

A Hope and a Future

5. *Hope While You Wait*

October 11, 2020

Over the summer our family spent some time boating on a lake. From time to time we'd take a break from tubing, turn off the engines, and everyone would jump in the lake to swim. Well, not everyone. I always stayed on the boat, which was helpful because the boat drifted. On the boat, I couldn't tell that it was moving – until I looked up and saw the swimmers were now yards away. So every few minutes we had to restart the boat and move it back to the swimmers.

What we needed was an anchor to keep the boat from moving. We looked all over the boat – but there was no anchor! I was surprised that the boat had no anchor, because an anchor is important piece of equipment for a boat. Without it you can't stay where you want to be, especially if the waves are strong.

Over the last 6 months, waves of emotion have been pushing against each of us. For some of us, it's been a subtle undercurrent and we might not even have noticed.

A few weeks ago Linda and I had a couple days of friction with each other. We were less patient with each other -- touchier than normal. We talked about it and we realized that the last 6 months of Covid had strained us emotionally, and it was showing up in our relationship. You might say we had drifted. Neither of us had been conscious of feeling out of sorts, but as soon as we named it, we realized that the strain was affecting us. And that was enough to get us back into normal sync with each other.

Some people have drifted spiritually. Covid has disrupted their routines. It's been a long time since they've sensed the presence of God in worship or taken joy in meeting him in prayer, served outside themselves, or let the Bible nourish their souls.

Others of us have felt the waves of emotion crash violently over our lives. Maybe we've been slammed with reduced hours at work, or we can't get together with friends, and these losses have us reeling. We're not sleeping well, battling depression or anxious thoughts. It's really obvious that you're not where we used to be -- that we're not in the same place in life. We've drifted. In times like this, we need an anchor for our souls.

At Niagara Falls, the Niagara River takes a thunderous drop -180-feet to the bottom of Horseshoe Falls. You definitely don't want to let your boat drift over the edge. I've never seen it, but I'm told that there is a warning sign posted upstream for boaters: "Do you have an anchor?" followed by another sign which says, "Do you know how to use it?"

Those are good questions for each of us today: “Do I have an anchor for my life?”, and “Do I know how to use it?”¹

The Bible says that the anchor for our lives is hope. **Hebrews 6:18-19** *God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*

Just as a boat’s anchor keeps it in place and prevents it from drifting, hope is the anchor for our souls that holds us firm when the waves of life smash against us.

Verse 18 says that when we take hold of hope we are *greatly encouraged*. Who doesn’t need some encouragement today? The more hope we have, the more encouraged we are even when life gets tough.

Hope is *the conviction that the future will be good, even if today is not.*

Everybody lives with some degree of hope, because if we don’t believe the future will be decent, we’d give up. But not everyone bases their hope on the same source.

- Some people believe the future will be good because they are confident that they have enough money to make it that way.

- Others believe the future will be good because they are sure their partner will be with them, or that their health will be good.

- Still others are confident their future will be good because they believe they deserve a good one.

Why does it matter if I know where my hope is based, as long as I have hope? IT matters because my hope is only as secure as the object I hope in.

For example:

If I have hope that I will get the job that I applied for because I took my lucky rabbit’s foot to the interview, my hope is on a weak foundation -- it is based on false assumptions about the power of my rabbit’s foot. So I may be deeply disappointed with what happens.

On the other hand, if I am convinced that I am going to get the job because a hiring manager reached out and told me they want me for the position, then my hope is well-founded. It is based on the word of the manager and the power of the manager to make it happen.

So today if we have hope for the future, the question is, Is our source of hope reliable?

¹ Paul Adams in *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker), from *Preaching Today*

The Bible gives us some great news: Hebrews 6:19 says that the hope God offers us is “firm and secure.” Why? Because it is based on the person and promise of God. When our hope rests on God’s promises, then it is secure.

Hebrews 6 lifts up Abraham as an example of a guy whose hope rested on God’s promise. Abraham hoped for a child even though he was old and childless. There was only one reason he had hope: God promised him he’d have a son. That promise wasn’t fulfilled right away – Abraham had to wait for years for the son he was promised.

Hebrews 6:15 “And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.”
We can have hope for our future because the promises of God never fail.

Tim Keller writes that God’s words are different than ours. We say things that might or might not happen. *But God’s words are identical with his actions* – there is no gap.

We might humans say, “Let there be light in this room,” but first we have to make sure the fixtures work and the electric bill is paid. Then we have to walk across the room and flick a switch...

But God says “Let there be light” and there was light.... Instantly! *There is no gap between what God says and what happens.* God’s words cannot fail their purposes because, for God, speaking and acting are the same things.”²

So that means that God’s promises to us are a sure foundation to build our hope upon – unlike other foundations. So, for a lasting hope, anchor our hope in Jesus, not in a desired outcome.

“The Stockdale Paradox” is named after Admiral James Stockdale who was a former naval officer and vice-presidential candidate. During the Vietnam War, Stockdale was held as a prisoner by the North Vietnamese for over seven years. He was repeatedly tortured, suffered constantly and had little reason to believe he’d make it out alive. Ultimately, what saved Stockdale’s life was his ability to acknowledge the harsh reality of his situation, while steadfastly believing that he would survive and return home.

Years later, he told author Jim Collins that when he was as POW, he had decided that he would turn his captivity into the defining event of his life, that one day he would look back on it and wouldn’t trade it for anything. And that’s what happened.

² Ch. 4 *Prayer* by Tim Keller

Collins asked Stockdale which prisoners struggled mentally the most with imprisonment? Stockdale replied “Oh, it’s easy. I can tell you who didn’t make it out. It was the optimists.” Collins was shocked. Stockdale explained: “They were the ones who always said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ Then Christmas would come and go – and they were still prisoners. And then there would be another Christmas. And then they died of a broken heart.”³

Admiral Stockdale is saying that those who based their hope on specific event happening -- like getting out by Christmas -- had a fragile hope. That hope crumbled when something different happened than was expected.

Stockdale’s hope for the future was that his captivity would become the defining event of his life – so every passing Christmas was just **another chapter** in his story. That gave him the hope to face the reality of his captivity each day, while he expected that a better day would come. And it did.

Our hope is built on God’s goodness and not on a specific outcome we want. Remember the example of Abraham? Abraham didn’t base the hope for his future on having a son, he based his hope on God who had promised him a son. There’s a big difference.

This shows up in Genesis 22 when God tests Abraham. After years of waiting, Abraham finally had a son. Then God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. God stopped him before he did it, but how could Abraham even consider doing such a thing? Wasn’t he supposed to have descendants through Isaac?

³ RobertGlazer.com; April 20, 2020

Hebrews 11:17-19 explains: *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*

Abraham trusted God could give him a future anyway he wanted to. If God wanted to give him descendants by raising Isaac from the dead, Abraham would go with it, because he trusted that God was good.

Today, do I believe my future will be good because I am confident circumstances will work out in a good way, or do I believe the future will be good because God is good?

Over the years I have heard people say that they lost their faith in God when someone they love wasn't healed. They say, "My grandmother was sick, and I prayed that God would heal her, and she died anyway. So from that moment on I had nothing more to do with God."

I can empathize with their broken hearts; however, our hope can never be on assuming what the future holds. Instead, it needs to be based on who holds our future. If they would have turned toward Jesus instead of away from him in their loss and sorrow, the Lord would have strengthened them, healed their grief, and led them into a good future with him.

Hebrews 11 says that some of the great heroes of faith suffered and were killed for their faith. How is that a good future? Were they foolish to hope in God? *All of them*

pleased God because of their faith! But still they died without being given what had been promised. ⁴⁰ This was because God had something better in store for us. And he did not want them to reach the goal of their faith without us.

That is pointing out that eternity will be the fulfillment of God's promise to us.

Jim Elliot grew up in Portland, Oregon listening to the stories of missionaries and dreaming of becoming one himself. He heard Jesus' Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples, and he wanted to help others hear about Jesus.

After years of preparation, in 1952 he moved to Ecuador. He and a team were going to reach out to the Auca, who were an isolated, hostile tribe known for attacking others.

He and a partner flew a small plane over the jungle, dropping gifts and broadcasting friendly messages in the Auca language. Then they landed the plane and had a meal with a few of the Auca. Everything seemed to be going to plan. But the next time they returned, they were ambushed by Auca warriors and killed.

Jim Elliot was 28 years old when he died. He had a young wife and an 11-month-old daughter. Was he wrong to trust God with his future? Was he wrong to put his hope in God?

Jim's wife Elisabeth grieved his death. Then, less than two years later, she and her 3 year-old daughter Valerie, along with the sister of one of the other slain missionaries, all moved into the Auca village. Eventually, the men who killed Jim came to faith in Christ and were completely changed. So was the rest of the village. A few years later, the village was known for being warm and welcoming to all they met.

Jim had gone to Ecuador to reach the Auca for Christ. And that is what happened. He never saw it, but his vision was fulfilled. People asked Jim why he was moving his family to the jungle in Ecuador. They told him he was throwing his life away. But he wrote in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Sometimes the purposes of God are too large to fit into one lifetime. That's OK, though, because you have an eternal life to enjoy God's good promises.