

## “Hope”

Introduction: There is a wonderful *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy and her brother Linus are having one of their priceless conversations. As she stares out the window, Lucy wonders: “Boy, look at this rain . . . what if it floods the whole world?” Linus responds: “It will never do that. In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of that promise is the rainbow.” “You’ve taken a load off my mind,” replies Lucy. To which Linus declares: “Sound theology has a way of doing that.”

We need sound theology. We need it because sound theology helps us to live rightly, it helps us to live without fear, it helps us to live with hope.

As we reflect this fall on the cry of God’s people, “Restore us, O God” (Ps. 80), we began by looking last week at faith. We said that for faith to be restored it needs to be linked with prayer and focused on care. This morning we’ll move on to our hope. What is it? Where does it come from? What secures it? How might it need to be restored? Let’s first hear our texts together.

### I. The Story that We Live In

A. If you were to sit down with a non-Christian friend over coffee and before you both emptied your cups you were to ask your friend, “So, what do you look forward to in life? Do you see any hope for the world?” I wonder what their answer would be. I wonder what your answer would be? How would you explain the hope that you have? And what difference does it make in how you live? Know that both you and your friend have a gospel story, a narrative of good news that you believe and live by. It consists of four basic parts, four essential question you each seek to answer:

1. In what do you find your identity? (Creation)
2. What is the fundamental problem, or reason things are broken in your life and in the world? (Fall)
3. To whom or what are you looking for rescue, to make things right? (Redemption)
4. What is your ultimate hope for the future? (New Creation)

B. When you boil it down, life is a story in four chapters whose main character is Jesus. It’s a story that tells us about a good world gone awry and then rescued by Jesus. It’s a story that is not yet finished as we are still awaiting the final chapter that is the return of Jesus and the completion of all that he began in his first coming.

### II. The Chapter of Hope

A. We could call this final chapter “hope,” and it is this chapter to which Paul turns when some of the members of the church in Thessalonica ask him about those who have already died. It seems that there was an expectation among some that Jesus would return before anyone died. But he hadn’t, and they did, and so what would happen to them? In response, Paul begins:

*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

“Uninformed” is a polite way of translating a word that is more like “ignorant.” The hurdle many needed to get over in Paul’s day was that death was considered the end of the line. As a pagan writer named Theocritus put it: “Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.” But Paul does not want his readers to live in such ignorance. He wants us them know the truth, for, as Jesus put it, the truth will set us free (Jn. 8:31f). And what we are set free from is the greatest fear we have – death.

B. By the way, interjects Paul, this doesn’t mean that we will not grieve. The curse of death is real. To lose a loved one is to lose a part of yourself. No matter how firm our faith may be, death can cause great emotional and psychological trauma as we adjust to living without a person who has been such a significant part of our life. Even Jesus, at the death of his friend Lazarus, wept (Jn. 11:35). And as Paul writes elsewhere, as we express our love for one another, we will rejoice with those who rejoice, and also help carry one another’s burdens by mourning with those who mourn (Ro. 12:15). But when we weep, and when we mourn, we can do so with, hope that death does not have the last word.

C. Well, as some might suggest, is this just wishful thinking? Paul says otherwise:

*For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Our hope is grounded in what Jesus has done in space and time and history. In his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated death and promises to bring with him into his new creation all who have put their trust (faith) in him. This includes those who have already died; they have not somehow missed out, Paul wants their friends and family to know.

C. To make his point, Paul gives them a picture of Jesus’ return:

*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be together with the Lord forever.*

It’s a rather strange picture, to our ears and eyes, but it’s a picture of what happened when an emperor or grand official paid a visit to a city or town.

Illustration: Last Monday Rama drove down to Cape Cod to help her mother with a doctor’s appointment, but she called me less than an hour after she’d left with the news that she was stuck in the O’Neil tunnel. Stuck? I said. She went on to explain that all traffic on the entire SE Expressway had been temporarily stopped to allow for President Biden’s motorcade to make its way from Logan airport to the JFK Library in Dorchester. Unique measures are often taken when a dignitary comes to town.

The picture Paul gives does not include rush hour traffic being stopped, but it does describe that when an emperor or grand official came to town, the leading citizens of that town would stop what they were doing and go out to meet this dignitary in the open country and then provide him and his entourage with a royal escort into their town. Importantly, to address the question of those who had already died, Paul says that they will rise first, having, one might imagine, been roused from their sleep by the loud command of the Lord and the cry of the angel, and the blasting of the trumpet of God...who could possibly sleep through that! Then, everyone would enjoy a reunion, with the Lord present in their midst.

That this meeting took place “in the air” probably refers to the dimension of heaven that was now open as it joined with the dimension of earth. Also possible is that since the air, in Greek thought, was the dwelling place of the demons, what we see is that now, even in that place, the hold evil had on the world had been broken and God had begun his victorious rule. It’s a reminder that at the end of Job, as we explored in adult SS earlier today, as Job’s reversal of fortune provides us with a foretaste of new creation, the Accuser is nowhere to be found (Job 42:7-16).

D. Thus is our hope. For those who have put their trust in Jesus, death, while real, is not permanent. There is a new creation that God is bringing about.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed this truth in a straightforward way as he spoke at the funeral of four young girls killed by a racist’s bomb in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963:

*Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith . . . be your sustaining power during these trying days.*

Dr. King can make this statement because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It’s the event that declares our faith is not futile (1 Cor. 15:17-19). It declares Jesus to be the Son of God (Ro. 1:4); it affirms that his death takes away our sin (1 Cor. 15:17); and it guarantees life with him and his followers, forever (1Thess. 4:14). And so we grieve, yes, but with hope, hope grounded in what Jesus has done and looks forward to what he will still do.

In these days that continue to be trying, may we encourage one another with these words, so that our hope may be restored, in whatever way we need it to be.