

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

7th Sunday of Easter
Year C

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Text: Psalm 42

Title: “Leading Causes of Life: Not Just Wishful Thinking—Hope”

In this worship series we’ve been exploring leading causes of life based on the observations of a couple of chaplains. They observed differences in the way in which people handle the same traumatic experiences in their lives. Some people fall apart and lose faith. Others are strengthened and find life in the midst of the experience. What’s the difference? These two chaplains concluded there are five characteristics that appear to provide life as God intends it to be: Connection, Coherence, Agency, Blessing.

Connection: When things are tough who are the important people in your life who provide a healing connection for you?

Coherence: In a way that is coherent with who you are, what would you tell someone about your experience of Jesus?

Agency: Knowing Jesus chooses you out of love for you, in what ways are you being called to be an agent of God’s love?

Blessing:

1. Through whom have you been blessed?
2. Who are you blessing by helping them live fully? In other words, in what ways are you blessed and how are you sharing that blessing.

The fifth cause of life the chaplains observed in those who found meaning, strength and purpose in the trauma they experienced is hope. Hope is a positive longing for something better. One of the driving motivators for me to become ordained was a longing for God I’ve had since I was a small child. In that longing there was hope for more of God, a yearning to be close to God, to know God and trust God more deeply.

There is a longing—a hoping for more--in all of us as human beings. It begins early and it’s not always for God. For example, in grade school it might have been thinking that if only we could be part of that group of kids or if only we were in that other teacher’s classroom instead of the one we’re in, we’d be happy and fulfilled. In high school, getting the driver’s license or

making the team or achieving membership in the honor society or dating that special someone we thought would bring fulfillment. Beyond that, getting the right job, the right education, the right home, the right spouse, the right income, the right ...something... promised fulfillment and satisfaction in life. Always something else, something more to which we look for freedom from our human condition that seems to be built on this need for something we cannot even define but we continue to strive to find it. We worry about things like money and debt and making sure our kids have all the right things we think they need to be successful. And for many of us, we find ourselves wanting more of God, yearning to grow in our spiritual lives, hoping upon hope that there is something more, something deeper than just working for stuff. So what do we do with this yearning hope that we carry within us?

The Bible is full of stories of those who experienced such longings. In Psalm 42, for example, we hear the voice of one who knew what it meant to long for God. We can hear it in the questions asked:

When can I go and meet with God?

...people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

9 I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

This is the voice of one who was missing something more, searching for something more—some “One” more. It’s the voice of someone who knows what it’s like to meet with God, to be with God, to feel secure and happy in the presence of God. This voice knows what it’s like to be in relationship with God, so much so that when it seems God is absent or missing, questions pour out: “Where is your God? Where can I go and meet with God? Why have you forgotten me?” So much so that there is some self-talk: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

I’ve repeated this story many times over the last 30 years because it’s so compelling. It’s that well-known story told by Elie Weisel of an ugly scene in a Nazi concentration camp. The inmates are all called out of their barracks to see an atrocity: a boy hung in the yard. His crime: stealing bread from the guards. It was to be a deterrent for anyone thinking of doing the same. As the crowd of inmates stood around forced to look on the boy, someone in the crowd said, “Where? Where is God?” From the back of the crowd a whisper came: “God is with the boy.”

Sometimes in our faith journey, we can be at rock bottom, along with the psalmist wondering what happened to God? Even Jesus screamed from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” There are periods in our spiritual journeys when God seems quite absent from us and we long for more. We hope....

I wonder if it isn't something like the feelings a spouse or children have when a loved one is deployed overseas whether it be for military service or for work. A deep, intimate relationship with someone is significantly changed by absence. And though there are phone calls and emails and skyping, there is still the thirst for the return of the intimacy of being together again that will not be quenched until the deployment is over and you can hold that person again, feel his or her embrace again.

The faith journey can be like that, can't it? Although we've experienced the love and grace of God's presence and the highs of knowing and experiencing God's profound eternal love, there are periods when a sense of absence creates a deep longing for something more, the something more we know and trust awaits us because we've experienced God or we know people who have and seek that same experience in our own lives.

Like that deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God!

So while there are those periods of absence and loneliness—sometimes even a sense of abandonment by God, there is that thirst within us that longs for God. We hear that not only in the voice of the psalmist using the image of a deer panting for streams of water but also in the refrain:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

The psalmist trusts that though there are those around him who taunt him with the question: "Where is your God?" And though he is troubled in his own soul, "Why are you cast down within me?", and though the voice cries out:

9 I say to God my Rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?":

in spite of all these questions and the feelings that go with them, the psalmist does not allow the feelings of the moment to dominate and squelch all hope and promise. Yes, there are low moments in his spiritual life. Yes, questions rise when life appears bleak. But it's all temporary. It's all part of a cycle of faith. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

What has your spiritual journey been like? Can you identify with the psalmist who expresses both a sense of God's absence and even abandonment and yet also a deep conviction of hope in God and promise that "I will yet praise ... God"?

The longer I live into my own spiritual journey—and listen to others on their own journeys, the more I am convinced that different people need different things at different times

on their respective spiritual journeys. Some live into hope by a deep, disciplined prayer life. Some step into hope by sowing diapers for babies they will never hold. Some live into hope by being God's hands and feet in the city of Saginaw. Others express their hope in God by joining a small group of others on the same journey. Some find hope lives and grows in them through a serious Bible study. Some reveal their hope in God's goodness through chosen occupations, occupations that heal or teach or stand up for the vulnerable or victimized. Some live their hope by doing all these things and more.

I'd like you to turn to #423 in your hymnals, if you will. These are the convictions of two saints of the church. Augustine of Hippo, one of the early church fathers wrote the first. The second comes from the heart and mind of Sundar Singh, a 20th century missionary from India. Will you read them with me?

Thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, And our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.

In comparison with this big world,
The human heart is only a small thing.
Though the world is so large,
It is utterly unable to satisfy this tiny heart.
The ever-growing soul and its capacity
Can be satisfied only in the infinite God.
As water is restless until it reaches its level,
So the soul has not peace until it rests in God.

Hope, it seems to me, is always accompanied by this restlessness installed by God within us all. As you ponder your own specific hopes in your own life, the questions for the tree of life this morning is:

1. What specific hope do you have as you think about the future?
2. How does this hope give you life?