Adult Sunday School – Engaging God’s World: Longing and Hope

Introduction:

For the next few weeks we are going to focus on the Gospel and the Kingdom. The book that we are using is, “Engaging God’s World” by Cornelius Plantinga Jr., which blends the two together. This book gives a good analysis on engaging culture through the basic tenets of the Gospel.

This is the first chapter and the one we are discussing today is on Longing and Hope.

Longing:

One common human experience is that of longing for something. It maybe is for companionship, love, purpose, excitement, happiness or any of the other things that people want or need in their lives.

This longing or yearning has strong overtones with seeking or searching. That when you long, yearn or desire something you seek out a way to make it possible. C.S. Lewis observes that when we have this longing or searching, we are seeking union with something from which we are separated. (Plantinga pg. 4). That might be a happy time, or a lost friend, a successful business or future wife. In either case a person wants to get to or back to something.

However these longings, yearnings, and desires are not able to be fulfilled. Even if these things come to us in some form or another they do not fill all the niches of our desire. We are always left wanting something more. Nothing earthly can fully satisfy us. We can be made content for a time, but we will always want or desire something more to make us whole.

The reason for this is that our final sense of joy and fulfillment lies with God. God created us to be in a relationship with Him, and without that relationship with God we will always feel lacking. John Calvin wrote that God created us with sensus divinitatis, or a sense of the divine. Our sense for God runs through us like a stream although we divert that sense toward other things; things that of course cannot fulfill that sense and need for a relationship with God (Plantinga pg. 5).

C.S. Lewis once wrote “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

However, as Christians we come to the understanding that that thing we need, that thing we desire, that thing we were searching for is found in Christ. That relationship with God that we were always meant to have gives that sense of fulfillment and purpose that every human being is born with a desire for. Once we have that, our longing begins to work in manifesting hope in our lives.
Longing as an Ingredient of Hope:

Longing is an essential part of hope. Genuine hope always combines imagination, faith and desire (or longing). “The hopeful person imagines a good state of affairs...he believes that it is possible...and he desires the good state of affairs that he imagines and believes in.” (Plantinga pg. 8)

Often times this hope seems to exude from a justified self interest. Such as the cancer patient who wants to be healed, the prisoner who knows he’s innocent, or the impoverished person trying to find a better job. In all of these cases the person imagines, believes and desires a better situation for their well being. It is important to note that this is not a bad thing. “It’s not only natural to form good hopes for one’s own future; it’s also very healthy. To hope for your future is to affirm the life God gave you and the range of possibilities that it generates.” (Plantinga pg. 11).

We know that God cares for and provides for our individual needs. We know that in our personal situations we can always hope in God to bring about a result. However we also know that as Christians we live and hope for something more than just ourselves.

Hoping for Shalom:

Once again it’s healthy and natural to hope for ourselves, but it is spiritually detrimental and unhealthy to hope for only ourselves. A person who has been enlarged by the Holy Spirit extends the range of his or her hope to the world around them.

In Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples they began to speak in many different languages, languages that they themselves most likely did not understand. It is an indication that the vision God has for His people is larger then just individuals, it is one that is to transform this world. Peter himself states on Pentecost that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. The promise of God is “for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” (Acts 2:39). Our hope has a much larger picture than just ourselves.

This hope has been formed on the beliefs, imaginations and desires of the people of God since the beginning. This hope started near the beginning with the promise that Satan would be crushed (Gen. 3:15). It grew with God’s covenant to Abraham (Gen. 15). It was seen with the redemption of the people of God from Egypt (Exodus 12). This Hope was spoken of by all the prophets who looked forward to the salvation of mankind. It was sealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is this Hope combined with Love and the power of God that has transformed nations, healed the sick, redeemed the fallen, and mended the broken hearted. It is a hope for shalom.

Shalom is the “webbing together of God, humans, and all of creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight”. It is roughly translated as “peace”, but not just a peace of mind, or lack of war. “In the Bible, Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God’s love. Shalom, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.” (Plantinga pg. 14-15)
The Christian’s hope for shalom lies in Christ alone, our Savior, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Conclusion:

Longing is a part of our human nature. It is the ingrained sense of our need for God. That longing when combined with faith and imagination becomes hope. This hope is not just for us but for the world God is transforming, to bring about shalom, or to bring things to where they were meant to be. Our hope for this relies in Christ alone.

Engaging the world around us begins with an understanding that the world longs for and needs Christ.

Other Scriptures to Keep in Mind:

Psalm 42:1
Psalm 130:7
Amos 5:24
Acts 2:12