

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, November 5, 2023

“Moravian Essentials: We Respond with Hope”

“Young at Heart” Message

Today, we have two young people participating in a mini obstacle course. The course consists of some books on the floor, and a strip of tape they need to balance on, along with a chair they need to climb over. They have to try not to touch the floor. The first time, both participants get to complete the course with their eyes open. The second time through, one of the participants will be blindfolded, and they are told to race. The participant who doesn't have a blindfold on will begin the course, but the blindfolded participant realizes the game isn't fair. The participant who isn't blindfolded comes back and helps to guide the blindfolded one through the course.

The Message

Thank you to our young people who were willing to try the obstacle course this morning!

When I asked them to try the obstacle course with their eyes open, it seemed quite easy. But once one of their eyes were covered, it became much more challenging. Perhaps even impossible.

It might have even started to feel hopeless, and maybe even a bit unfair. After all, one could see and the other couldn't.

But then, we saw something that gave some hope: the one who wasn't blindfolded offered to help the other through the obstacle course.

With guidance, they were able to finish the obstacle course together.

In life, we sometimes encounter situations that make us feel hopeless.

The obstacles that land in our path sometimes seem too much to overcome on our own.

How do we maintain hope when things feel hopeless?

In my role as a pastor, I get to talk with a lot of people, and often, people open up to me in ways they might not open up to other people. It is the nature of the work I do.

I often hear people share their feelings of hopelessness about a situation or about the way of the world at any given moment.

When people share these things with me, they often feel like the challenges just keep piling up. There doesn't seem to be enough support, and the bad starts to feel like it outweighs the good.

The obstacles that are placed in front of us can start to loom larger and larger, especially when our vision is clouded and we can't see a clear path forward.

How do we come to a place of hope in those times when we are looking through the veil of shadow?

Often, Christian churches will teach that all we need to do to fix all our problems and feel better is to have hope and trust in God.

However, when we struggle to do that and our vision is still clouded by that veil of shadow and hopelessness, this can make us feel guilty or even feel like a bad Christian because we can't easily remove the veil.

Our demonstration this morning is a great reminder that all those feelings are valid, and you are not a bad Christian during those times when you feel the obstacles becoming too much handle alone.

It was also a great reminder that it is OK to reach out to someone and share those feelings, and it is OK to seek help and an understanding ear.

Living in hope can be the most difficult of the things we consider essential for many of us, and it can be the most difficult to understand when we are struggling to make sense of the world around us, or when we feel like our world is crumbling.

So, I return to my original question: how can we find hope when things feel hopeless?

Hope is the final essential thing in this sermon series because hope is a product of our faith and love.

Faith can help us through times of hopelessness.

Faith is what makes it possible to have hope even when things might not appear to be hopeful.

That is what the Romans passage we read earlier is telling us.

If we already have what we hope for, there is no need to keep on hoping. Instead, we hope for something we have not yet seen, and we patiently wait for it.

Hope is what saves us.

But what that looks like in practice in the real world could be any number of things. God walks with us and guides us even when the obstacles become too much.

Even when our eyes are veiled and we cannot see the path before us clearly.

But God walking with us and guiding us might manifest in ways we least expect. It might be that another person walks alongside us and supports us. It might be something that happens that causes us to realize we need help. It might be little nudges or signs that keep recurring that cause us to rethink our approach to something.

Sometimes, those signs, nudges, or people placed in our lives at the exact right moments can fulfill our hope when it wanes.

Hope is confidence that love is stronger than death. And, our hope in the future informs and shapes our actions in the present.

It gives us the assurance and the courage to act with boldness in this life. Hope completes us and moves us forward, even when we would prefer to stand still or turn back.

We see hope for the future because we believe that this is God's world and we trust that God creates, Christ redeems, and the Spirit sustains us, and God is still at work in this broken world.

We have hope in the future because we have faith that is rooted in the past and love that is active in the present.

Our hope is grounded in God's eternal love for us and for creation, made present to us through the work of the Holy Spirit in all those little ways mentioned earlier.

This hope that we are talking about today is more than optimism or merely wishing that things will somehow turn out OK.

When people respond to our personal struggle and feelings of hopelessness or despair by saying things like "just think positively," or "chin up, God doesn't give us more than we can handle," we start to feel guilty for our feelings.

This guilt can actually cause stronger feelings of hopelessness.

Hope is what allows us to sit with our feelings, and hope is what allows us to meet other people on their paths that are shadowed by obstacles.

Hope is what encourages us to meet each other and ourselves where we are, rather than trying to cover our feelings or put on a brave face.

Hope is so much more than simply turning our frown upside down to please other people.

Hope is deeply spiritual. Hope is what keeps us going in the dark and sleepless nights because we know the sun will rise again.

Hope is what makes it possible to work, day after day, in ministries of justice and mercy.

Hope is what encourages us and sustains us even through the challenges of life.

Hope is what lifts our eyes from our own pain and misery so that we can look into another's eyes with compassion.

Hope is confidence that love is stronger than death and this life is not our only life.

We respond to God's loving actions in faith, and in love, and in hope. These responses to God's love work together, and that is why all three are essential responses to God's love for us.

Without one, the others become much harder to keep and hold in our hearts.

But, as we have heard over the last three weeks, and as we saw demonstrated earlier today, even during those times when we struggle to keep faith, love, or hope, we are guided by the Spirit, and God walks with us, guiding us toward wholeness and healing and helping us overcome the obstacles that may seem too big for us to handle alone.

Amen.

Let us pray: Compassionate, loving Spirit, we hold a space for gratitude, knowing that when we carry burdens, you carry those burdens with us.

When we struggle to maintain hope in a world that feels hopeless, or when our eyes are veiled and we cannot see the way around or through the obstacles

before us, we hold onto our faith that you will take our hand and guide us with love and hope.

We pray that you continue to walk with us, that you will endlessly reach for our hands and offer your guidance as you help us look toward the future with hope.

In your holy name we pray. Amen.