

Sermon by Rev. Dale Woods – May, 2010 at “Stewards By Design”

Stewards of Hope

Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:38-44

Focus: We are stewards of hope, not of our own making but of God's.

Lewis Smedes, who was a professor at Fuller Seminary, tells the story of driving away from Los Angeles airport one day, only to notice a huge, brilliantly illuminated billboard. In large letters, three small words were printed across it: KEEP HOPE ALIVE.

It was only three words but Smedes writes, "it was the most compelling billboard I've ever seen because keeping hope alive is the number-one priority" not only for Los Angeles or any other city, but for *our own lives as well*. It is also critical for our life together as congregations.

Imagine living without hope. Take away hope and the spirit dies. As Smedes says, "They may not bury you for a while, but without hope you're dead."

And that's exactly where we find the prophet Ezekiel: in a place of death amongst a people without hope.

Just to set the context: Ezekiel is writing during the Babylonian captivity. In 586 B.C. Israel was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. In several forced deportations the people were marched to Babylon. The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple, the sign of God's presence with his people, was destroyed! All but the very poorest were herded off as slaves to Babylon where they became foreigners in a strange land. It was despair upon despair, upon despair. A people without hope and as good as dead.

But as it is in God's story, death is never the last word. And that is where we find Ezekiel and ourselves. A vision is given to Ezekiel and as it unfolds there is this amazing movement from despair to hope.

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It all begins with a dream, a vision. That is almost always the starting place for hope. It's hard to have hope if you don't have a dream.

When I worked in the school system in Vancouver, I would often deal with students who were struggling academically. I came to the conclusion that for many of the students with whom I was working, the essential problem wasn't that they didn't have the academic ability. It was that they didn't have any dreams. And without a dream it's hard to have passion. And without passion it's hard to keep going. I spent less time on the academics and more time encouraging them to try dreaming. It didn't always work, but it was a start.

For Ezekiel, it all starts with a dream, a vision. But even a dream is not enough. You have to believe that it is possible to achieve the dream. So God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man can these bones live?” Is it possible to choose something besides death? I have known congregations, and I'm sure you have too, who have chosen death over the possibility of a new dream.

But even having a dream and believing it is possible is not enough. You have to be personally invested in it. So God gives Ezekiel a task: “Prophesy to these bones.” “Pray for the Spirit of God.”

It's one of the biggest mistakes a pastor can make: just because the congregation lets you drive the bus, it doesn't mean they're on the bus! God drags Ezekiel around in the vision, forcing him to get up close to the death, to the dry bones. God calls on Ezekiel to get personally invested in the vision, because you can't have one if you don't.

That's why you can't live off of someone else's dream. That's why you can't even live off of yesterday's dream. You have to have your own.

When my brother graduated from high school he was unsure of what he wanted to do. He was good in math and my dad encouraged him to become a chartered accountant. It was a

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‘strong’ encouragement! My brother enrolled in university and part way through the second term one night at the supper table my dad asked my brother how things were going. My brother said, “Great dad. I had the best day ever today.” My dad, intrigued, said, “What happened today?” My brother said, “I quit.” My dad was about to go ballistic when my brother cut him off and said, “Dad I don’t want to be a chartered accountant. I’ve never wanted to be a chartered accountant. That’s your dream, not mine. If you want to be a chartered accountant you should quit your job and go be one. I want to work with race horses.” My dad had the wisdom not to say anything. A few years later my dad and brother went into the race horse business and my brother is still in it today.

Lewis Smedes puts it in like this: "Dreams + faith + personal investment = passion for the possible."

He goes on to say, “Hope is the most powerful energy source in the world. Hope gives people power to achieve what they hope for. Some people think that poor people, hungry people, oppressed people change things because they are poor and hungry and oppressed. It is not true. People change things when they have hope that they do not need to be hungry or poor or oppressed anymore.”

All of us know that it is possible to lose hope in this life. It is even possible for congregations to lose hope. I read of one minister who got so discouraged with his congregation that he began the Sunday service by saying, “Let’s all join hands this morning and try communicating with the living!”

Human hoping is important to our lives. It gives us passion for ways to make our lives better; it gives us power to proceed against difficult odds.

But human hoping is not the same as Christian hoping. This is not simply a passage about human hoping; about our own dreams for life; about changing the world with our own limited resources. It is a story about God’s dream for his people and this world; it is a story about God’s promise to fulfill that dream. It is God who promises to act. It is God

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who has loved Israel and who will not let them go. In the story it is not what Ezekiel will do, but what the Spirit of God will do.

We have hope in this world because God has hope in this world. And we are stewards of that hope.

Joyce Hollyday tells the story of a school teacher who was assigned to visit children in a large city hospital and help them not fall too far behind in their school work.

This teacher received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child. The teacher took the boy's name and room number, and was told by the teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's room that she realized that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

The child was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through the English lesson, ashamed at putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?"

Before the teacher could finish her outburst of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy said: "They

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wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a kid who was dying, would they?"¹

Surely God wouldn't send his son to die on a cross if there was no hope for this world.

Surely Jesus wouldn't come back to the very same disciples who had abandoned him in his greatest time of need, if there wasn't hope for them.

Surely Jesus wouldn't commission us to go out into the world as his witnesses if there weren't people in the world who desperately longed to hear they are loved by God.

Lewis Smedes was right. There are few words more important than 'keep hope alive'. But sometimes we need others to help us 'keep hope alive'. That was largely the task of the prophet.

So this week may I encourage you to pray to be open to being the vessel God may use to pass on that hope? You just never know who may need it. And if we don't offer it, who will?

We are stewards of hope. Amen.

¹ (Donald William Dotterer, Living The Easter Faith, CSS Publishing Company, 1994.)