

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

February 25, 2018
Second Sunday in Lent

How many of you remember watching the Billy Graham crusade on television? It was almost an annual tradition when I was growing up. In 1996 I had the privilege to see Billy Graham at the Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte, NC. In four days, more than 330,000 people came to hear him preach. Not including the 25,000 volunteers from 900 churches representing 54 denominations. It is estimated that throughout his life, he preached to over 215 million people in over 185 countries. Billy Graham was often referred to as a “national clergyman”, and was a close advisor to democrats and republicans alike, preaching not on divisive issues but simply on the Gospel. It is said that Billy Graham was not building a church, he was building Christianity.

Whether or not you agree with Billy Graham’s theology or methodology, for me one thing is certain – he understood how to connect people with the love of Christ.

He was often quoted as asking: “Are you frustrated, bewildered, dejected, breaking under the strains of life? Then say yes to the Savior, and in a moment you will know such comfort as you have never known. It comes to you quickly, as swiftly as I snap my fingers, just like that.” Imagine hearing those words from a place of desperation or hopelessness. Imagine that kind of Good News.

I am not sure if comfort always came that suddenly but his point was clear – Jesus changes you. Jesus picks you up from the darkness you are experiencing and brings wholeness to otherwise broken people. And people were desperate to hear his message of hope. They are still desperate to hear a message of hope.

Because we all know what it feels like to be frustrated. We know what it feels like to be bewildered and dejected. We know what it feels like to be breaking under the strains of life as more schools are shattered by violence, as more animosity and division grow between our political parties, as more people are afraid of anyone who doesn’t look like them or talk like them, as folks become more focused on justifying their own self-interests than finding common ground with one other. You better believe we need that message of hope.

And as we watch it all unfold, we are begging for answers to the violence and hate in our midst. We are begging for resolution. Anything to bring peace and safety to our world and we are tired of the fighting and the finger pointing. We are tired of the fear and the uncertainty. We all just want to snap our fingers and find the comfort our faith promises.

Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s that easy. Because I don’t know about you, but I’m done with the pithy sentiment of thoughts and prayers. I don’t see it doing anything to resolve the problems we are facing. I need a hope that is tangible. As theologian Miroslav Volf stated,

“There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you’re unwilling to resolve.” Or might I say, hoping for someone else to step up to the plate and get their hands dirty.

This is going to take a lot more than a snap of our fingers or a singular confession of faith. And in a day where we want quick answers and simple solutions, we are met with today’s Gospel when Christ says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

That sure sounds like a lot of work, especially when our hope may be waning. After all, crosses are heavy and painful. And yet, Christ is clear...this is the path of the Gospel. Your faith will certainly bring you comfort but it will also challenge you. And part of discerning the work of your faith is the ability to move into those difficult spaces with full knowledge that God is right there with you.

It isn’t a passive comfort that is promised to us. It isn’t a shallow hope. It’s the kind of comfort that says I will be with you through this life, bringing you strength, bringing you courage, bringing you wisdom. It’s the kind of comfort that opens our hearts and minds to address the problems of this world, to not just offer our thoughts and prayers but to offer our time, our energy, our commitment to making God’s goodness available to everyone.

There is a fantastic quote by Mark Twain that I think is quite appropriate for today: “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

Because once we enter a Gospel kind of life, once we truly become followers of Jesus, we have to really listen to those parts of the Bible that call us to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. Because if we are going to pray about resolution and change, we have to be ready to be part of that resolution and change.

And in our Gospel, Peter is like many of us...we find him struggling. He doesn’t like what he is hearing. He wanted a different answer than what Christ was giving him. He and the other disciples had expected a savior who would come in and overthrow the oppression of the Roman empire. Instead, he got a Savior who called Peter to task. A Savior who was not just there to help Peter but to help everyone. It wasn’t what Peter wanted to hear. And Jesus rebukes him in a difficult lesson of faith.

It’s the lesson that when we feel the world is against us, when we can’t see a way out, when the problems seem too big to overcome Christ calls us to come back. To hope even when you feel you have lost hope. To hope against insurmountable odds. To hope in the midst of our pain and confusion.

One of my favorite writers had these beautiful words to say on the matter:

“We belong to a God who tells us, as Jesus tells his hearers, that what is torn down will be raised up, and what is destroyed will live again. Because we belong to this God, hope lives even when we feel we have lost it, and cannot summon it up in ourselves....

Hope does not depend on us, but it cannot do without us. By which I mean, hope does not originate with us—it has its beginning in God, who goes on providing it for us with an extravagant stubbornness. It comes as a gift and grace that we cannot manufacture. But hope does need us for its ongoing survival. It asks us to give it legs in this world, to bear it into places of hopelessness, to enter into the rhythms of dying and rising that come as we follow Christ and work with him for the healing of the world.”

That kind of hope is where knowing the love of God and being ready to carry our cross intersect. It's the space between our fears and our faith. And we are called to live in this place when we are frustrated and breaking under the strains of life. That was Billy Graham's message. It is our beginning. It's where God finds us and where we find our hope. Amen.