

"THE HOLY SPIRIT SURPRISES WITH HOPE"

Notes toward my sermon

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1 Did you know that in the Japanese language there is no word for **hope**? The word for desire is closest, but everybody knows you can be brimful of desire without hope of getting what you desire, & the resulting soul-condition is frustration & despair, the opposite of hope. But while only 1% of the Japanese population is Christian, the most advantaged 20% are open to Christianity because of the enthusiasm for the music of J.S.Bach, which is full of Christian hope because it's thoroughly biblical, & the Bible is the world's most hopeful book because it's full of promises, the promises of the God who is faithful to his word & all-powerful to enact his promises--& what is hope if not faith in promises grounded in trust in the promiser? And what soul-condition does hope produce if not joy? And what convinces of the truth of the gospel if not joy?

2 All this comes together at the end of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus & his disciples had **lived** God's promises through the prophets, & in the Lord's Prayer we disciples continue to **pray** those promises. But they found, & we find, that the praying & living of the divine promises is no guarantee that their fulfilment will match the particulars of our expectation: promises are promises to grow on & hope through, not predictions to calculate by & bank on. The Bible's promises, when prayed & lived, give our lives dependable direction toward the Promiser, toward G our heavenly Father, our Source & Destiny. This direction is surer than a known way; for a known way leads us only to a known destination, & our hearts cry out for direction into the unknown through clouds of unknowing & valleys of deep darkness.

In this worship, our first reading was **Joel 2:23-29**: God reveals his loving intention: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Our second reading, **Luke 24:13-21a**, shows that the cost to God of the working out of that promise was the death of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; & the cost to Jesus' disciples was deep despair (v.21: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.")--yet Jesus himself, who had momentarily despaired on the cross, now carrying the promise in his resurrection body, said (v.49) "I am sending upon you what my Father promised." And our third reading, **Acts 1:1-5; 2:1-4**, has Jesus saying to his disciples (1:4) "Wait there [in Jerusalem] for the promise of the Father," which was that God would pour out his Spirit first on his faithful followers & then on all humanity (in Joel, "all flesh"). The reading concludes, vv.2:1-4, with the fulfilment of the promise: the Spirit is indeed poured out on Jesus' 120 disciples, the event Christians through the ages have called Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. What had seemed to them, & everybody else who knew of Jesus' crucifixion, to be the death of the Jesus movement led directly, through the resurrection of Jesus, & the gift of the Spirit, to the birth of the Church. The despairing disciples were surprised by their Lord's appearances to them, hopeful as they obeyed his command to wait, & then the Holy Spirit surprised them with soul-energy, with (Luke 24:49) "power from on high."

3 Now, from time to time throughout my 60 years of ordained ministry, someone has said to me "Can't I believe in God without believing in the Trinity?" My response was & is, "Not if you are a Christian." The story I have just told is the story of the hope-giving divine promise. The Father promised, the Son in his life-death-resurrection embodied the promise, & the Holy Spirit is the promise fulfilled in the birth, life, & expectation of the Christian Church. Because it is the supreme Story that will not die, it is full of surprises for those whose minds have been formed to a godless way of making sense of life & of the world. If you don't believe in ghosts, you are surprised to hear about the particular ghost whom our Lord Jesus sent to be with us in the forming of the Church & the leading of Christian lives--the *Holy Ghost*--"ghost" being an Old English word which got translated into Latin as "Spirit."

The plain fact is that we cannot expect to be more than pale Christians if we do not attend to the formation of our Christian mind over against the mind our culture forms in us. Said a nonChristian woman plaintively to me, "I wish I could believe as you believe." I replied, "You can if you are willing to live as I live," including church-going & daily devotion. She can't think her way into a new way of believing, but she can act her way into a new way of feeling-imagining-thinking.

living. That action should involve regular Christian education: one sermon a week is hardly enough to train the troops for the daily & lifelong battle of the Lord. Besides, preaching is to persuade, teaching is to enlighten--& even an hourlong sermon (which this won't be) is not enough to do both. Preaching may be a good breakfast, but teaching is a good dinner.

4 The perpetual offer of the gospel, this morning as every day, is the true & living hope that "sin, death, & the devil" cannot confound. Over against it stand hopelessness & false hope:

hopelessness--Two Fridays ago, Loree & I were at Lincoln Center for the New York Philharmonic rendering of Gustav Mahler's 9th symphony, which is 83 minutes of glorious sound under the incumbus of his sense of impending death from a bad heart: he died at only 50 years of age. Is there anything wrong with you that makes you feel hopeless, despairing? In your whole life, what was your sharpest experience of that feeling? In my case, it was a dozen years ago--suddenly going blind in my left eye & being told that at any moment in the following five years I might go totally blind. But the "Lord of all hopefulness" (as the hymn puts it) did not let me down.

false hope--In the Czech Republic, Loree & I walked into a Nazi death-camp under a huge sign reading "ARBEIT MACHT FREI," Labor Makes [You] Free. The idea was that if the prisoners had some hope they could work themselves to freedom, they'd be easier for the guards to manage & conduct into gas-chambers marked "Show-ers." In your life, what has been your keenest experience of hoping falsely?

5 Finally, **the true and living hope**. It cannot much have to do with your body, for you are a terminal case: you're not going to get out of this alive. But it does have to do with how you use your body up, how you burn it out as "a candle of the Lord" (Prov.20:27). Fifty years & five days ago, I wrote this in my diary as I was kneeling in morning prayer with lit candle: "Thou, O Lord [Jesus], art man the tallow. Thou, O Christ, art God the Flame! My body the tallow, my spirit the flame." Through days, years, decades the Holy Spirit has been surprising me with hope--then, as a young pastor, praying for & ministering to his people; now, as an old man whose candle is short but whose Christian hope is strong, & brighter if you have listened well to this sermon.

I'll let the sage in Proverbs 3:5-6 have the last words, words I learned as a child which are truer & deeper for me now than they could have been then: "Trust in the LORD with all thy might and lean not unto thine own understanding; in all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

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