THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPTIMISM AND HOPE
November 24, 2013, Christ the King Sunday
Colossians 1: 3-5; 11-20
Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
Theme: We dare to hope because a loving God reigns over the universe.

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Here’s the difference. Optimism is inside of me; it rises from within me. It’s an attitude toward life that I choose, or maybe one I’m just born with. Whatever its genesis, optimism is internal, a personal disposition, part of my make-up. It’s a sweet thing, optimism, though it can wear thin. But more to the point, if it’s something that’s just “in me,” it can fade away when life gets really tough. Or to use another image, if it’s simply something like fuel that I have in my tank, I can eventually run out of it.

Hope, on the other hand, is grounded in something outside of me. It’s not a mere disposition or just an attitude I have; it’s rooted in a reality beyond me. I know that I’m creating something of a rhetorical dichotomy here, a bit too simple perhaps, but stay with me… I might say, for instance, that I’m an optimist because that’s simply how I am built. But, on the other hand, I could say that I am full of hope because there is good reason for hope out there – a reason beyond any native “chipper-ness” inside me.

In the passage from the Letter to the Colossians that Deidre just read, Paul tells the church in Colossae that he’s heard about their faith, and then in verse 5 that he’s heard about their hope, a hope that he says is “laid up for you in heaven.” In other words, their hope is not merely in them; it’s more than optimism because it’s based in something transcendent, something beyond them, in Paul’s words, something “laid up… in heaven.”

In the second part of passage we heard today, Paul points to the source of this hope that animates the Colossians. He says the reason they can hope is that they have been “rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son.” Then, in words that morph into a stunning hymn of praise, Paul says that the One who has rescued them from the power of darkness, namely Jesus Christ, is

“the image of the invisible God,”
“in (whom) all things hold together,”
“the beginning, ”
“the firstborn of the dead,”
“first place in everything.”

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This is theological poetry, perhaps better sung than said. But all its rhetorical arrows are aimed at the same target. The target is a core truth of the faith, the trust that – believe it or not – a loving God reigns supreme in the universe. This truth, Paul says, has been made real to us in Jesus Christ. In his cross and resurrection,
good won the defining battle with evil,
love won the contest with hate,
life triumphed over death.
The defining victory was won on Calvary’s hill
and the ultimate victory is guaranteed.
The last words of life and history shall be “truth” and “love” and “life,” not “lie” and “hate” and “death.”

This core affirmation of the Christian faith means that life really does have meaning and purpose. It means that this life is more than a sorry series of random passions and fears. The promise of the Gospel, the promise celebrated on this Christ the King Sunday, is that – even though it’s not obvious much of the time – the God of love rules the universe. And because of this, those Colossians – and you and I – can dare to hope, not merely to be optimistic, but to hope.

Until Harry Potter came along, the best-selling book in the English language beside the Bible was John Bunyan's classic 17th Century allegorical novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The book uses a journey as a metaphor for life. The very last scene finds the chief character, Christian, who is the archetype of a person struggling to lead a life of faith, coming to the end of his symbolic travels. His journey has taken him through many grave hardships with such emblematic names as the “Hill of Difficulty,” and the “Valley of the Shadow of Death.” Christian also faces temptations, mostly famously when he attends the “Vanity Fair.”

The last leg of his journey requires that he cross a great and fearsome river.
Christian is afraid. But together with his friend Hopeful, the two of them wade into the waters. Bunyan wrote the scene this way: “Christian began to sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all his waves go over me...” Hopeful, who is just ahead of him, replies to his cry of fear with what may be the most hope-filled words in all of literature; “Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good...” “Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good...”
I cannot imagine a book more different from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* than Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 noir novel, *No Country for Old Men*. It was made into an equally dark movie two years later. I watched the film on TV a few years ago and found it so distasteful that I declined to read the book when a friend gave me a copy. But brutal and grim as both the film and book are, both actually end on a note of hope – cautious and enigmatic hope, but *hope* none-the-less.

If you’ve read the book or seen the movie you know it’s about a desert drug deal gone bad and the disappearance of several million dollars in cash, an event that includes a number of brutal murders. Following this opening scene, two plots unfold. First, the county sheriff, a good man, a no-nonsense local named Bell, investigates the crime. In the second and parallel plot, a hired killer named Chigurh searches for the missing money. In doing so, he leaves a bloody trail of pointless death. Chigurh is the personification of mindless evil in the world. He is death and hate and meaninglessness incarnate.

At the end of the story Chigurh is still roaming the earth. All the decent characters are either dead or defeated. It seems a narrative picture of utter hopelessness… until the *very* end. The sheriff, Bell, is speaking. Bell remembers aloud a dream his about his late father, a lawman like him, “an old-fashioned man of unbending integrity. This is his dream: “…we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin’ through the mountains of a night…. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me… and he was carrying fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was going on ahead of me and he was fixin’ to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there…”

*and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there…“*

“In the film version of *No Country for Old Men*, this eschatological speech is the last scene. When Bell finishes speaking these words, the credits roll. At most showings, the audiences sit puzzled, unsure of what to make of this curious ending. In one movie house, it was reported that when the screen went to black, a man in

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the theater shouted into the darkness, ‘What the (blankety-blank) was that all about?’” ¹

What it was all about was a hint of hope, just a hint, in the face of seemingly triumphant evil, a glimmer of hope in the deep darkness, hope that in the end, “whenever we get there, He will be there, waiting by the fire.” A much darker version of hope this, but still hope nonetheless, a whisper of Bunyan’s same hope: “Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good…”

One last story… A Reformed Rabbi named Hugo Gryn rose to be one of the most prominent Jewish thinkers in post-war Britain. “When he was a boy, he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz… Hugo’s father insisted they observe the Sabbath… Hugo remembered to the day he died a time, when to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a shabbat candle. Hugo was furious and protested, ‘Father, that is all the butter we have!’ His father said, ‘Without food we can live for weeks, but we cannot live for a minute without hope.’” ²

Dare to hope, even when you don’t have it in you. 
Dare to hope, because there’s good reason to hope that’s outside of you and me. 
Dare to hope, because – less-than-obvious as it sometimes may seem – the God of Love reigns over the universe.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*


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