

JULY 6, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON 'Shining a Light: Fear' 1 John 4:13-21, Isaiah 41:8-10, Matthew 10:26-31

Last week we began recognizing that the stories of today that entertain us so often have themes that are very directly correlated to what we understand from our scriptures. Conflicts of good and evil, heroes, and villains, life after death, and struggles with temptation are common in our modern myths, and likely have ties to a long and rich culture that has Christianity in its history.

We used that to launch into this series that is based on the mythology of the Green Lantern, where each color of the light spectrum is a power connected to an aspect of human character or experience.

The green is the color of willpower, and we looked into that last week.

This week we go to the color blue. In the mythology this power is the power of hope. Hope is one of the central themes of Christianity. Most significantly we talk about the hope we have in Christ. But what is this hope? We'll get to that soon enough.

The interesting things about this blue power of hope is that it's not enormously as effective on its own. It is one of the few colors in the stories that acts this way. But the power of hope also has an added bonus that none of the others have. It is the way it interacts with the power of green, the power of will.

The blue energy amps up the green. In other words, hope makes the will stronger. The two added together are far more powerful than they are alone.

This very much resonates with what we see in our faith, scripture, and life. Hope is wonderful, but without the will to act on it is little more than a dream. Will subjected to harsh resistance can collapse. Having a hope greater than ourselves can resolve our will, giving us reserves of strength to do more and act with far greater conviction and confidence than otherwise.

A reality check about hope is that the notion it is only about something not yet seen or realized isn't entirely accurate. In fact, hope grows as experience bolsters it.

Think about it in terms of baseball.

When a team is down, and a solid slugger or consistent hitter is at the plate, hope is alive. It might even soar. The average batter or batter who is struggling doesn't inspire this. If hope were only about the unknown and a desire, it would exist in spades every time someone stepped into the batter's box. Because everyone has the possibility of a solid hit when they step to the plate, right?

The hope is different and far greater for the proven hitter. Why? Because experience has shown that they have a better chance of scoring a hit, or even sending the ball out of the park. This track record inspires the rest of the team to dare to hope that the odds might change with a single pitch.

It's hoping for what hasn't happened yet, but that hope is more and more solid and powerful based on the past performance of the person holding the bat.

The same is true with our faith.

Romans and Peter talk about things we don't see. Yet we have the hope of something greater. The passage in Peter is commonly read at gravesides. We hope for something more on the other side of death. We trust that reward is waiting for us when our faith is in Christ. We can't see it but we believe it is there. This is the essence of why when "we suffer trials to test the genuineness of our faith" hope inspires us to meet those trials with the conviction to follow Christ through them.

What is interesting about the hope of what comes later is that the evidence of it is only faith and faith alone. None of us here today can say that we know for certain what lies on the other side of the grave. We haven't been there. Thus we take it on faith. This doesn't diminish the power of the hope. But it's a different hope than the one we'll see in a moment.

Before we do, however, I want us to consider something that is of utmost importance. The hope of heaven that we have is very frequently different in tone than the hope of those first century Jews and then Christians.

The Jews had been stepped on for century on century. They had been exiled, scattered, and in their home country of Judea subjected then to the governing of Rome. That governance wasn't terribly friendly. This is evidenced by the rebellions that took place and were then squashed by the empire. Those first Christians then had the double whammy of that history and reality compounded by their own people, the Jews, seeing them as blasphemers and heretics.

In many ways it would have felt like the whole world was turned against them. The justice of God didn't seem

to register in this world. The hope that justice would be realized in the next life would have been an incredibly powerful and present hope for them. When the realities of daily life would come at them and concerns arise simply because of their faith, this hope would be the anchor to keep them daily focused on Christ and living into their faith in Him.

Most Christians that we know in America have absolutely no idea what this kind of existence is like. We live with relative ease, and certainly our faith isn't something we need to be concerned will get us into trouble. If we're honest, the only issue non Christians have with Christians isn't our faith. It's those who claim the faith and don't live into it in a Christlike manner.

The point is that while we may claim the hope of heaven when this life ends, the life we have for most isn't all that terrible. In fact it's often downright comfortable. It's not perfect, but most of us don't need to worry about being jailed, killed, or otherwise because we believe in Jesus.

Perhaps this is where the disconnect comes for some. It's one thing when the hope we have is the only thing to keep us focused on living a genuine faith as tied to Jesus as possible. It's another when we can rely on a decent salary, a fair retirement plan, good insurance, and so on in combination with an ease of worship. Suddenly hope day to day is taken for granted in the worldly benefits we possess.

When this is the case injustice can become less about actual injustice and more about anything that threatens to disrupt our comfort and control. This is a recipe to lead us away from Christ and the hope we have in Him rather than towards it.

The point being that when things are comfortable and relatively easy it takes great intention to not just proclaim the eternal hope we claim. We have to be present and vigilant to keep our true hope in God and not be wrapped up in the worldly trappings that provide that comfort and ease in this life.

So what other hope do we have? What is the hope that is more than a promise of something we can't see? What hope do we have that is like the proven slugger walking up to the plate when the team is down?

Romans talks about creation itself groaning, and hoping for relief to arrive:

19 For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that[h] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

The world didn't decide to mess itself up. We, humans, did. Paul refers to a creation waiting to be freed from the condition imposed upon it. Interestingly the hope of creation to be freed rests in the same ones that messed it up. It rests in people, but people who are made alive to God.

This is where we see track records that bolster hope. We see it in those faithful people who have taken a stand and made a difference. Those who stand up for people victimized by the ungodly attitudes that dismiss folks in need, or push them aside because they look or think differently. It's in those people who have made a point to care for the needy, the hungry. It's in those who take the time to know others that don't fit a prescribed mold, show them the love of Christ, and have invited them into a relationship with God through Him.

We have seen success after success through history. Our own United Methodist history and roots have incident after incident of changing communities and lives through education, medicine, and relief work that are inspired and driven by our faith in Jesus.

The world will always fall short of the perfection of God's Kingdom. That's unfortunate. What that means is there will always be opportunities for us to exercise our spiritual muscles to do our part to bring Christ to bear in it. In this we participate in hope upon hope if we allow ourselves.

We have the examples of the past that have shown us that truly living for Christ impacts our world. It has the tremendous power to change things for the better. It has the power to change lives that change families and communities, including our own. That hope drives us on to live into conviction rooted in the example of the Biblical Christ.

In living into this, we live into the hope that we have in His sacrifice and redemption. That hope is secure not because we say it is. It is secure because our very lives reflect the grace that Jesus Himself calls us to become as evidence that we are in Him.

You have heard me share the following before. Living into the hope demonstrated by the believers of the past and promised in the life to come is what will cause others to hear what I heard at my grandfather's celebration of life. "That man didn't just know the Bible, he lived it."

May we all live lives that earn that kind of praise lifted in this world and rewarded in the next.