

Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost – Naomi Brown

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Hope is a fragile creature. It can feel like a feeble flame, easily extinguished by the winds of this world, becoming both more fragile and more vital as the night grows colder. As people of faith, we are in no way exempt from the icy winds that threaten to snuff out the fire of our hope and leave us in despair. Yet hope is crucial to Christian practice. As Rev. Dr. Lauren Winner notes, “Despair diminishes our capacity to act. Hope makes action possible.” How, then, can we protect and rekindle our hope when reasons for despair press in on every side?

Hope asks us to surrender our illusion of control. To open ourselves up to hope feels risky, because it requires acknowledging precisely what we can and cannot control. Hope demands an awareness that we do not know all outcomes, and frequently can do little to determine them. An unfortunate trend throughout Christian history is the inclination to replace hope with certainty. It is easier to have belief in a doctrine rather than hope in a person, and often we have used our theologies to drive away the very ambiguity that is necessary for genuine hope. A posture of hope requires us to admit that we do not fully understand how or when or why God may choose to act, and to place our trust in the living person of God rather than in our own beliefs about God.

Rev. Dr. Kenyatta Gilbert describes this posture in his commentary on today’s gospel passage, saying, “Resurrection is an absurd notion to accept unless one’s faith claim is premised on the assumption that the historical process is not theologically closed. To believe in the resurrection of the dead insists on the understanding that only a free God can work wonders in history, has the power to liberate, to heal, and yes, to raise the dead. What resurrection symbolizes, if it communicates nothing else, is that only a God unharnessed can keep the historical horizon open. In short, a God who raises life from death stands outside the expectation, prediction, and horizon of human control.”

The Sadducees were a sect within Judaism that accepted the authority of only the written books of the Torah. The Pharisees, the theological group with which Jesus was most closely aligned, also accepted the oral Torah, which had been passed down through generations and was used to interpret the written law. The Sadducees (who we, who are Protestant Christians, should probably read ourselves as in this text) had a theologically closed view of God and the world. They, like many Christian traditions, assumed that what was written in the Scriptures was the only authority, and since they could not find evidence of the resurrection in the written Torah, did not believe in an afterlife. Their closed view towards the ongoing revelation of God prohibited them from having hope for their eternity. But Jesus uses that which they viewed as authoritative to teach the Sadducees not only about the hope of the resurrection, but also to show that the God revealed in the written Scriptures is not confined to them.

The question the Sadducees ask is not meant to be genuine. It was a carefully designed trap, using wordplay and impossible hypotheticals. It is the third and final in a series of questions put to Jesus by the religious leaders with the intent to ensnare him. But while the Sadducees are not

entering into the dialogue desiring to learn, but rather to humiliate, Jesus takes their question at face value and responds with a genuine answer.

Jesus' response tells the Sadducees that they are asking the wrong questions. In taking their question seriously, he is able to shift their thinking from the lenses of this world to the lenses of the Kingdom. The laws of levirate marriage referenced by the Sadducees were established to ensure that a man's lineage would live on, to provide the hope that even if one were to die without an heir, there would still be descendants to carry the family on into the future. But Jesus' response offers a new hope, that of the resurrection. In the resurrection, procreation and therefore marriage is not necessary for preservation, for the children of the resurrection cannot die anymore. In the resurrection, the ways in which we humans have tried to solidify a legacy that will outlive our fleeting years, to create some refuge from death's oblivion through descendants, wealth, fame, or power, become meaningless. Our hope is no longer in these attempts to "cheat death," but rather in a God who is able to defeat death all together, a God for whom even the patriarchs who have died centuries ago are just as alive as ever.

This is the message that was received by the Sadducees, and it is powerful enough that right after our lectionary reading ends, even they admit, *Teacher, you have spoken well*, and no longer try to trap him with their questions. But I can't help but imagine how this teaching was received by others in the crowd, particularly by the women who gathered around Jesus. I imagine many women in the crowd, and countless others who have heard this passage over the centuries, felt a secret spark of joy that the most concrete detail Jesus gives of the resurrection is that then no one will be *marr[ied] nor ... given in marriage*. In a patriarchal society, one where women had little to no voice or agency for or within their marriages, sometimes even being required to marry their rapists, how many women have silently praised God that in the resurrection no one would be given in marriage? And how many enslaved persons have rejoiced in the promise that, one day, they too would be freed and would no longer be married off for the profit of their oppressors? Even for those for whom marriage has been a blessing rather than a curse, how powerful that the one detail given by Jesus of the resurrected life highlights the equal dignity and agency of women and the oppressed.

Even in our modern era, Jesus' teaching offers hope of freedom. Western evangelical Christianity has made an idol out of marriage and worshiped the family. Marriage has been seen as the pinnacle of Christian life and relationship, and singleness therefore has frequently been dismissed as a time in life to "get through" or as one's burden to bear. And we have cheapened the beauty and the gift of both marriage and singleness when we have presented our queer siblings with the choice between lifelong celibacy or leaving the church. Jesus, however, offers a vision of the resurrection without marriage, a vision in which singleness is positioned as better representing the coming Kingdom of God than marriage. While marriage is certainly a beautiful and holy undertaking, it is important that we remember that it is not eternal, and to be conscious of what we can learn about Kingdom relationships from those who are single. As a single person myself, I admit that I find hope in the knowledge that whether I marry in this life or not, in the resurrection, I will be able to enjoy deep spiritual and relational intimacy not just with one person, but with all persons.

However, as is typical of Jesus' teachings on the afterlife, his response in this passage does not provide the kind of answers we or the Sadducees seek. The Christian faith does not allow us assurance as we assess our mortality, or at least, it does not offer assurance in the sense of confidence in what we can expect upon dying. The answers I would want from Jesus in regards to the resurrection—who will be there, what will it be like, when will it occur—are pretty much absent. But while details of the resurrection event may be lacking, in just a few simple sentences Jesus paints a radical vision of the character of the resurrected life. The hope of the resurrection is the hope not only of a new life, but of a new way of living. In the resurrection, that in which the powerful have placed their hope is no more, and the hope of the powerless and downtrodden is made complete.

But what does this resurrection hope mean for us now? While the promise of a life to come may provide solace for some of life's most existential fears, we also need some source of hope for our daily lives. As Christians, we are often far too eager to tell one another to simply trust in our eternal hope, as though being assured of life's ultimate end eliminates the very real need for something to cling to here and now. Loss and grief and suffering abound, and despair is a rational response. No matter how wonderful the resurrected life may be, there is no doubt that this life we are in will contain many sorrows. Hope for the future is a wonderful gift, but without hope for our present realities, we are paralyzed by fear and despair.

Thankfully, Scripture is not shy of talking about despair. Our other lectionary texts for today provide us with stories of the people of God trying to find hope in the midst of their present situations.

In Haggai, we enter the scene as the Hebrew people have returned from their exile and are rebuilding the temple. The foundations have been built, but many of the older generation, those who saw the original temple in all its splendor, are disheartened by the memory of the old temple compared to the present state of the new construction, a mere shadow of its former glory. Meanwhile others among the people think with dismay about the vast resources it will require to complete the work, in a time when they are still trying to scrape together a life for themselves post-exile. The fear that the glory of the past has been lost forever, and the fear that their scarcity will prohibit any flourishing in the future, have made the Israelites feel hopeless about their present reality.

It is into this situation, addressing both the past and future reasons for despair, that the Lord of hosts speaks through Haggai, saying to the people, *Yet now take courage; ... work, for I am with you. ... My Spirit abides among you; do not fear.* The hope that is offered in their present moment is the presence of God. While those who have seen the temple in its former glory feel crushed by what has been lost, the prophet responds that what the temple had always truly meant, the presence of God abiding among the people, is not tempered by the diminished splendor of the building. And those who nervously consider the inadequacy of their resources are reminded that *the silver* and *the gold* are the Lord's. They need not live in fear of scarcity, they have only to respond faithfully, and if God decides to fill the temple with splendor, God will do so. Both a romanticized view of the past and fatalistic calculations about the future lead to despair. But the presence of God brings hope.

Like the people in Haggai's time, the church in Thessalonica finds hope difficult in their present situation. They have heard rumors that the end times are at hand and are fearful of the tribulations they believe are coming. As in the time of Haggai, the people know what the ultimate future contains: for the Hebrew people, this means the temple rebuilt in splendor, for the church in Thessalonica, obtaining the glory of the Lord. But both peoples also know that the road to this ultimate end is full of suffering, hardship, and sacrifice. So we too, living in the "already and the not yet," may find the demands of our present context overshadowing the hope we have in the resurrection. Like the Hebrews returning from exile, how often have we seen that which was once full of goodness and life be diminished beyond recognition? How often have we counted out the cost of what the future will require and have found our resources to be woefully inadequate? The state of our climate is becoming catastrophic, our nation is being consumed more and more by hatred, we stir up unrest around the world for our own profit and then turn away those who flee from the ensuing violence, we build new prisons to accommodate the demands of an unjust system and watch over and over as black bodies are shot down by those who claim to serve and protect. Institutions crumble, families break apart, and we wrestle with our own loneliness, hurt, and trauma. While we may not be living in fear that the end-times are imminent, at every level, there is much about which to be *shaken in mind or alarmed*.

Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians is to *stand firm and hold fast to the traditions* they were taught, to cling to their identity as a people *beloved by the Lord*, chosen as first fruits of salvation. For the Hebrew people, hope was found not in rebuilding the temple so that God would once again dwell among them, but in recognizing that God had never ceased to abide with them. So too the Thessalonians can hope not only in what God will do in the future, but also in what God is doing in the current moment—loving, choosing, and sanctifying God's people. This is the hope of the resurrection, not only for the future but also for the present. It is the promise that the God who spoke out of the burning bush is still the God of the living, that this God who has proven to be faithful in the past and given promises for our future desires to live among God's people right here and now, walking with us—in, through, and beyond life.

Paul concludes this passage by praying that the God who has given eternal comfort and hope would comfort and strengthen the Thessalonians' hearts for their present work. As we look to embody resurrection hope, we will require both the comfort and strength of God. Often, we desire one or the other: comfort, so that we have no need to be strong, or strength, so that we can protect ourselves from any need for comfort. This world is full of sorrow, and we need comfort in our despair. But we also need strength to overcome despair, strength to choose to act, to stand firm, to work towards the future, no matter how bleak it may seem. May we hold fast to the hope of the resurrection, the hope of an upside-down Kingdom where priorities and powers are dismantled and rebuilt. But may we also have the comfort and strength to embody a present hope, the hope that the God of the Living abides among us, yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.