



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Hope's Solid Anchor

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COMMUNION MEDITATION

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When can I go and meet with God?

³My tears have been my food
day and night,

while people say to me all day long,

“Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:

how I used to go to the house of God

under the protection of the Mighty One

with shouts of joy and praise

among the festive throng.

⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God.

Psalm 42:1-5

No Hope

Just before Christmas, in what was billed as a “farewell interview” for the outgoing First Lady with daytime talk show queen Oprah Winfrey, Mrs. Obama captured headlines with this statement: **“Now we are feeling what not having hope feels like.”**

Many different talking heads, pundits, journalists and op-ed writers weighed in on her comments. Some took it as just an emotional reaction (or over-reaction) to the unexpected defeat of her political party in the last election—another example, they claimed, of Democrats being stuck in their grief process or being sore losers. Others took it as partisan sniping and pettiness. Her “hopelessness” complaint prompted some to reflect on how much of her husband’s legacy will be overturned by his successor. Still others wrote or spoke about the irony of the campaign eight years ago that trumpeted “hope and change,” and debated whether Mrs. Obama’s husband delivered on his promise or failed. And others reacted with empathy and understanding to what they felt were genuine, transparent emotions. I leave that for each of you to decide. But the raw words themselves—“what not having hope feels like”—were beneficial in prompting a national discussion on the role of hope in our public and private lives.

I recently came across a touching interview with two parents in their late 40s whose 23-year-old daughter had just died of an opioid overdose, a toxic combination of oxycontin and fentanyl. She had been in and out of addictive behavior for several years. The parents had pleaded with her to join a faith-based addiction recovery group, but she defiantly told them she didn’t need any crutch like God, and could handle life in her own strength. A week before her death she was fired from her job because she had missed too many days, and she confided to a friend that she had come to the end of her rope. “I have no more hope; I can’t stop getting high,” she said to her friend in the last text message she sent.

Hope is the essential oxygen of the human soul. We need it to keep going. When it’s in short supply, we gasp emotionally, just as our lungs will gasp for precious oxygen in a smoke-filled room with a polluted air supply. Hope is what keeps us going.

Three Simple Truths

There are three simple truths I want to highlight from a Christian perspective. The first is that, in our desperate human search for hope, **we can place our confidence in the wrong things.** If our entire hope

is in government, politics, power, wealth or prestige, they will ultimately fail us. That's true for the new incoming President and administration as well. They are all imperfect people. Let's not expect too much, nor place our hope solely in them.

That may be why so many politicians of the losing party have been struggling terribly for the past two months: they have put too much of their faith in that which is unreliable, constantly shifting, and cannot last. The tragedy of the young girl who couldn't defeat her addiction reminds us that personal strength and willpower are also not reliable sources of hope. We are all mortal, our bodies are frail, and our strength to overcome obstacles by our own efforts is very limited. It may be ego-boosting to refuse to turn to a "higher power" and insist that you can handle things in your own strength. But making such a choice is highly risky, and has brought ruin to many. We need to make sure our hope is based on something lasting and permanent, something dependable and secure.

The second truth to recall: **Life is at times discouraging for all of us.** Emotions go through cycles, just as our physical energy and our mental focus and capacities do. We go up and down. Every mood is transient and temporary. C.S. Lewis, the great British Christian author of the last century, in his classic *The Screwtape Letters*, coined the phrase "The Law of Undulation." All of us undulate. We ride the elevator of mood and energy and outward circumstances and events up and down. Just as political parties move into power, and then out of power, in the constantly-shifting landscape of daily events, so we as individuals need to expect that the only constant in our personal worlds is change.

Our undulation is caused by both internal and external factors. Even the most determined among us can't guarantee that every day will be a good day. Lewis makes this undeniable point not to cause despair within us, but to redirect our minds away from what we are feeling at any given moment to the One who does not change. Therefore the third truth is this: **Hope that is based on an unchanging God is the most reliable and trustworthy hope of all.**

A Reflection of the Law of Undulation

Look at the words of this timeless poem known as Psalm 42, written at least 2,500 years ago. Although this author knew nothing about our current politics, our business cycles, the ups and downs of an economy, or shifting world alliances, he certainly understood the Law of Undulation.

How does the writer feel at the moment he puts ink on the page? Listen to verses 1 and 2: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” He’s down, he’s exhausted, he’s gasping for some refreshment, the way a thirsty animal crossing a desert is desperate for a drink.

Then in verse 3: “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” His tears have been continual, without a break. And added to whatever his personal struggles are, he is being tormented by others. They are either unbelievers who are mocking him for having faith when that faith apparently hasn’t prevented his difficult circumstances; or else they are like the traitorous friends of Job, who tried to heap blame on him for doing something wrong to cause his troubles.

But the writer keeps his wits about him enough to think back on the good times and memories, and those memories help restore his perspective. When we’re in the down times (when the emotional and spiritual elevator has gone all the way to the basement) remembering that this is only temporary allows us to turn to the future with hope.

And having wallowed for a while in his discouragement, he gives himself a good self-lecture in verse 5—and again a duplicate in verse 11: “Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.” That will be our simple summary for today. If you hear nothing else from Psalm 42, listen to this plea from a man of God from long ago, echoing down through the centuries to you today: “Put your hope in God.”

Although we humans ride the elevator up and down, the Lord is always constant. Here are the qualities of God upon which the

author of Psalm 42 bases his trust. Our Lord is:

- ◆ The Living God
- ◆ The Protector
- ◆ The Mighty One
- ◆ The Savior
- ◆ The God of My Life
- ◆ My Rock

It is this God, not some creature of our imaginations or human invention or philosophical speculation, that is the source of our eternal hope and confidence. This is the God of the Bible, the only true God.

How would you register right now on the “Hope Meter”? If [medical device company] Arthrex could invent a machine to measure not our heartbeat (the EKG) or our brain waves (the EEG) but rather the level of our hope and confidence in God to be with us and sustain us as we enter into a new and unknown year, what would your test show?

An Ancient Symbol of Faith

In the early centuries of the Christian movement, when it was highly politically incorrect (and even dangerous) to profess faith in Christ, our spiritual ancestors utilized various symbols and signs and codes to communicate with one another. Today we think of the cross as the universal symbol of faith. A more common one 1,900 years ago would be the fish symbol (a clever acrostic, meaning to those who knew the code that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and the world’s Savior). A shepherd’s staff would be drawn to represent Jesus as the Good Shepherd; a picture of a dove would represent the Holy Spirit; the Greek letters Alpha and Omega meant that Christ was the beginning and end. But a surprising symbol of great meaning to the earliest Christians was the anchor. Archaeologists have found numerous pictures of anchors carved on the walls of the catacombs in Rome, where believers were buried.

An anchor was the iron weight that, attached to a rope or chain, would hold a boat secure and in place in its harbor. You boat owners

here in Southwest Florida typically pull your craft out of the water by electric lifts and store it safely in a marina, or you put it on a trailer and haul it home to park in your driveway. Thus when the tropical storms blow in, your boat is safe.

But in the ancient Roman world—which was built around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, where seafaring was the most common form of transportation—there were no modern boat lifts. When the storms came, the only safe place was in a harbor with the heavy anchor resting on the bottom of the sea. That alone would keep the sailors safe and secure, no matter how strong the winds and tides and waves. It was this sense of the security God brings to us that made the anchor the fitting symbol for faith. Let's make sure that Christ is our secure anchor, and that we are firmly attached to Him. If we are, then hope in Him will allow us to ride out any storms that may come our way. ■

