . It was a wonderful reminder of God’s presence with us. There were food drives started by children and neighbors to help combat food insecurity. Neighbors helped neighbors and our members reached out to our church family to assist and check on them . People helped make appointments for vaccination for strangers . Others provided transportation . This was God’s love in action .

A devotional that I read says “ Be blessed with rest in the God of Hope alone when your expectation is delayed . You are in the waiting room of the God of Hope , anticipating and expecting as you are learning the meaning of hope. The Hebrew words for hope and wait come from the same root word . The Hebrew words translated hope mean “ confidence , waiting , expectation , patience, trust , enduring , expectancy , something longed for . “

Be blessed with faithfulness in the face of circumstances that look nothing like hopeful . Take refuge in Him and take new courage . Be blessed as you connect with your Father in a special and deep way . Be blessed with unshakeable hope in Him , when everything else is shaken. Stand firmly on the solid rock of God’s faithfulness and timing . “

How do we acquire that biblical hope ? God is the God of Hope . There is only one source of all real hope . It is only through our relationship with Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we are infused with hope . Although we can’t acquire hope in our own strength we can grow in trust and reliance on the Lord . There three keys to having hope .

Hope depends on knowing the word of God.

Hope depends on knowing and resting on God’s grace .

Hope depends on the Spirit filled life .

In the midst of the encouraging news about the successful covid vaccine and reopening , Fairfield Grace received the sad news about Pastor Cho’s reassignment . This was an unexpected earthquake for us as a church family . Each of us has our own unique story of how he has touched our lives . He has been our good shepherd for 13 years loving and caring for us . We will miss him so much ,but he goes with our love, prayers and gratitude . A new chapter begins in july with Pastor Young Choi as part of God’s plan to give us a hope and a future .

Let each of us warmly welcome our new shepherd and his family demonstrating our love and kindness that we are known for in the community .

And Finally :

Fairfield Grace , let us hold onto hope as we wait expectantly for God’s plan to be revealed in the life of our church .