

Lake Shore Baptist Church
Sermon January 19, 2010

Charlie Fuller

Title: *What Does Hope Look Like?*

Text: Psalm 40:1-11

This morning's text bears the truths that we claim as a church of Jesus Christ. It proclaims in beautiful poetry the rich and wonderful qualities of God. I can almost hear the Psalmist singing of God's mercy, righteousness, love, and faithfulness. The poet singing to himself, to the community, to the world at large of *their* God, *the one and only* God, the only God worthy of their praise.

But the song begins with a different tone. The Psalmist is singing about patiently waiting on God to answer his cries for help. We hear about muck and mire and slimy pits. The Psalmist is singing about pain and loss, emptiness and hurt. When the Psalmist sings about patience it seems almost as if there's no other choice.

Haven't most all of us experienced that? A form of forced patience?

Many of you know the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. It's a prison movie. It's been out for twenty-six years, so I'm not going to be too concerned about spoilers. The main character, Andy Dufresne, has been convicted and sentenced to life in prison for murder. His friend, Red, is also serving a life sentence. We know Red is guilty. Andy, we're not so sure. After many years in prison, Andy and Red become best friends.

At one point Andy locks himself in the prison office and plays an opera duet through the prison loudspeakers. After spending two weeks in solitary confinement as punishment, Andy and Red have this exchange:

Andy Dufresne: That's the beauty of music. They can't get that from you... Haven't you ever felt that way about music?

Red: I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense in here.

Andy Dufresne: Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget.

Red: Forget?

Andy Dufresne: Forget that... there are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside... that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours.

Red: What're you talking about?

Andy Dufresne: Hope.

Red: Hope. Let me tell you something my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside. You better get used to that idea.

People have always struggled with the question of hope. Here's an example: The Heidelberg Catechism is a Protestant confessional document from 1563. It actually *begins* with *this* question and answer:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul,
in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Not a bad answer. Actually a pretty wonderful answer. We are not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

And yet we still struggle.

One of the things I absolutely love about being a minister is hearing your stories. I truly believe that it's a holy privilege for someone to share their story with me no matter how deeply they wish to go. I know that I'm never the same after I've heard your story. Your story is now a part of my story and I'm grateful beyond words.

I know that Vernon Davis told you our story when you were deciding to call Cindy and me to come and share life together. And while I'm sure Vernon did a good job, I'd like to share a part of that story myself. It just seems only right that even as you share your stories with me that I share mine with you.

Please know that I share our story not because it's unique or special in some way, because it's really not. Your stories are just as important and instructive as mine. I tell it only to take the risk that it might be helpful to you in some way. Loss comes to all of us sooner or later and one of the ways we cope is drawing on each other's stories. I believe that was what the Psalmist meant when he says,

“he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand,”

The Psalmist may very well have been talking about community, a community whose stories weave in and out of each other in supportive acts of love. Isn't that so often true? That our community becomes our refuge, our place of safety, our rock?

On June 1, 1999 Cindy and I were returning from a choir tour to Germany with about 25 people from Ouachita Baptist University. We were in charge of the group and also had our three daughters on the trip. I was the conductor of the Ouachita Singers, one of our university's choral groups and Cindy was our accompanist. Our oldest daughter, Becky, and our middle daughter, Rachel, actually played flute and oboe on one of the selections in our concerts.

We arrived at DFW Airport in the late afternoon and cleared customs. As everyone in this room will understand, it was one of those typical late spring days when lines of thunderstorms were making their way across the Southwest. We were delayed at DFW due to the weather, but finally left at 11 that night.

Our arrival in Little Rock coincided with the arrival of a severe thunderstorm with torrential rain, hail, and 80 mph winds. The pilots were unable to stop the plane and we went off the end of the runway. The plane collided with runway landing lights, split in two, and broke into flames.

There were 135 people on board that night. Eleven died either at the scene or later at area hospitals. Our Rachel was the last to die after two weeks in the burn unit at Arkansas Children's Hospital. The rest of *our* family's injuries were emotional and spiritual.

Where was hope during those days? It's a great question. Hope was **not** found in the platitudes that sometimes came our way.

Words like "God has a plan" and "God is in control" were *just not helpful*. I was unwilling to think that God's plan included the incompetence of an airline and their crew. Words like "God needed another angel" were belittling of both God and Rachel.

Cindy and I questioned many things during those days and the days following.

And we continued to ask ourselves a few specific questions.

We asked, "how do people deal with loss without community?" During the days, weeks, and months after the crash I read the newspaper in a new way. I saw the news of so many people dealing with loss. Car wrecks, homicide, terminal illness. I realized that many if not most of these people were facing loss without any kind of support from others. Without an empathetic and loving community to care for them. Cindy and I had multiple groups that seemed to know just when to lean in and just when to give us the space we needed.

We asked, "how do people deal with loss without faith?" I still simply can't imagine how people cope with the loss of those they love without the hope we claim of resurrection. I acknowledge that heaven is something that requires honest struggle, but as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I also must proclaim that there is a resurrection and Jesus the Christ has led the way. Our hope in a resurrection to come is central to finding hope for this mortal journey.

Cindy and I wondered why we were spared when others were not? After twenty years I still work to try to figure out what that means as I try to live a faithful life day after day after day. Some days I succeed. Some days I fail.

Probably the most difficult thing I eventually learned was that I was actually stronger because of the experience. God used all that happened to change me and I would never be the same. It was an excruciating discovery because the cost was so very high. I could never deserve something that cost the life of my precious daughter and the others who died. But I didn't get that choice.

By far the most important part of my experience during and after the plane crash was this: I never once felt that God was not present. Before we got out of the plane, as we

were making our way through the exits, as we were gathering in the wind and rain trying to find shelter, as we made our way out of the crash site, for two weeks at the hospital with Rachel, and then in the terrible days of grief that followed – I never felt that God was not there with me. God crying God’s own tears as I cried mine. God hurting just as I was hurting. And I might even say, it sometimes felt like God was asking the same questions that I was asking, that God was as frustrated as I was about what had happened.

My experience wasn’t all sunny days and peaches and cream. I’m not going to blow smoke at you this morning. The lights dimmed for me often during those days. Despair often sat down beside me and tormented me. But somehow, in the dark, I always sensed that God was there, too. And that God would still be there when despair had gotten bored and walked away. And twenty years later, that’s still true.

God has never promised us perfect lives, lives free from pain and struggle. But God has promised to be present, to be with us until the end of the age.

One of the things that has struck me in just the short time we’ve shared life together is the amount of loss in this community. Cancer. Dementia. Stroke. Death. Loss.

And *every single* one of these stories of loss told to me included a chapter about how the Lake Shore community rallied to help. In these stories I heard over and over and over again how people in loss and grief were surrounded by the people of God who call themselves Lake Shore. This community has been the rock sent from God and described by the Psalmist.

There are a myriad of ways to engage hope. Shawsank’s Andy and Red had their ways. We all have our own. Sometimes we find it in the stories of others. Sometimes we find it in deepening relationships with those around us. Sometimes we find it by working to release ourselves and others from unreasonable expectations. Some find it in friends. Some find it in coaches, counselors, or therapists. Sometimes we find hope in doubling down on spiritual disciplines. Sometimes we need *all of the above*.

Wherever we access hope, *however* we access hope, we must acknowledge that hope comes from God. Hope is God’s gift to us. Hope comes from the one who is joyful when we’re joyful and hurts when we hurt. A Creator who walks beside us in both the brightest and darkest moments of our lives. The one who is present even when we just don’t know how or why.

Here’s what I *can* say to your loss and sadness: Whether your loss is big or small. Though you may be disappointed, shattered, hurting, and empty beyond words God hurts along with you.

How do we know this? It’s because of the incarnation. What we celebrated last month. God putting on human skin. Immanuel means literally, “God with us.”

Because our Creator became one of us, we know that God knows what it means to hurt. And because we believe God is present with us, we know that God hurts as we hurt, even as God jumps for joy when we're glad. In our joy and in our pain, God walks alongside us.

And because God walks our journeys with us, we know that God is on the side of the downtrodden, the powerless, the marginalized, those who are empty of heart.

God knows what it means to hurt, what it means to be empty, what it means to lose hope. That is the Gospel. Our experience is God's experience, too, because God loves us so very much.

We find the evidence on a wooden cross and an empty tomb.

To know *that* God, to praise *that* God in both our joy and in our pain, our thriving and our suffering, our fullness and our emptiness is to experience the honest hope of joy that we will someday have forever.

We find our hope in the God who joins us on the journey, who sings along with us the songs of joy and the songs of lament. Whose very presence empowers us to engage our callings for another day.

Our hope is ultimately in the one who walks before us to light our path, who walks beneath us to catch us when we fall, who walks behind us to keep us moving on the journey, who walks above us to shelter us with God's wings, who walks beside us to experience all we experience, and walks within us, to remind us constantly of whose we are.

Back at Shawshank, after Red is finally granted parole, he finds a letter left for him by Andy. Here's what Andy says to Red:

Andy Dufresne: I could use a good man to help me get my project on wheels. I'll keep an eye out for you and the chessboard ready. Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies."

Indeed, my friends, hope may sometimes be hidden, but hope never dies.

Thanks be to God! Amen.