

Face the Future With Hope

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5

Pastor Chip Fisher
June 14, 2009

We Americans seem to be both blessed and cursed with a short historic memory. Some of you remember the TV commentator Charles Kuralt; not long ago I was reading about his observations of the cultural scene. “The bright sun of American optimism has disappeared...” he wrote, telling of a conversation he had had with a young man graduating from the University of Wisconsin. The student observed, “This must be the worst time in history to be graduating from college.” (For what it’s worth, this conversation took place in 1982.)

Kuralt wondered, however, how anyone could spend four years at a fine university and remain so unaware of history. “Had he not heard about the graduates of 1861 who went right from class to the Battle of Bull Run?” Or the graduates of 1932, who did post-graduate work selling apples on street corners? Or the graduates of 1943, many of whom died...on the beaches of Iwo Jima?”

I do not mean to make light of the economic difficulties and personal anguish so many are facing in 2009. Financial uncertainty, a sense of dramatic political change unleashed—these are exhilarating times for many and challenging times for many. In a time like this, unsettled and uncertain, it makes sense for us to inquire about genuine hope. What about a hope which brings enthusiasm and vitality and “staying power” to our lives, despite the ominous “unknowns?” How do you face the future?

(One thing about facing the future: let’s not place too much emphasis on what the experts have predicted. It’s always dangerous to extrapolate the future from the past. Eminent physicist Lord Kelvin stated in 1895, “Heavier than air flying machines are impossible and will never happen.” Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox observed on December 5, 1941 (two days before the attack on Pearl Harbor) “No matter what happens, the U. S. Navy is not going to be caught napping.” President Jimmy Carter said in a speech in 1978, “Because of the greatness of the Shah, Iran will always be an island of stability in the Middle East.” Business Week prophesied in

1979, “With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn’t likely to carve out a significant slice of the U.S. market.”)

So much for observing present realities and trying to look ahead.

Psychologists tell us as a result of numerous studies how an optimistic outlook toward life is healthy for people. The December, 2006, issue of the Mayo Clinic Proceedings medical journal published results of a massive four-decade study administered in the mid-1960’s to over 7000 students at UNC Chapel Hill who had taken a personality test trying to measure their inclination to be optimistic or pessimistic. As you might expect, most students fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, but it turned out that 1630 were considered to be pessimists while 923 were labeled optimists. Over the next 40 years, researchers discovered these pessimistic students had a 42% greater likelihood of dying from any cause than the optimistic students. [Dr Charles Carver, PhD, has also researched how an optimistic outlook helps people cope with stressful experiences. The more positive folks tend to take better care of themselves with respect to exercise, diet, and lifestyle, while the more negative folks tend to worry too much, inducing cardiovascular disease. Fortunately, Dr Carver also believes that “optimism” can be learned and practiced on purpose; our attitude is not merely something we’re born with. As you might expect, he recommends such practices as yoga, meditation, cognitive therapy, and keeping a journal of gratitude—to prompt people to intentionally focus on those things all around us for which we can give thanks.]

So far, so good. But I hope you don’t think we’re all here this morning so I can remind you to keep “thinking happy thoughts” and “focus on the positive” and be sure to get enough exercise and yoga. These are helpful things—I hope you are doing them and I hope you all live long and faithful lives.

But what about reality? What about the beaches of

Iwo Jima—or the valleys of Afghanistan—and what about when you’ve been notified your department budget has been slashed, and you realize your spouse is not coming back, and you’ve been told it’s time to call the people at Hospice? What about when you just don’t feel very optimistic? What about the possibility that our state deficit will keep rising above \$20 billion and even deeper cuts in spending will have to be made? If the Chinese quit buying our bonds, and the Government’s unfunded liability continues to skyrocket to \$60, \$70, \$80 trillion while unemployment keeps bumping up? What about the possibility of the millions of single mothers and children descending deeper into poverty, already victims of a national ethos in flux? There’s no end to possible negative scenarios.

Of course I hope these dire scenarios prove inaccurate. But the biblical hope, the hope of which Paul writes in Romans 5, is a rational hope based on a sure foundation which overcomes, independent of what the economy or the Senate—the Roman one under Caesar or the American one in Washington—may be doing.

We hear in the first verse [Romans 5:1] that our sure foundation is the grace of God, made known to us in the love of Jesus who went even to the cross for our sake. The unshakable love of God becomes the foundation for our rational hope. Let’s follow the sequence Paul describes in some detail...

Paul writes that we have been granted “access” to the upholding grace of God in which his disciples are already now living through our Lord Jesus Christ. At one time—before the Lamb of God on the cross showed the world the love of God—other religious systems recognized access to the various deities as a big problem. (I think of the courage of Esther in approaching King Ahasuerus with both trepidation and courage: she had no legal “access” to him, and when she entered into the court to speak to him without being summoned, she ran the risk of being put to death.) We may pray to God; we may depend upon the irrational and forgiving grace of God toward us when we are still imperfect. Jesus has shown us: the High King does not kill us, but receives us in love.

The word Paul uses (translated “access”) connotes two things: both that safe “access” Jesus offers us as former intruders into the courtyard of God but also the sense of a safe haven or harbor available to storm-tossed ships in a tempest. (Something like the safety the “Wedge” and Balboa peninsula provides small craft today.) The ancients were at the mercy of big storms; a protected harbor could save their boats and their lives. Of course they tried to anticipate the weather; they would not sail on the Mediterranean beyond late September due to the possibility of storms. But in case storms arose, when tragedy and uncertainty threatened, a safe haven would still save them.

(Bottom line, Paul is saying that our hope which rests upon the love of God is a rational, life-saving hope. The love of God endures no matter what else is going on around us. I read not long ago of a ferocious storm many years ago which whipped up in the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron, off Ontario. A large boat transporting ore was sunk, and many lost their lives. Six men and a young girl, however, escaped into something of a lifeboat. The waves were so wild, however, the lifeboat itself kept flipping over and over. One by one the men lost their grip and disappeared. These were strong, seasoned sailors—they were lost. The mate, however, had lashed the girl to the boat. When the storm abated she alone drifted safe with the boat to the shore. She had been fastened securely to what could not sink.)

If anyone had experienced the reality of both the forgiving grace of God as well as the reality of human suffering on this earth, Paul did. Paul is not one for recommending we go into therapy to cultivate a positive attitude toward life because the storms are only an illusion, or because life will be easy with a smile on our face. On the contrary!

Life could be brutal in Rome for one who followed Jesus with any kind of conviction. Paul was on the receiving end of the lash, the rod, the fist, the leg iron, the prison cell door clanged shut behind him. So Paul no sooner promises that disciples of Jesus may enjoy peace with God than he also warns, “we will boast of our sufferings, which will produce endurance, which will produce character—which will produce hope.” [vv 3-4]

The word translated “sufferings” could also be translated “pressure” or “stress,”—the very same condition which may take years off our lives if not faced with some sort of hopefulness in something else. The disciples in Rome ended up facing pressure and persecution and martyrdom for centuries. But that stress does not need to turn anyone pessimistic; it may instead be utilized to produce “endurance.”

This sort of “endurance” is never a passive resignation and is never bought “on the cheap”; it describes an active overcoming, a “bring it on” attitude born of inner conviction rather than outer bluster. The many years of trial and error honed in Thomas Edison this quality translated as “endurance.” You probably know he was once [at least said to be] asked by a reporter, “How did it feel, being such a failure, when you failed for years and years to figure out how to invent a light bulb which worked?” Edison replied, “I never failed; I was simply discovering it was a 2000-step process.”

(Another anecdote in the life of Edison illustrates this virtue which Paul says can come only as the result of misfortune, pressure, difficulty. To Edison we owe the light bulb, the microphone, the phonograph record player, movies with sound, and more than a thousand other inventions. For 10 years Edison had been losing money trying to perfect a new kind of storage battery. One freezing December night in 1914 the cry “Fire” went up. Given the chemicals and the flammable materials, the entire warehouse and all the contents were a total loss. Edison’s son, in his biography of his dad, was concerned at this total write-off. He was worried about his dad’s spirit. Until his dad came running toward him: “Where’s mom? Go get her, son, and tell her to bring her friends! They’ll never see a fire like this again!” The next morning Edison called together his employees and announced, “We’re going to rebuild!” He instructed one of his men to lease all the machine shops in the area; another to obtain a wrecking crane from the Erie Railroad Co. As an afterthought, he asked, “Oh, by the way, does anybody know where we can get some money?” He explained later, “We’ve just cleared out a bunch of old rubbish. We’ll build bigger and better on the ruins.” Then he rolled up his coat for a pillow and fell asleep on a table. [p 109, *The Winning Attitude*, John Maxwell.]

In Paul’s progression, this is the quality of “endurance” or “fortitude” necessary to produce “character.” [v 4] This word is used of metal which has been refined in the furnace. Sterling silver or purified gold—the dross or impurity has been cleared away. A “character” may be cultivated only in hardship or stress; our desire to take the easy way out, to avoid the pain or risk can never buy us this “character” Paul describes. Paul is describing the Monterey Cypress; you’ve probably seen the pictures of that hardy, windswept tree which can somehow survive in sheer rocky terrain where nothing else green seems able to scratch out a living. Quite the opposite from the hothouse begonia which can barely survive when it’s planted outside in a real garden with real cold at night.

Our hope in the love of God is precisely what allows us to live our lives so that we develop a character and a trust which can stand true and keep growing in every situation and circumstance. This kind of hope “does not disappoint us;” it only grows more strong with usage and in adversity. It stands in opposition to the hope which hopes life will never toss us a curveball, will never rain on our picnic or storm while we’re at sea. Our Christian hope trusting in the foundation of the grace of God is revealed and experienced only in the difficulties.

Our sure hope “which does not disappoint” requires some grit. Even though the Holy Spirit assures us of the love of God within our hearts, our Christian hope requires some grit. Our hope is not the illusory optimism which cannot face the hard facts of life and the certainty of death. It does not need to tapdance around those twins of the modern world, despair and depression.

Hope and despair are not opposites—as Joan Chittester observes, they are cut from the very same cloth, made out of the very same circumstances. Each day each one of us gets to choose how we will face our circumstances and what we will fashion from our cloth. Each day we get to choose: will I assume I need a cloudless sky to make a bright future because in the end I assume I need to play God? Or will I assume that this day, in this present darkness or brokenness or loss, the Holy Spirit is with me, the

Holy Spirit of God who has been faithful to lead me to this time and place. When I am disappointed by life's cruel twists, will I stand frustrated and frightened, cemented in the present moment and afraid of the future? Or will I again choose to trust in God, choose to lean into the future, choose to trust that the Light of the world who has brought me safe thus far will likewise sustain me thru the darkness of uncertainty yet one more time?

Hope is not the absence of despair or depression: hope is the result of despair and depression which has been surrendered to the love and the power of God over and over and over again. Our embarrassments, our heartbreaks, our failures need not drive us to despair: they are the same fabric which may grow into a mature hope. Our memories of our failures; our memories of feeling inadequate and broken—these memories, nurtured by the Spirit, become the seedbed of our hope. (You are here this morning, you have not given up or died: whatever your despair, your aloneness, your loss, your struggles—your lifetime of struggles—God has not abandoned you; you were not alone then nor are you alone now. By the grace of God, keep striving to turn past struggle into present hope. This attitude is the basis for our sure hope in God into the future.)

[In my experience, it's a lot easier to muster up the "grit of hope" when we keep looking backward as well as forward. Paul looks back to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross but also forward to the "hope which does not disappoint." The Scriptures do this hundreds of times—look backward in order to help the people of God muster up some grit for a challenge in the present: for one example, the psalms rehearse the saving events and the power of God who rescued the Israelites from the land of Egypt. For that matter, the ten commandments are prefaced by "I am the LORD your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." At least eleven times in Genesis the promise of the land to Abraham is repeated to his heirs (e.g. the eleventh, to Jacob: "I am God almighty... a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land... I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and... to your offspring after you." [Gen 35:9-12] Jacob kept facing the future in resolute hope, in faithful and bold action, since God kept reminding

Jacob of God's promises which He would surely keep.]

I don't know about all of you, but I am not naturally very optimistic. As I get older I try not to get too grumpy about it, but I think I naturally tend to get more pessimistic about the future of this land that we love and the nearly 7 billion children of God on planet earth. But somehow, by God's grace, I keep getting more hopeful about the larger picture, the eternal things, the love and the power of God who is sovereign. The God who raises up princes and puts down kingdoms; who kept warning His covenant people not to worship idols and not to neglect their covenant relationship. And when all seemed lost, again, God would raise up a remnant; God would raise up a green sprout out of the dead stump; Jeremiah would buy a field as all the people were getting carted off to Babylon as prisoners and real estate values were really tanking. In the fullness of time God raised up a Savior—and then, raised Him from the dead.

We are not the first generation to question the goodness and power of God to make things right; to ask whether it is rational for us to hope in the future. Even the early Church grew impatient with what they had been taught: that Jesus would come back and make everything new and good again. Their hope flickered faint. They asked Peter, the leader the Lord had appointed, for one good reason they should keep believing Jesus was going to come again. They were being slaughtered by the imperial powers of Rome. Nothing had been made new; certainly nothing had been made good. What difference had Jesus made?

There was a lot Peter couldn't explain in his epistle; there's a lot I cannot explain to you. How correctly were the thoughts of Jesus interpreted, then written down? In what way will Jesus come again? What plans for renewal and regeneration, after two thousand years, will He execute? Personal renewal? Environmental renewal? Cosmic renewal? What are His plans for this world, or is He focused only on the heavenly dimension? There was a lot Peter didn't know how to explain, so he got very simple with those disciples: "God promised." God promised; therefore you can bank on it. [2 Peter 3; observations

of Lewis Smedes]

In His grace, God has given me a healthy dose of trust and hope. (Perhaps it is because I have had desperate need of His forgiving grace, and have had to call out to Him, and have had plenty of opportunity to see Him deliver me from the end of my rope into something of His marvelous light.)

I never know whether my hope is based on strength or weakness. Maybe I'm not courageous enough to give up on my hope in God; maybe I'm overly gullible and reluctant to face a Godless reality. So be it. Maybe my hope is too strong, and I have observed the promise of God to save far too often, and from the inside out, to give up on my hope in the God who saves. So be it.

However gullible we seem, however silly in the eyes of the rapidly-changing world, still we proclaim: Jesus died and God raised Him again from the dead. God is present with us, and in us, in His Spirit; this day we may pray to God and speak to God and hear from God. If God disappoints our highest hope, there's nothing left. Nothing. Without Jesus, the only choices are terrible. Vain cycles repeat. Human plans descend into deadly despair or utopian tyranny—the more frightful and violent when its naked power is clothed in the words of compassion. These options are terrible; I keep betting on Jesus, my Lord and my God.

All the heroes of God whose endurance cultivated a character of hope out of seeds of despair did not die in Bible times. In 1989 there was a faithful Catholic priest who would not go along with the bullies of the Communist Party. His name was Vaclav Maly; his penalty for putting his hope in Jesus and preaching the gospel was to be “disbarred” from the priesthood and to spend the rest of his life cleaning toilets in the subway system of Prague. He was still scrubbing away down there, recanting not one word and giving not one inch, when on Christmas Eve, 1989 the gathering crowds sensed the time had come. The New York Times records how the people began to call out in unison for the hopeful former priest, chanting, “Maly, Maly, Maly!” Vaclav Maly emerged from underground and led the 800,000(!) people to the Square in Old Prague. There the defrocked priest led Worship and offered

the sacrament and Christ's offer of forgiveness to hundreds and hundreds of Communists (and no doubt others) who readily came forward to repent and receive them.

The next morning the tanks were gone; the sovereign God had used this faithful man full of God's hope even in the darkest of places to spark this “Velvet Revolution.” Not a life was lost nor a drop of blood shed.

In the End, the future belongs to God. Set your hopes upon Him; love Him and serve Him. God bless you.

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.