

“Wherein Is Our Hope?”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

We live in anxious times. Maybe we always have. We wonder about the future. What will tomorrow bring? Wherein is our hope?

I was talking to a businessman the other day. He's active in politics and knowledgeable too, respectful of all sides on any topic of debate. "I'm worried," he said. "People are losing hope that Ottawa, Washington, Europe, China, Japan has any means of fixing what's wrong with the economy. When people don't think that the government has a plan, the people get scared."

In downtown Montreal, just across the street from St. Pauls/St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, a beautiful structure in its own rights, is a beautiful old church, a huge neo-Gothic building. It's no longer a church but home of an art museum, the Montreal Museum of Modern Art. However much I like art, it seemed such a shame that it is no longer a church. I was told, "They just gave up hope that they had a future in the city."

the ravages of lost hope are great. Victor Frankl, in his classic book "Man's Search For Meaning" tells about his life as a prisoner in a Nazi death camp. He recalls a fellow prisoner who was in good health, considering it all. Each day on the way out to the work site this man would talk about what he and his wife would do together at the end of the war when he was released.

Then one day another inmate brought him the sad news. His wife had died. Two days after receiving the news, the prisoner died. Frankl concluded from this that people can live longer without bread than without hope.

I remember a sermon I read titled "The Saddest Three Words In The Bible." His sermon was on Luke 24 the Easter evening walk to Emmaus. Two despondent disciples walked to the village of Emmaus. A stranger walked beside them. "What's up?" the stranger asked. The two disciples don't recognize that this is none other than Jesus. They tell the stranger about the terrible things that happened in Jerusalem that weekend saying, "We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel. But he has been crucified and buried."

The preacher said those were the saddest of words, "We had hoped." Hope lost is a life in despair.

You and I are conditioned to believe in self-help. When we come to some problem in life, some detour or dead end, we pump ourselves up, put on some makeup and a happy face, and attempt to move forward with a positive attitude and a stiff upper lip. And for much of life, that's enough.

"Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," was how our grandparents put it.

I recall another sermon by a preacher on a miraculous catch of fish. Remember that story? The disciples have been fishing all night. And yet they catch no fish. Jesus tells them, "cast your nets on the other side!" And they have a miraculous catch of fish.

You know where the preacher is going with this. He went on, in his sermon, to tell inspiring stories of folks who, in their lives, "cast nets on the other side" and succeeded. Theme of sermon, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." This I later learned to dismiss as "The Little Engine That Could Theology." The theology of that brave little engine of the children's story who said, "I think I can, I think I can." And did.

And that works, on most days. Most of us are here today as those for whom this bootstraps theology has worked. We set goals, we faced setbacks, we took a deep breath, we dug in, and we moved forward. We have hope for the future, a hope that is lodged mostly within ourselves. From past experience we feel that we are justified in hoping in ourselves.

But what about those times in life when the despair is greater than our resources?

The wherein is our hope?

As you well know, four weeks today is the 10th anniversary of the terrible attacks in the United States in September 11, 2001, ironically falling on a Sunday this year. Sometime after that terrible day in history, there was a documentary on television called "Faith At Ground Zero." I saw it a couple of weeks ago in late night tv, a run up I think to this 10th anniversary. In this documentary, various people, from various faiths, testified to what their faith had taught them during this terrible tragedy. And the full horror of the evil perpetrated that day really came through, the massive destruction and the human anguish and loss.

One of the people said that for her the most inspiring moment came when she watched two people holding hands, jumping from a fire-filled floor and sailing through the air to their deaths below.

"That's the indomitable human spirit. That's our hope," said the person – two human jumping to their deaths, holding hands? This is our hope? I'm sorry I just don't see it that way. I think it's a sad image of many in our sometimes sad age. We're in free-fall down to our destruction, but let's hold hands while we go. No, I don't see hope in that.

What we need in our age like ours is some larger hope. Some hope that is not mere wishful thinking, not self-deserved. A hope that is large enough to stand up to the most difficult dead ends we face in life, those times when our positive mental attitude is not enough for the fate that comes upon us.

Let me tell you a story from the early days of my ministry when I was learning to be a pastor and then I'll close. I was with this woman as her pastor from the first diagnosis of her cancer through the difficult therapy. A couple of times a week, I visited her and we prayed for healing. We prayed earnestly week after week for healing.

"I still have that hope that I'll be healed," she said.

Then one day when I entered her hospital room I could tell that she had a sense of great serenity and peace. She seemed somehow stronger as if she felt better. I had hoped that her treatments were at last being effective.

No, that was not the case. But she was better, spiritually, if not physically. She explained to me, "Pastor Doug, earlier I prayed for healing. Now I just want to be with God no matter what. That's what I hope for. I haven't given up hope. I have enlarged my hope."

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Wherein is our hope, ultimately?

We live in times when hope is a problem for many of us. What does the future hold? Who is in charge of the world? What does tomorrow bring? Is there any hope? Christians believe that Jesus Christ is not only our "saviour," "friend," and "redeemer," Jesus is the hope of the world. That's what the Canaanite woman in today's gospel reading knew to the core of her being. Her only hope for her daughter was in Jesus. May you know that too. Let us pray:

Dear God, sometimes the world comes at us faster than we can think. We turn on the TV and see distressing news. There are wars and rumours of war, horrible acts of terrorism, shortage of resources, social decay and disorder. Sometime our own lives seem anything but our own – out of control and chaotic.

For all these reasons, Lord, sometimes we lose hope. We fear for tomorrow and wonder what's coming next.

Come to us, Lord. Give us confidence in the ultimate triumph of your will, in the complete victory of your love. Thus we might have hope that enables us to live with dignity. AMEN.