

Hope Is the Fuel for Our Journey!
1. God's Implant for All Humanity
Psalm 42:1-5, Romans 5:1-5

Hope is the fuel for our journey through life. Sometimes we can take a fun look at that hope.

I know many of you take cruises. Did you hear about the single gentleman who took a Caribbean cruise? On the first day out he noticed a woman about his age smiling at him in a friendly way as he passed her on the deck. This pleased him. That night he managed to be seated at the same table with her for dinner. As the conversation developed, he commented he had seen her on the deck that day and had appreciated her friendly smile. She smiled again and commented, "Well, the reason I smiled was that when I saw you I was immediately struck by your strong resemblance to my third husband."

At this he perked up his ears and asked, "Oh, how many times have you been married?"

She looked down at her plate, smiled and answered, "Twice."

Someone once wrote: "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life."
 [Emil Brunner, Swiss theologian (1889–1966)]

In recent weeks our local news reports have wedged two images into my consciousness. One is seeing a distraught-looking woman who had lived for years close to the large propane plant that blew up in the early hours of August 10 in northwest Toronto. Her face showed the anguish, despair and *hopelessness* of seeing her house shattered – windows broken, doors caved in, drywall detached -- after the devastating blasts from exploding propane tanks. One television station reported: "Many houses suffered structural damage ... and the emotional toll was tough to take [for many people] as well. Everybody's on edge all the time." [Citynews.ca Sunday August 17, 2008]

The other image is that of the faces of the delegates to both the United States Democratic and Republican conventions. (I admit to watching some of the speeches, especially of the presidential and vice-presidential nominees for both parties.) The delegates were waiting to hear anything that would give them *hope* – hope for a more stable economy, hope to end a war taking the lives of young soldiers and draining their financial resources, hope for a country restored to its former place of moral integrity in the world. Their eyes were alight with hope for a better nation and a better world. And hope that their party was leading in the polls, of course!

The Apostle Paul spoke of the importance of hope when he linked faith, hope and love together in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Chapter 13, verses 12 and 13: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abides faith, hope, love, these three"

Paul admitted we do not see the truth about all of life as clearly as we will one day. It's as if we are now in a fog and peering through a mist. So until we can see as clearly as God sees us -- according to the Apostle Paul who is outlining profound wisdom for us here -- we have **three things to do: trust** steadily in God (that's **faith**), **hope** unswervingly and **love** extravagantly. If you read 1 Corinthians 13 in a modern English version of the Bible such as *The Message*, the meaning will become much clearer for you.

If you are talking with my wife, Marg, for very long, don't be surprised if she says, "Hope! That's my favourite word." Hope is an important word. One philosopher and ethicist believes "there is **nothing more important** in the entire world than keeping hope alive in the human spirit." He is convinced "that hope is so close to the core of all that makes us human that when we lose hope we lose something of our very selves. And in the process we lose all reason for striving for the better life we were meant to live, the better world that was meant to be." [Lewis Smedes, *Standing on the Promises*, p. ix]

God has implanted hope into the fibre of being human. Our spirits were made to hope the way our hearts were made to love and our brains were made to think. Our hearts are drawn to hope as an eagle is drawn to the sky. The famed psychiatrist Karl Menninger called hope a "life instinct." If we keep hoping, we keep living. If we stop hoping, we die. Inside.

Do you recall the news story during the last week of August about 21-year-old Amber Pennell of North Carolina? She drove off the road and was trapped inside her wrecked car for five days before she was finally found and rescued. She said she didn't remember wrecking but she remembered being down there. She also said she was going to stay strong for her babies -- and she did. Her life instinct was to keep hoping and be strong for her children. [abcnews.go.com August 27, 2008]

I do not hope primarily because I am a believer in God. I hope because I am a human being -- connected to every other human being, whether a believer or not, who has known anxiety, struggle, suffering, unfulfillment and longing for a better world. In his letter to the Christians at Rome, Chapter 8, verses 20 and 21, the Apostle Paul observed that the story of all creation is a tale of groaning and hoping. And even those who believe in God share in the groaning of life -- but also in the hoping.

My faith connects me to God as my reason to keep hoping when fear or discouragement or despair begins to get a grip on my soul. And my faith gives me, I believe, God's own vision of the good things that he promises and that I hope for too. One way or the other, people hunger for hope -- even when their hopes seem to be dashed -- because our Creator made us to live by hope.

What is there about the way God made us that gives us such a **need for hope**? Here are two reasons.

First, God made us with the power to imagine. So we can imagine the possibilities ahead of us even if we cannot see how we will make them happen. We can imagine the future even though we cannot make it happen. We can also imagine the bad things we do not want to happen but sometimes cannot see how we can prevent them from happening. We can hope, however, for the good things we imagine even while we fear the bad things we imagine.

Second, God made us to be travellers on a journey. Most of us are on a long-distance run as we have talked about for the past five Sundays. So the human spirit keeps moving even when we can't be sure of what's around the next bend. We keep hoping that what comes tomorrow will be better than what came yesterday.

Here is a parable to illustrate what I mean by both of these reasons.

To live the human life is something like taking a long hike on a crooked trail up a rocky hill to a place at the crest where we will have all that our soul longs for. Things like lasting love, good health, peace of mind, joy of heart and, to make life completely blessed, a close friendship with God. The hill is not all that steep, amateur climbers in reasonably good shape can manage it, but there are obstacles at every twist of the trail: rapid streams without bridges, logs fallen over the path, a trail that is fiendishly slick. And there are temptations to give up the journey and settle where we are: wondrous vistas, campsites so comfortable we hate to leave them and contented folk we meet along the way who tell us that things there are as good as they can get [staying here]. But we keep climbing. [Smedes, *Standing on the Promises*, p. 8]

What keeps us going? What provides the strength to keep us climbing? It is the hope that we will make it to the top. Or at least get closer to the top than we've come so far.

This is the gracious design of creation. God has given us fuel for our uncertain journey -- the gift of hope to keep us going.

I may have told this story before but it is such a story of hope in such a hopeless situation that it bears repeating here.

Herman was a popular piano teacher. One night at a concert, when a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill and had to stop playing, Herman quietly rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance.

Herman was asked how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. His answer is wonderful. "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practise every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. **That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope** that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom."

To hope is so wonderfully human and part of our very being as human beings.

But you and I know – sometimes through terrible, personal experience – that our dearest hopes die. Sometimes our hope is cut down with shocking swiftness when the one thing on which we set our deepest hope is blown out of our lives, like a tent in the path of a hurricane. Other times our bright hope dies slowly, darkened by disappointment. Maybe we should put up a sign: CAUTION! HOPE CAN BREAK YOUR HEART.

As the renowned psychologist Erich Fromm wrote: "Hope often is shattered so thoroughly that a [person] may never recover from it." [Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, p. 20] That is why hope is so important to hold onto.

A young man who suffered from HIV came into the outpatient AIDS clinic at Los Angeles County Hospital for his regular dose of medicine. He sat in tired silence while a new

doctor at the clinic poked his arm and, without looking up at his face, asked, “You are aware, aren’t you, that you are not long for this world – a year at most?”

On his way out, the patient snapped at one of the doctors he knew: “That S.O.B. took away my hope.”

And that doctor replied: “I guess he did. Maybe it’s time to find another one.”

But is there another? It may not be too difficult to find another doctor but is there another way to find hope again? When our dearest hopes die, we face the ultimate question of hope: Is there a hope beyond human hoping?

While I am not a painter, I understand that how painters use colour is significant. This was true for the famous Dutch Impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh. Throughout much of his life, Van Gogh experienced bouts of depression and suffered greatly. He had two unhappy romances as well as several unsuccessful work experiences. He was also a Christian missionary to miners in Belgium for a time but was asked to leave by his superiors because he so totally gave of himself to the miners and their families and shared whatever he had with them – literally the shirt off his back. Life was very difficult for him.

But somewhere in the latter years of his life (he died at 38), Van Gogh caught a sense of hope for a time. And he gave that hope colour -- the colour yellow. We can see that hope in the gradual increase of the colour yellow in his paintings. Yellow evoked for him the hope and warmth of God’s love. In his famous painting *Starry Night*, done during one of his depressive periods, we see a yellow sun and yellow swirling stars symbolizing this hope but, sadly, a grey-coloured church -- not yellow. His experience with the church was not a happy one. But his response to God was not grey – it had grown into yellow. By the time he painted *The Raising of Lazarus*, the entire picture is blindingly bathed in yellow. In fact, Van Gogh put his own face on Lazarus to express his hope in the resurrection.

I have talked this morning about hope as God’s gift to **all human beings**, not only to persons of faith. We hope because God implanted hope in our spirits as human beings. But when our fondest hopes fall away, we face the ultimate question: Is there a hope beyond human hoping?

Yes, there is! But you will have to come back next Sunday to hear what it means to have God involved in our hoping. God promises a hope for all his beloved creation that is sure and certain and wonderful.

May this hope be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller
September 7, 2008