

## **For Those Who Have No Hope**

Sermon 79 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 1, 2020

All Saints' Sunday

1 Thessalonians 4: 14-18

Today has not gone according to plan. For about a month now, we have been remembering the outdoor concert we hosted back on October 4<sup>th</sup> when we tested out the live stream, the FM transmitter, and the individually prepared communion packs, dreaming about finding a way to be together in community. For a month now we had planned ahead and worked out the details trying to make it possible for folks to worship together once again.

We wrapped our minds around worshipping outside of our sanctuary as we read the names of our departed "saints", the beloved members of this fellowship who are no longer with us – but who have gone onto their eternal home. It didn't feel like it always did... but we adjusted our expectations and placed our hope in the fact that at least we might be able to be together, as a family of faith, outdoors – yes, but in person all the same.

But today has not gone according to plan.

Yesterday when the forecast included a 90% chance of rain and we began to consider what that rain would do to not only an "uncovered" congregation, but also a whole host of audio / visual equipment, we realized that we were going to have to adapt the plan and move the whole thing inside.

I need to confess, I was pretty mad about the whole thing. And it didn't help that when I looked at the weather app to see that 90% chance of rain for today, I saw that it was followed by 8 days of sunshine and moderate temperatures. "Really, God?!" I wanted to say, "it has to rain on the *one* day we had planned to re-gather for worship outdoors... really?"

I needed a fresh perspective if I was ever going to sit down and write out a sermon on hope for a day like today.

I sat down to write anyway, and as I did I couldn't help but remember a conversation I had with one of the saints of our church whose name we read just a moment ago. It was pretty early on in this pandemic. Everyone had just settled in for the stay at home orders, images of overcrowded Italian hospitals flashed across our TV screens, and churches everywhere were trying to figure out how they would survive if they could not meet in person to sing, to pray, to worship... and let's be honest... to collect the offering. Fear was rampant, and it threatened to overcome us all.

I started calling some of our older members just to check in on them and see how they were doing. It was my intention to offer a word of hope to them as many of them lived in facilities that were literally "locked down" keeping them apart from family and friends. I

thought a little word from their pastor might lift their spirits. But more often than not I found their stories of resilience gave *me* the hope I needed to face the day.

On this one day in particular I called Jud Ammons, just to say hello. When I asked how he was doing he answered the same as he always did, “Well, you know I’m just happy. Happy, happy, happy. My kids are healthy, my grandkids are doing alright... so I’m happy too.” I guess he could sense the fear in my voice when I shifted the conversation to the pandemic unfolding around us because without waiting for me to really stop and ask his opinion, he interjected with a new perspective that moved me from fear to hope.

“You know, we’ve been through all kinds of crazy things... and everything always finds a way of working itself out. This will too. It’s going to be OK.”

It was a word of hope, built on experiences of the past, and firmly rooted in a simple faith that insisted whether or not things went according to our plans... God was going to take care of us.

Sometimes we all need those simple reminders, to shake us out of the present moment and offer us a new perspective.

This is exactly what Paul is doing when he writes to the Thessalonian church in the early years after Jesus’ ascension. Things were not going according to plan for the Thessalonians either! They thought that Jesus’ return, the one that would bring about the end of this world and the beginning of God’s eternal Kingdom, was going to happen in their lifetime. So they’d been hopefully and expectantly waiting for Christ to return. As time went on, the people began to grow older and some of them even died which ignited all kinds of fear about the afterlife and who would get there first – if at all.

You can almost sense the anxiety through the page as Paul does his best to assure them with a very detailed eschatology that it’s all going to be OK. But even before all of that he begins with a simple statement offering a new perspective, pulling them out of fear and moving them into hope.

*Do not be uninformed, sisters and brothers, for we do not grieve as others do... as those who have no hope...*

In Christ there is always hope because if God can raise Jesus from the dead, we have to believe that somehow, some way, God can save us too from all that threatens to take our joy, our hope, or even our very lives.

This week as we enter the 34<sup>th</sup> week of pandemic church, the first day we were going to try to worship outdoors – but it rained – the beginning of the second quarter of a school year that is unlike any other, 8 months of isolation and distance from family and friends, and the final stretch of a major national election – we are a people on the brink of losing hope. And it feels like if any one of these things or any other new thing doesn’t go our way, everything is going to fall apart... including our faith.

Perhaps at the dawn of this new week what we all need is a new perspective... one that shifts us from all that we fear to all that gives us hope. "Encourage one another with these words..." Paul writes... simple reminders of a faith rooted in hope.

Howard Thurman, who is in my book an "unofficial saint" of the Christian Church, tells a story about a simple reminder (like we're talking about today) he learned from his mother when he was a young boy. He was just 10 years old when Halley's Comet crossed into the solar system. For weeks leading up to it, people had been preparing for the worst. In those days nobody knew what to expect. There was no Google or Wikipedia to search for information about how to prepare for comets. There were not YouTube videos showing people how to properly wear comet-proof clothing. There were however, entrepreneurs selling "Anti-comet" pills and "Comet Protecting Umbrellas".<sup>1</sup> The theory was that if the pills were taken properly, then when the earth and the tail of the comet collided, the person taking the pills would not be harmed. We don't think about it this way now, but people back then were afraid that after the comet passed, the earth would pass through the tail which was full of invisible and lethal gasses, like hydrogen cyanide.<sup>2</sup> There were public bulletins that went out encouraging people to stay inside their homes and close all the windows in order to protect themselves from whatever may come. A lot of people were really afraid.

One night Thurman remembers being awakened by his mother who told him to get on his clothes and come with her into the back yard. Facing his own fears about whatever might happen, Thurman joined his mother outside. He writes about what he saw:

*I shall never forget it if I live forever. My mother stood with me, her hand resting on my shoulder while I, in utter, speechless awe, beheld the great spectacle with its fan of light spreading across the heavens. The silence was like that of absolute motion. Finally, after what seemed to me an interminable time interval, I found my speech.*

*With bated breath I said, "What will happen to us if that comet falls out of the sky?"*

*My mother's silence was so long that I looked from the comet to her face where I beheld something in her countenance that I had seen only once before, when I came into her room and found her in prayer. When she spoke, she said, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard... God will take care of us."*

*...Many things I have seen since that night. Times without number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield."*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.denverpost.com/2010/05/25/halleys-comet-100-years-ago/>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

Something shifted in young Howard Thurman that night as he took in the words of his prayerful mother: “Nothing will happen to us, Howard... God will take care of us.”

Something shifted in Thurman that night and it created room for hope to come and dwell. Hope that God would see him through the struggles life brought his way. Hope that even though there seemed to be no way, God *would* make a way. Hope that would lead Thurman to persevere and write books that would become one of the spiritual foundations for the Civil Rights movement... books that many believe Martin Luther King Jr. carried with him right next to his Bible.

Something shifted in Thurman that night and he was reminded of the simplest truth which created just enough room for hope.

Sisters and brothers, Greystone family, we do not have to be afraid like people who have no hope. Because though life is incredibly hard in these pandemic days... we must believe that God will indeed take care of us. Somehow, some way.

And on the days when we struggle to believe that for ourselves, all we have to do is reach out to one another and remember the saints and stories from our past who tell us with their lives that even when the going gets tough, even when nothing seems to work out as planned, the beginning of our faith is the foolishness of the cross, and the promise of resurrection reminding us that hope *will* make a way.