

DEC 8, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

December 1 sermon— “The Hope of Time”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Matthew 24:36-42, Matthew 6:31-34

This week we begin our Advent series. Often we have a series that focuses on each weekly theme of Advent. Other times we dissect the story in different ways. This year we focus on one specific theme. The theme of hope.

In this first message we focus on the hope of time. This might seem a bit strange, however the way we perceive and use time can be infused and empowered with incredible hope.

To begin, let's start with what might not seem like the most hopeful elephant in the room. No one knows how much time they have or have left. We hear this often. Certainly there are lifestyle choices, age factors, and more that can give us an idea that we might have more or less time. This is the norm. Yet there are also unexpected events, accidents, and tragedies that cut time short.

Those circumstances are so often perceived as more tragic because they seem outside the natural order of things. Still, they are a reminder that moment to moment no one knows how many more moments they are going to have.

In this is our first hope. That life is uncertain means that every moment is precious. Every moment is packed with opportunity. The way we use the moments in our lives has everything to do with how fulfilled and meaningful they will be. Each life is built one moment at a time. They stack on top of one another to create whatever and whomever we are to become. This opportunity is hope that whatever has been doesn't rule over whatever may come if we seize each moment faithfully.

Jesus talks about not worrying about tomorrow. Focus on today. James says don't get too wrapped up in planning way ahead. Even God when God introduces Godself to Moses says I Am that I am. Much has been made of this expression. I think it's fair to say that if God is I Am, God is the God of the present. Perhaps more importantly than past or future, though God is present in all. The past can't be undone. The future is yet to be written. It is what happens in the present moment that builds on the past to create whatever future we are seeking to create.

Each moment has the power to be a new start, a new idea, a transformation, an amends. In this there is tremendous hope.

So is that it? We live for the moment without thought for the future? Certainly not.

Jesus also said to count the cost. Think ahead to make sure a decision made now can be brought to completion. Throughout scripture people stored up for famine to survive. This is at the heart of the story of Joseph in Egypt. The wise man built his house on the rock, why? Because he was thinking ahead to the storms that might come and wanted his house to stand.

For most of us life stretches on beyond the moment. That we will likely have a tomorrow is a wonderful hope. It means we moment to moment build the best we can, in the hope that someone might carry one what we have begun.

This was the disciples and apostles as they formed communities of faith. The hope was that they would continue to carry out the gospel commands and spread the Word of Jesus long after they were gone. This is the hope of our congregation and why in this time of transition and transformation we are called to give a strong push in ministry to seize every opportunity to further the ministry of this congregation. Past generations have built what we have been given and it is up to us to see that it continues long after all of us are gone. The hope that what we build today will endure tomorrow.

That life carries on brings us into the hope of Ecclesiastes. This famous passage is all about seasons. There is a time for many different things. That there are seasons is hope in and of itself. If we are in a hard, uncomfortable, even tragic season take hope. This season will end and the hope is that a better one will follow it. If the season is wonderful and grand, there is hope not only in the goodness of the season at hand. The goodness we store up as treasures in our hearts, and that we wisely secure looking down the road is hope that sustains us in those harder seasons. It is a reminder of the

wisdom, inspiration, and guidance of God that walks with us no matter what season we are in.

Each season carries with it the hope of its own uniqueness that propels us to the next. Every life has cycles and phases. If we are wise each one teaches us to make the next one wiser and better.

I tell my Tae Kwon Do students when sometimes they get impatient that it's important to enjoy the rank they have while they have it. They will only be a rank once and for a season. Milk it for all it's worth with the hope of what is coming in the next rank, the next season.

A final hope in time will eventually bring us full circle to our first point.

This hope is the hope in God's infinite patience. We see this evidenced that the world is still spinning round. Jesus' second coming has been predicted over and over again. It's been wrong every time. Scripture even tells us no one knows. That hasn't stopped folks from guessing and doing all kinds of ridiculous analyzing of their own contemporary time to crack some apocalyptic coded to convince people that they are correct.

If history is predictor, God's patience with us could endure for centuries on centuries. I, for one, am fine with that.

It confuses me when I hear people asking Jesus to "come soon". That doesn't register to me as reflecting the love of Christ. If I am asking this and get my wish, sure things will draw to a close and hopefully I'll make heaven my home. What about all those millions and millions of souls that might have come to faith later and now are gone?

Typically this wish comes hand in hand with a severe theology of damnation and a stringent view of the specifics required for salvation. If that's my sensibility I am wishing for the condemnation of everyone who doesn't agree with my theology and cheating them out of a chance to discover Christ.

In conversation this past week the suggestion came that a reason for asking for a quick return is to end suffering. Again, if I hold to the severe and stringent theology my argument fails. Sure, suffering in this world will end, but for how many will the suffering then get much worse?

I'm personally all about God continuing to wait. Continuing to hold off to give this creation opportunity to meet and reconcile to God. When scripture tells us the God wishes that "none should perish", let's give all as much opportunity to find God as possible. And let us be all the more passionate about living out the love and grace of God so that they can see it. And pray that if they experience it they will desire it and perhaps we will have the privilege of guiding them home.

This patience of God means we don't serve a God of second chances. We serve a God of infinite chances. In all of this there is hope. Hope that God wants us enough to give us as much time as we can get to be found.

I said this will bring us full circle. That we have as many chances as we have moments in our lives sends us back to the hope of the moment. Every moment is a chance to draw nearer to God. For some to find God and meet Christ. For some to make a better choice for a better life. For some to make a choice that may even save a life.

Every moment is bursting with hope and opportunity.

Be thankful for the patience of God that gives us the hope of time stretched out longer than we might have expected. Seize the hope of the moment and use each one to its utmost, honoring God with whatever we do. Take the hope of the moment to embrace the hope of a future that if we seize the opportunities will build a legacy of God's love and grace that will outlive us to generation on generation.

Time is not our enemy. If we live it in Christ and use it wisely it is a wonderful ally.

BIBLE STUDY

1 Samuel 31 ends the book of 1 Samuel in a predictable yet unfortunate fashion. Samuel had predicted Saul's pending demise and as he goes off to fight the Philistines it certainly comes to pass. Saul's unfaithfulness, madness, and intemperate disposition has led Israel in many ways right back where they were before he was ushered in as king.

The Philistines were a defeating thorn in their side. Israel was failing to seek or find God's

direction. And there was no king in Israel.

As the battle wears on his sons are killed and he himself is mortally wounded. Rather than suffer whatever painful indignities would occur if he were captured alive Saul asks to be killed by his armor bearer. Perhaps taking his cues from David, the armor bearer refuses to “stretch out his hand against the Lord’s anointed.” Saul takes matters into his own hands and ends his own life.

This brings up the delicate question of suicide. In our discussion we talked at length about this subject and I hope that sharing some of it here will be helpful.

There are several suicides in scripture. None of them have any judgment rendered about the act. There is nothing affirming it, nor is there anything condemning it. How people choose to process it runs a gamut of opinions.

Some believe it is unforgivable as it is something that can’t be repented. Some see it as a final act of murder, that being self-murder. Some see it as taking control of what God and God alone should control. It is God’s place to take or preserve a life.

Some see it as an act of desperation that is covered by the radical grace of God. Others see it as not being in one’s own right mind because to do such isn’t a natural or lucid thing to do. Some see it, perhaps as in the case of Saul, as mercy to end suffering.

Those who automatically see someone who dies by suicide as condemned do an injustice to the person who has passed, to the surviving loved ones, and to the radical potential of God’s grace. We don’t know the final outcome. In truth even the people we see as the most sainted of us we can’t pronounce any final outcome with certainty. God is the final judge and always will be.

When suicide confronts us, faithfulness demands several things. We must take in what led to the suicide so that we can learn for the future. We must allow our hearts to be moved with compassion for what kind of pain the one who has passed must have been enduring to make such a choice. We must be delicate, kind, and gracious to the loved ones surviving. Their grief and even guilt is often deeper than we can possibly imagine. Adding to it only harms, and never helps.

Above all we must be careful not to judge, especially judge harshly. For those that remain it is our responsibility to draw them close to God in these moments.

After Saul’s body and his sons’ are discovered the enemy indeed defiles them. They are decapitated, stripped, and put on display for all to see. This is barbaric, yet not terribly out of character for that time and place. Remember, David took Goliath’s head and sword as trophies. The sword ended up in the care of the priests. The head we were told ended up in Jerusalem ultimately. As grotesque as all of this sounds to us, it may have simply been the way of the world to them.

Yet even in Saul’s defeat and death, and despite his decline into madness and being rejected by God, in the end kindness is shown to him.

Earlier on Saul had protected and delivered the people of Jabesh Gilead. When they heard of Saul’s death and the disrespect shown to him, some of their men went to where the bodies were on display, took them down, and gave them a burial. There was a time of mourning.

In this we are reminded that no matter how many problems someone has created, they are not all bad. No life passes without some good being done. The people of Jabesh Gilead hung on to their gratitude and in that gratitude gave a more fitting burial to the first King of Israel.

We do well to listen to their example. Remember the bright spots in the life of even the most difficult of individuals. In those memories we find the grace to forgive, and even the humility to honor the good in them regardless of the bad.

Saul is now dead, but David is not yet king. We’ll see how this unfolds when we turn to 2 Samuel!

BIBLE STUDY

The book of 2 Samuel is an unintended division. The original work was one continuous story of both 1 and 2 Samuel without interruption. It wasn’t until the book was translated into Greek and Latin that the division took place. The natural spot to do so was at the death of Saul. Though it would be a mistake to assume that 1 Samuel was all about Saul and 2 Samuel about David. David has been a prime

player since midway through 1 Samuel.

Here David hears about the death of Saul. It is important to recognize that as the story unfolds at this point we have information that David does not. We know that Saul has died by his own hand. David has been fighting the Amalekites while Saul was battling the Philistines. David has just finished his own war and doesn't know what has happened in Saul's.

Coming to the camp what we essentially see is a lesson in bad judgment and not being able to read a room.

This Amalekite(keep in mind David has just finished fighting Amalekites) comes to David with a story about Saul's demise. It is very fair to assume that this man is a scavenger. When there were battles it was not uncommon for people to come along after the fact and steal valuables from the fallen on the field. This really is the only way to reconcile Saul's beheading and being stripped of his armor and hung on a wall with this man having the crown and royal arm band.

He must have come across Saul's body between his death and the desecrating of the body.

Why would he make up this story about killing Saul as an act of mercy? Perhaps he is trying to dance a line. In killing Saul he might be hoping to win David's favor for slaying his nemesis. Framing it as mercy likely would be attempting to temper his "action" as not being malicious. He killed the king but not out of aggression.

What would his reaction have been to David's reaction? Rather than a cheering glee, David is broke with grief and orders his men to join him in mourning. This isn't the reaction that was likely anticipated. How will David respond the Saul's "murderer" in the throws of this grief?

Clearly this man was not familiar with David's fierce regard for the office of God's anointed. Twice David had the chance to dispatch Saul and twice he refused to do so out of regard for Saul's position. This Amalekite had no such regard. He thought that David might applaud him for killing Saul. Instead David's heart was torn and the reward was a death sentence.

David's pronunciation of the Amalekite's self-confessed guilt belies another motive beyond grief. David has gone to great lengths to make sure he didn't kill Saul. As the anointed heir to the throne to ascend by assassinating the sitting king would set a dangerous precedent for the future. Here, the guilt is confessed and publicly lies squarely on shoulders not David's. He is free from blame as he moves forward.

Then comes the lament. The story shifts from reading like a historical narrative to a Psalm like read. We are told it was recorded in the book of Jashar. This is one of those hints that the narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel were written well after the actual events. The book of Jashar has this lament written and recorded later, but the writer inserts it here. This isn't problematic as what better place to insert it? David is heart broken and what he recorded reflects his mental and emotional state.

I love that there is nothing negative written about Saul. David's words are glowing and appreciative. For whatever Saul was and was not, David doesn't take the opportunity to run him down. He extols this first king of Israel.

Isn't this the way we remember so many of those who pass away? When they are gone we remember and share the best of who they were. Their faults aren't worth listing and airing. So many are remembered far more fondly in death than they were regarded in life. I can't say I believe this is a bad thing. It reflects grace and forgiveness in the hearts of those who remain. And isn't that at the core of who we are as believers in Christ?

Towards the end David waxes much more personal as he uplifts Jonathan. There is a note worth making here as he says Jonathan's love was "better than the love of women". This isn't a romantic sentiment. Rather it is an unfortunate commentary on the role of women in the ancient world.

Women were property. A man "purchased" with a bride price a woman from her father. It was a legal exchange between two men. While I'm not saying love was fully excluded from the process, the baseline reality is that the woman's feelings didn't come into the equation. She went from being the father's property to the husband's.

On the other hand, a relationship between two men was equally consensual. There was no obligation to be loyal or faithful. So in regards to this lament, it makes sense. Jonathan's love and loyalty wasn't purchased, it was freely given. Thus David's greater grief.

We see in this chapter a wonderful example of grace towards an enemy. We also see the foolhardiness of a dishonest charade in the hopes of selfish gain. In both there is an example of what it means to follow God faithfully. Have a gracious heart. Have an honest tongue. In the end these two things flesh out the greatest will and design of God.