**Sermon for July 12th**

Halloween 1974. I was nine and my little brother seven and even as we putting our costumes on we both got sick to our stomachs. I don’t know if it was something we ate or if it was the flu but it put a quick and sudden end to trick-or treating. Later in the evening, after our stomachs had settled down mom came in to our room to trying to make things better.

She said, “Perhaps we can hope your dad will bring some candy in from work?” To which my little brother said, “I don’t think so mom, my hoper is broken”

We all hope. It is deeply human to hope. And we’re going to talk about hope today.

In our readings this summer we are working our way through Paul’s brilliant but sometimes confusing Letter to the Romans. This week we hear him talk about setting our minds on things of the flesh or setting our minds on things of the Spirit. “To set the mind on the flesh is death”, he writes “but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

I think we’re well advised, when we read “set your mind on” we hear “set your hope in”?

We all live in the physical world for this part of our journey so naturally our minds are, as they should be, frequently on “things of the flesh”; that is physical, earthly things. It seems rare and blessed when we can actually set our minds on things of the Spirit. But I don’t think Paul is actually talking about where our thoughts get to, I think he’s asking where do we get our peace of mind from? Where do we draw our comfort and in what do place our hope.

This is an excellent question and one worth asking ourselves. In order to direct his readers to things eternal, “things of the Spirit” Paul engages in an argument style that was common to his training as a learned first century Jew. He seeks to establish the clearest dichotomy between two choices in a debate. This was for him and his first readers a common and useful teaching method. The problem is that unaware of his tactics we can easily read today’s passage as an outright condemnation of the physical world. The danger of this misread is that it can lead people to minimize or devalue this segment of our life journey, which is for now what we have.

It’s easy for our modern ear to hear Paul saying that all things earthly or fleshly life are dying and as such of minimal value, or worse, to be avoided. He is not saying this. It is *this world* that God created, and then called “good”. It is *this world* that Jesus entered for the purpose of redeeming. More to the point it is only in *this world* of the flesh that we can live out our faith. It is this planet that needs our assistance today. It is the 72 million refugees in 2020 that cry for a just and peaceful place to call home. It is a real virus that must be eradicated and real work must be devoted to race relations.

Yes, if we reduce the life of the flesh to something we should attempt to elevate above we can permit ourselves not to wade into the harsh realities of life. Here I am reminded of the old admonition given to clergy, “Beware of being so heavenly minded that you’re no damn earthly good!”

The gospel, Jesus himself, clearly calls us to roll up our sleeves and devote our time in the flesh to the real needs of our siblings in the flesh. Paul would have us think no differently. What Paul is saying (in language that sounds dramatic, even extreme to us) is that the only sure place from which to draw peace and in which to set our hope is the creator and not in things created.

Everyone hopes; it is part of the human condition. We hope. The only variable is where you plant your hope. In his typically dramatic fashion Paul tells us that if we set our hope in our wealth or our physical strength or our pensions or our homes or even our spouses anything else in the created world we are fools as we know that everything we see, that is “of the flesh” will run its course and die. So if it is folly to take any lasting comfort or place any hope from the physical world what then can we cling to, what does this leave? Paul says “things of the Spirit”, Paul says God. What I would like to do this morning is make placing your life’s trust in God easier. It’s not actually me at all its God Himself and it’s a promise he made to Isaiah this morning.

This promise, above all else is worth getting excited about. In these words are our peace of mind and in them we can firmly plant our hope. God declared “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

This is one of my favorite sentences in scripture and I’m excited to shine some light on it this morning.

The first *word* that came from God’s mouth was at creation. To speak is to breath, to exhale with sound. Our creation story begins, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a breath from God swept over the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good…”

A few profoundly important things are contained in these opening words of our Holy Scriptures. I think the first is that God created. Such a simple truth but always worth remembering; this is His not ours. The second is that He actually spoke creation into existence. It was by God’s *word* that things came to be. He said “Let there be light”, he said “let the earth put forth vegetation” and “let the earth bring forth living creatures” and he said “Let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness” While God could have thought creation into existence or waved his Holy Hand he chose to speak words to create. This ties into today’s promise. The word that goes out from my mouth; shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Creation is ‘God’s word issued’ and even as it came into being it was going to complete its divine purpose. Think about this, the ultimate victory was built into creation. There are no cosmic “ifs” there is no question of redemption, no “I wonder if this will all work out?” Creation is God’s word issued and God’s word always accomplishes its purpose. The fulfillment of God’s kingdom was always assured.

Love spoke. Love created and love won right from the start!

Can you see why I love this promise? This is the ground from which Julian of Norwich could proclaim, “All will be well. All will be well. All manner of things will be well.” How could it be different when God’s purpose was sown into the very molecules he created?

Moving on, there are two more times God’s *words*, the ones that always succeed in their tasks, are spoken to us. The first of these is ‘the word’ God speaks through his prophets. I hear the words of the prophets as “boosters”. Sometimes God will speak his word through a prophet as a corrective for hurtful behavior and sometimes as a reminder of his purpose.

You’ll notice that I am using present and not past tense when I speak of God’s word shared through the prophets. You see I am convinced that we have no right to claim a monopoly on God’s word bearing prophets. Every culture and every time has had prophets of this I am sure. The story tellers, the shamans all prophets. Springsteen, Arden and Lightfoot, all prophets. Remember that each time a prophet utters the word of God it is in order to save the world, not condemn it.

The ultimate completion of God’s purposes was always Jesus Christ. In the profound and beautiful opening to his gospel John writes, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

By breathing into creation God put himself, his word, into all that he made including you and me. This word, once issued was always going to succeed in accomplishing what God willed for it. In order that you and I might live into God’s purposes he has sent his words through the prophets. Ultimately God himself would enter creation as the word, as Jesus, to accomplish the perfect redemption of all things.

So when I, with Saint Paul, say that placing our hope in things physical is foolish I don’t mean damnable I simply mean it is sadly myopic. The created world is marvelous, truly wonderful, but it is not God. Happy news, it is being redeemed by God to be with God. The people in your life are also not God. They too are marvelous and being redeemed but there is a fundamental misstep to placing hope anywhere but God. In God alone is our comfort, in God alone is our hope; why? Because he promised, “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Praise God! Amen.