

EMBERS OF HOPE

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

(I Thessalonians 4:13-18, NRSV)

Today's sermon topic is hope, a subject I am familiar with on a weekly, if not daily basis. Every week by Wednesday I settle on a scripture passage for Sunday, the passage I will use as the basis for that week's sermon. I pick the passage carefully and with a large dose of hope—hope that I'll be able to find something meaningful and inspiring to say to those of you who have this peculiar habit of showing up week after week in this place. When I choose the scripture I rarely know how the sermon will begin, much less how it will end. And I never know exactly what I might see, hear, or read during the week that will influence the direction of the sermon.

This week I struck gold. Ever since changing offices almost two years ago I've stared at a stack of magazines that Rev. Fetty left for my benefit. A particular one this week, *The Living Pulpit*, caught my attention because of the "Hope" theme. I picked it up and thumbed through it when my eye caught an author's name, "Lamont, Thomas." Could this be our Tom Lamont? Quickly flipping to the end of the article I shouted, "Yes!" as I read the words, "Thomas Lamont is associate minister of the Manhasset Congregational Church, Manhasset, New York." What a treat to find a wonderful article by Tom about my theme for this Sunday. (I would have just stood up here and read it to you word for word but without that beautiful Irish brogue it just wouldn't be the same!)

In the article, Tom recalled a story about the late Karl Menninger. When Menninger researched his book, *What Happened to Hope?*, he made a startling discovery. At the public library Menninger searched the shelves for a book on hope. While volumes on faith and love proved plentiful, he found none whatsoever on hope. Menninger poured over the *Encyclopedia Britannica* only to discover the same thing—articles on faith and love but none on hope. Menninger concluded that he did not live in an age of hope. Tom Lamont reflected on the first 9 decades of the 20th century and reported, "Our century has been called the century of despair. We live in tragic and discouraging times, and we might be tempted to despair" (Tom Lamont, "We Are Both Creatures and Creators of Hope," *The Living Pulpit*, Jan.-Mar. 1992, p. 41).

Unfortunately the 21st century has only brought more pain and suffering—from the atrocities of September 11th to the recent bombings in Morocco and Saudi Arabia, the outbreak of SARS to the increasing AIDS epidemic. Along with suffering we have known death, too much death. When our nation observes Memorial Day, we are responding to grief and death. After the Civil War in 1868, Decoration Day, as it was then called, began “...for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country and during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land” (*Seasons of the Spirit: Congregational Life*, Lent/Easter 2003, p. 116). In 1882 the name changed to Memorial Day (Ibid.).

Despite all the recent atrocities we’ve seen, I wouldn’t want to trade places with the Civil War generation. The total number of Americans who died in that wretched war numbers in the hundreds of thousands, greater than the number of Americans who died in every war since combined. How did that generation respond to the aftermath of this almost unspeakable tragedy? Did they despair and wallow in their misery? Did they throw up their hands and declare it impossible to go on? Did they dwell on the past, on the injustices on both sides? While undoubtedly some did, many others found meaning in this idea of Memorial Day, a day to honor those who died for a cause greater than themselves.

Our church has taken this idea one step further and designated Memorial Sunday as a time to remember and honor members and friends of our church who have died over the past year. While we may feel grief today as we gather, our purpose transcends tears. For we gather today to celebrate and honor the lives they lived. We gather today to remember and to hope.

In our scripture lesson today the Apostle Paul wrote, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died...Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with [those who have died] to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (Thessalonians 4:13-14, 16b-18).

In the midst of times of great trauma and upheaval, we can either be brought down by the sadness of it all or we can nurture our faith in the living God, creator of heaven and earth, who will one day call us home. Belief in something better on the other side of death offer us immeasurable hope even in the midst of life’s most difficult and trying times. Tom Lamont wrote, “One cannot speak of hope without speaking of faith which gives substance to our hopes and makes us certain of realities we do not see as yet” (Lamont, p. 41). The hope of heaven is a matter of faith, faith in something we have not seen, but have only known through the biblical witness. Our hope is not rooted in scientific proof or irrefutable evidence. Our hope springs from the empty tomb. Our hope springs from belief in a God who launched creation itself way back in the beginning, whose creativity fashioned magnificent mountains and delicate butterflies, and

whose love beckoned from a Bethlehem manger. As sure as the sun rises in the east, we can trust God with the lives of those we love who have passed on before us.

The most pervasive fear amongst human beings in every time and place is the fear of death. And yet from a faith perspective, we have nothing to fear. Rev. James Christensen suggests that "...perhaps we [should] look at death as an unborn child might look at birth. Snuggled beneath its mother's heart, the child is protected and warm. If it could [speak], it might say, 'I don't want to be born. I am happy here. I am afraid of birth.' In those prenatal days, it might regard birth as we do death. It is the end of [a] certain experience and the beginning of an uncertain one. But then the child is born; there it sees the kindest, sweetest face in the world. There it is cuddled in loving arms; there it is able to develop and grow, work and serve. It is a happy experience. Should we fear death, which is a birth into another world?" (*Funeral Services*, Westwood, NJ: Revell Co., 1959, pp. 51-51)?

While death is a step into the unknown, it is not a step we take alone. Recall Paul's words in I Thessalonians, "We who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with [those who have died] to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever." The God of the Easter miracle, the God who brought Jesus from the despair of Good Friday to the glory of that resurrection morning, will be with each and every one of us as well.

At the end of Tom Lamont's article in *The Living Pulpit*, he quotes Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport, who wrote, "'While it is true that any type of personal hope will give us something to live for, it is only religious hope that holds everything in place and gives equal meaning to suffering and joy, to death and life. [Allport concludes...] Religion itself is ultimately a living hope, a hope that the world is intelligible, that it can by our efforts be improved, that there is a God. Religion gives hope...'" (Lamont, pp. 41-42).

Because of our faith we can hang on to hope. Recall Paul's words to the Christians in Thessalonica, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Paul doesn't tell them not to grieve. He doesn't tell them not to be sad. After all, the shortest verse in the Bible deals with the grief of Jesus following the death of his good friend Lazarus. The simple words are these, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). We too weep for those we have loved whose time on earth has ended before ours. However, we do not grieve as people who have no hope. As dark as the hour may be and as faint as our faith may feel, through trust in the living God we yet have embers of hope—embers in the remnants of lives which once burned warmly, embers that glow of memories of times that were and will never be again, but embers that one day will be fanned by the wind of God's Holy Spirit into a glimmering, warm fire. The embers that faintly glow now will one day shine brightly, never to dim again, when we are fully united with God and reunited with our loved ones in the eternal radiance of the life to come. As Tom Lamont reminds us, "...faith...gives substance to our hopes and makes us certain of realities we do not see as yet" (Lamont, p. 41). AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, before whom nations rise and fall, we pray this day for our nation and our world, beset by violence and fear. How we need your healing, peaceful presence. Too many lives have been lost, too much blood shed in the name of cruelty and injustice. Help leaders use their power wisely with the goal being justice and peace, liberty and freedom for all people. We thank you this day for men and women of integrity who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of others. We ask your help this day for people whose hearts are breaking over the deaths of those they love. May your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, ease their pain and encourage them to place their trust and hope in You.

Draw us nearer to you and to one another for having worshiped together this day through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.