



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

SEPTEMBER 24, 2017  
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Harvesting Hope Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Barely had the Red Sea mud on the bottom of their sandals begun to dry than new crises began to pop up for the Hebrew people as they began their wilderness wandering. First, just three days after leaving Egypt, they found water at Marah, but it was bitter. The people complained to Moses and God directed him to a certain tree. Moses threw a branch from the tree into the water and it miraculously sweetened the water and they all drank their fill (Exodus 15:22-27). Then, a few days later, they journeyed on toward Sinai and camped, but once again, they were discouraged and complained to Moses and Aaron:

The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Exodus 16:2-3

Given everything that had happened, all of the audiences with the Pharaoh, his broken promises, the plagues, the rushed escape from Egypt, and the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, it was quite an indictment of Moses and Aaron to accuse them of bringing the Hebrew people into the desert to die. Sure we were slaves back in Egypt, they said, but we were well-fed slaves! Here in this wilderness we are little more than liberated corpses. What have you done to us?! They were ready to turn around and go back to Egypt, but imagine what Pharaoh would have done had they showed up looking for a welcome home. The punishment he would have poured out on them would have made the plagues look like child's play. Still, they were ready to go back to captivity rather than perish in the wilderness if what they had known thus far was what freedom was like.

What happened? Only days before they were excited beyond words that freedom was ahead. God had finally heard their cries and sent help. In the most dramatic way they could ever have imagined, they escaped Egypt, but now, they were ready to go crawling back to Pharaoh and give up their freedom for the consolation of food and shelter. Surely to God it must have

sounded as if his people were willing to sell their birthright for a bowl of pottage once again.

The temptation is to preach this story as if the Hebrews are whining like toddlers who constantly ask, “How long before we get there?” There is an impulse to paint the Israelites as ungrateful and demanding children who pout and throw a tantrum whenever they don’t get their way.

There is, however, another inclination, and that is to see the Hebrew children as a people who have lost hope. We cannot forget that they were the last of a series of generations, stretching back four hundred years, who had suffered under the whip of the Egyptians. Today we marvel at the pyramids and even take some pride in the fact that our spiritual ancestors built them, but we cannot forget the price paid in grueling work, crippling injuries, and horrific deaths. Finally, the gate opened and they were free, but free for what? When all you have known is the strictures of captivity, how can you know what to do with freedom? And even if the oppression you suffered provided you with three square meals a day and a solid roof over your head, freedom without those necessities might not seem so free. It is not uncommon for an inmate who has been in prison for years to commit a crime soon after release in order to return to the only place he or she has known will guarantee the essentials of living.

As we all know, loss of hope can be devastating. We are always amazed to hear the stories of people who survived the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. Those survivors will tell you, however, that they knew when someone had lost hope. Their surrender showed on their faces. They stopped eating and drinking and became ill or they would intentionally lag behind and get shot. Such people become known as “the walking dead” long before the term became associated with the horror entertainment genre. Hopelessness can be deadly.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps instead of rolling our eyes at the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as they complained to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, we should look around us and within us and notice that there are other children of God in our midst who also struggle with losing hope.

We call it a number of things—“the blues,’ ‘feeling low,’ or ‘being down’ . . . sad, lonely, empty, unhappy, and dejected . . .”—but whatever we call it,

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<sup>1</sup>Aaron Kheriaty, “Dying of Despair,” *First Things* (August/September 2017): 24.

it is a form of depression.<sup>2</sup> We don't like that term because our culture has stigmatized it. We are frightened by it because we don't always know how to help someone suffering from it. We are scared of it because we know something of what it feels like and we don't like it. Nevertheless, depression in its many forms visits most of us and the people we know at one time or another.

There are many levels of depression from the "feeling blue" kind of days when we are simply out of sorts to the days when all we can do is lie in bed with the covers over our heads. Granted, with rest, the resolution of a problem, or a revamped attitude, most of us get through our down times and come out on the other side little worse for the wear. We know, however, that some forms of depression are brutal and are rightly considered mental illnesses. None of us wants to be diagnosed with such an illness, but neither do I want to be diagnosed with cancer! In fact, some people who have suffered with both illnesses have said outright that, if they could choose, they would choose cancer because the suffering from depression is so much worse and they would have support and understanding that does not come with illnesses of the mind.<sup>3</sup> We need to know that first and foremost, God does not distinguish between the kinds of illnesses that plague us. They carry no moral or punitive value. God hears our cries, whether they are the weary whispers of slaves begging to leave Pharaoh's land or the anguished prayers we offer when we can't seem to get control of our lives. If God does not place value judgments on the illnesses we develop, why should we?

Writing on this issue, Aaron Kheriaty reports that "Depression is now the most common mental health disorder in the United States." He also cites a World Health Organization report that finds that depression is a "leading cause of disability worldwide."<sup>4</sup> Severe depression often leads to withdrawal, the inability to function or a manic propensity to over-function, and a variety of health problems, including suicide. Moreover, instances of depression in all of its forms is increasing at dramatic rates. Why, in a world with so many resources and so much abundance, would anyone lose a sense of hope?

We know that in some cases, chemical imbalances in our bodies cause us mental distress, but that is not the only reason for our experience of depression. Dr. Kheriaty places the blame on an increase in social fragmentation. His research indicates that loneliness is increasing despite all

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<sup>2</sup>Andrew D. Lester, *It Hurts So Bad, Lord*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976), 9-10.

<sup>3</sup>Kheriaty, reporting on a female patient who suffered with breast cancer and severe depression, 24.

<sup>4</sup>Kheriaty, 22.

of the means we have of making connections with one another. He sees the decline of family relationships as a factor in making us vulnerable to despair since families offer us social identity and a sense of security. A reduction in civic involvement and declining participation in faith communities also foster isolation and a sense of loneliness. On the other hand, people who engage their faith and activities around it have additional resources to remain hopeful. Dr. Kheriaty writes, “We now have a sizable body of medical research which suggests that prayer, religious faith, participation in a religious community, and practices like cultivating gratitude, forgiveness, and other virtues can reduce the risk of depression, lower the risk of suicide, diminish drug abuse, and aid in recovery.”<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that people of faith are immune from such problems, but we have unique resources to combat them.

Another factor which fuels our hopelessness is the fact that we often see one another through a utilitarian lens. That is to say, we think of other people, and other people think of us, in terms of what we do rather than who we are.<sup>6</sup> In other words, we may need one another for practical reasons, but do not really want one another for personal reasons. Personal and work relationships suffer from this attitude all the time. When we are not valued for who we are but are given attention only for what we do, then our self-esteem suffers, our place in the social fabric becomes frayed, and our expectation for something better wanes. Our hope dies.

That is where the Israelites found themselves just a week or so after crossing the Red Sea to freedom. They did not know what lay ahead for them. They could not see a future beyond the next water break or meal. They expressed their anxiety in complaints over water and food, both critical needs, but their real problem was that they were losing hope.

Note what God does. From the moment they stepped foot on the muddy floor of the Sea, God was present in the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When they found water and discovered it was bitter, God directed Moses as to how he might sweeten it. When there was no food to be found, God provided quail in the evenings and manna in the mornings. God never fussed at or complained about or punished the Hebrews. God provided what they needed and surrounded them with his care. The quail and the manna were daily reminders of God’s love for his people. Twice a day, the people picked up food and, in the process, harvested hope.

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<sup>5</sup>Kheriaty, 23-25.

<sup>6</sup>Kheriaty, 25.

Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard probably seems like an odd story to tell in conjunction with the Hebrews wandering around in the desert struggling with hope. It is, in fact, one of the most frustrating parables Jesus ever told. We readily identify with the workers who showed up early, worked hard all day long, and earned their pay. When someone else is paid the same wages for a tenth of the work we did, we are understandably upset.

The Hebrew's dilemma has helped me to see this parable in a new light, however. When I see the workers who show up at the end of the day as people for whom every hour of life is a struggle, I see them differently. Perhaps they simply could not make themselves get out of bed early in the morning. Maybe when they did show up, they were too withdrawn to make the landowner even notice them. When they finally mustered enough strength to work an hour before quitting time, the owner of the vineyard might have recognized the deep lines on their faces, the gaunt look of hunger, and the vacant stare of someone who would rather be anywhere else. Perhaps it was nothing more than compassion and an understanding of what it is like to feel tossed aside by the world and short-changed by the universe. Maybe he thought it was the right thing to do to hire these people at the last hour because the harvest was bountiful and he wanted as many people as possible to share in the harvest. Maybe he just understood and cared.

The parable reminds us that even when we struggle with the simplest tasks on a given day, when we feel that we do not measure up, or when we believe we are not worthy of anything better, God thinks otherwise. God loves and cares for us. God provides for us. It is that "love that wilt not let me go" about which we sang earlier in our worship.

When there is no visible wound to heal, no surgery to fix the problem, and no tangible hurt that we can soothe, there is a temptation to minimize someone's suffering and to suggest that if they will simply buck up and be more positive, life will get better. In 1936, Charlie Chaplin wrote a piece of music for his movie *Modern Times*. He composed it in a minor key but years later, John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons changed it to a major key, wrote lyrics, and gave it the title "Smile."<sup>7</sup> It has become a popular favorite, recorded by many people. It encourages us to look on the brighter side when things are not going well.

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<sup>7</sup>Alyce McKenzie, "Smile, Though Your Heart Is Aching: Reflections on Philippians 1:21-30," *Patheos* (September 16, 2014); available online at: <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/smile-though-heart-aching-alyce-mckenzie-09-16-2014#5PG2UdBFpIXb0mSb.99>.

Smile though your heart is aching.  
Smile even though it's breaking.  
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by.  
If you smile through your fear and sorrow,  
Smile and maybe tomorrow  
You'll see the sun come shining through for you.

That is not bad advice for any of us. A positive attitude can be very helpful. We must be careful, however, that we do not negate the power of depression in someone's life. The song's second stanza may not apply to everyone:

Light up your face with gladness.  
Hide every trace of sadness.  
Although a tear may be ever so near,  
That's the time you must keep on trying.  
Smile, what's the use of crying?  
You'll find that life is still worthwhile  
If you just smile.<sup>8</sup>

For people who have lost hope, sadness is a daily visitor and gladness seems far away. Sometimes, crying is the only way to release the pain and clear the heart. Sometimes we can't "just smile." That is where true friends and a faithful God are so important.

Many of the characters in the Bible struggled with a loss of hope and perhaps with depression itself. Moses, Elijah, Job, and Jeremiah were all despondent at times. The psalms bear witness to the struggle we all have to find hope at times. Jesus himself felt the weight of the world bearing down upon him in the Garden of Gethsemane and again on the cross. The witness of scripture is that God hears our cries and responds to us.

The call of scripture is for us to do the same. Earlier, our choir affirmed that "Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal."<sup>9</sup> That is true, but God uses no magical tricks to make us immediately better. God provides help for us through the rest of us. There is help available for us all. We need good friends to stand with us in our darkest, most frustrating times. We need good counselors like the therapists at CareNet and good medical care that will realize that treatment of the body, mind, and spirit are all important. And we

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<sup>8</sup>Charlie Chaplin, "Smile," 1936; John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons, lyrics and arrangement, 1954.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Moore, "Come Ye Disconsolate," 1816.

need the faith community to affirm us when we are low as well as when we are high, to appreciate us for who we are, and to love us when we are not at all lovable. We need one another to recognize that illnesses of the mind are just like illnesses of the body and respond best to tender loving care, which is what we are best at doing. Often through each of us, heaven does heal many sorrows. When we care for one another, we sow seeds of hope that will be available for the harvest when we might need them ourselves. Amen.

September 24, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We hear that beautiful assurance that “earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot heal” and we pray it is so, O God, for it has certainly been a week when sorrow upon sorrow has afflicted the earth. We were still shocked and worried over the destruction caused by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma when Hurricanes Jose and Maria destroyed island after island in the Carribean. The earthquake in Mexico brought great destruction and all of these disasters claimed life after life. And then we cringe again when world leaders swap insults that could easily lead to a nuclear disaster. We cannot help but ask, “Can your heav’n heal these earthly sorrows?”

Barely have these thoughts leapt from our hearts when you reassure us that you can and will heal all of our woundedness. You remind us that you know our suffering firsthand and have experienced the same things we experience. And you assure us that your priority for us has and always will be life. Thank you, O God, for not leaving us to our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Thank you for helping us through every sorrow so that we might experience resilient joy.

Hear our continuing prayers for the thousands of people who are suffering right now and provide them with whatever they need. Bless the people nearer to us whose needs are just as important and whose prayers are not any less urgent. Surround us all with the grace of your kindness and lift our spirits when tug of the world pulls us down.

For all of the goodness you bring to us, we are grateful. We thank you for family and meaningful work, for secure homes and opportunities to help other people. We also thank you for friends, O God, whose friendship often means more than we ever say and whose presence is truly like a bulwark in the storms of life. Thank you for memories which will transcend life here on earth and for bonds that will endure eternity.

In the midst of all the bad news that comes our way, hold tightly to us, O God, and do not let us go. Hold us in the arms of your mercy, we pray, and wrap us in your love which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.