

A Future with Hope

St Marys Presbyterian Church

Oct. 15, 2023

On Saturday, September 23rd, we cycled about 30 kilometers from Woodstock to Ingersoll and back on a beautiful autumn day. My wife Laurie and I were part of the *Woodstock Wonders* group and together we raised almost \$2300 for the food security programs of PWS&D with partners in various parts of the world. (World Food Day: Oct. 16)

This event is called *The Journey for Hope* and it takes place each fall with Canadian Presbyterians and others from across the country taking part in support of the vital work of PWS&D.

Our hurting world can sure use a message of hope at this time. And I think this congregation may also benefit from hearing a word of hope during a pulpit vacancy.

Hear again the word of God proclaimed by Jeremiah the prophet in a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon:

The Lord says: For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
(Jeremiah 29:11)

The exiled people of Israel were defeated, displaced, disoriented, even downtrodden. Their distress grew into despair as they endured a crisis of identity.

The forced separation of the people from the land provoked an identity crisis and lies behind the tortured question posed by the Psalmist:

“How do we sing the Lord’s song in this strange land?”

Nevertheless, God provided for them, first with a word of encouragement and then a promise of return and restoration that was to be fulfilled in God’s good time.

I believe God is calling us to abound in hope in these difficult and demanding days.

We hear of the perils and possibilities of artificial intelligence (A.I.) and we wonder about the future.

The cruel and unjust Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused senseless suffering, destruction, dislocation and death in that country and has sent geo-political and economic shock waves around the world.

Now there is the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas.

And season by season and year by year we experience the devastating effects of the climate crisis.

And I haven't even mentioned the global pandemic, until now.

Yet the Bible speaks to us of hope - a living hope that confounds the cynics and inspires people like you and me in our congregations and communities.

Friends in Christ, the Christian gospel is, in the words of one writer, "a challenge to complacency, an antidote to despair; a stirring call to follow God boldly into the future."

What does it mean to be the hope-filled disciples of Jesus Christ in 2023? What is God calling us to say and do?

We're faced with some tough choices. We may choose to face the future with fear and foreboding. We may stumble and stagger toward the year 2024 kicking and screaming all the way.

We may be tempted to think that a quick fix will set things right. Remember, Jeremiah warned the Jewish exiles that they would have to endure the duration of the exile.

Yet God's word through the prophet was and is a word of hope – about a future with hope, not just any future, but a future with the living God.

A certain sage remarked: "We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future."

We are called to claim and proclaim the resurrection hope for a God-given future. After all, we're God's Easter people.

We're here on Sunday morning because God calls us to worship and to celebrate the living hope that is rooted in Christ's resurrection.

A Sunday School teacher had just finished telling her third graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing off the only way in or out.

Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, and the surprise of Easter morning, she asked: "And what do you think were Jesus' first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive?"

A hand shot up into the air from the rear of the classroom. It belonged to a most excited little girl. Leaping out of her chair she shouted excitedly, "I know, I know, I know!"

"Good," said the teacher. "Tell us."

*Extending her arms high in the air she sang out: "**Ta-Da!**"*

The hope that sustains me is not based on election results, on the performance of the TSX, on the success of the Jays or the Leafs, not even vocational fulfillment, but the faithfulness of the living God, the God of hope.

Last year I retired as the Minister of Chalmers PC, in southeast London. The vision statement of Chalmers concludes with the words, "bringing hope to life's journey."

The HOPE that that was born at Christmas and who rose at Easter empowers us for lives of faithful worship and ministry.

According to theologian Doug Meeks,

"the household of Jesus Christ begins with dancing the Easter dance, the dance of life over against death."

Signs of Hope

I invite you to look for signs of hope all around you, in the church and in the world.

The church in Canada is facing all kinds of challenges these days. Some congregations are struggling and others are seeking to amalgamate as worship attendance, membership numbers and givings decline.

Others are seeking to renew their worship and ministry with creative and faithful ways to participate in God's mission. I believe God promises us a hope-filled future.

Let's look for and celebrate the signs of hope that God is giving us in these times of great challenge and change.

I am currently the co-convener of the PWS&D Committee, serving with the Rev. Theresa McDonald-Lee. The full committee will be meeting near the end of this month in Regina and I will be leading worship and speaking about the work of PWS&D on Sunday, October 29th, at Knox PC in Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

The support for sponsoring of refugees is a key part of the ongoing work of PWS&D.

PWS&D notes

The church's work in refugee sponsorship is one such sign of hope.

Three years ago I was able to participate in a PWS&D partner visit to Malawi, Africa. (This visit took place just before the declaration of the global pandemic.) This was a powerful and uplifting experience for me.

Another partner visit to Malawi was planned for two other members of the committee in March but it was postponed due to cyclone Freddy which did great damage in southern Malawi.

And this was the third devastating cyclone in the past 4 years, further evidence of the deleterious impact of climate change.

Malawians are wondering how much more they can handle and if this is their new normal. Yet the people of Malawi are responding with hope and resilience, with support from their mission partners.

I see this type of compassionate response, and our partnership in mission as a sign of hope in the world God loves so much.

And so we have hope, and as the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5, "... hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Heralds of Hope

We're an Easter people called to participate in God's mission in the world.

As author Tom Sine wrote,

"We are the ones who should teach the world to sing and dance and praise God. We should live as though Jesus has risen from the dead! We should be joy, hope and celebration to a world that has lost hope."

God is calling us to be heralds of hope in a hurting world.

We are called to account for the hope that is within us. With our heads, hearts and hands we're to share the good news of God's unconditional love for us and all of creation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- So make that phone call you've been considering,
- drop by your neighbour's house with a casserole to help them get through a tough time,
- extend a hand of welcome and friendship to a newcomer at church;
- participate in a refugee sponsorship group,

- go on or support a mission trip and do your part in the ongoing mission of God in St. Marys and beyond;
- be heralds of hope in Jesus' name.

Hear the words of Presbyterian preacher and author Tom Long:

"Hope is the very stuff of life; it keeps the farmer on the tractor, the prisoner alive, the student at the books, and the patient waiting for the morning.

Hope fills present sacrifices with joy and keeps us at worthy tasks even though rewards are small.

This hope is not whistling in the dark nor is it activated only by spring flowers. Rather it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Do we dare hope that God can bring new life out of moribund places?

Do we dare hope that God will show up again in our lives to remind us that we are not alone?

Do we dare hope that God will send us out of the church sanctuary on this Sunday in mid-October with a compelling vision and purpose for the living of these days?

May you, the good people of St Marys PC, abound in hope today and in all the days to come.