

"For What are Hopes" A sermon based on Hebrews 11:1-3;8-16 and Genesis 15:1-6 delivered on Sunday, August 10, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

Danish theologian and writer, Soren Kierkegaard, who lived in the 1800s suffered terribly with clinical depression. In his searching for healing he described faith as a leap. He said that reflection and meditation deceive us into assuming that by thinking alone, by our own intellectual action and rationalism, we can know all possibilities of life. But really, he said, it is only by a leap into the depths of the unknown, only by a total commitment to this leap, can a person have the full experience of Christian faith. Kierkegaard would agree with the definition of faith given by the author of Hebrews read in our lectionary passage this morning, "...faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (v. 11:1)

Modern cleric, Sean Caulfield, in his book Under the Broom Tree: Coping with Life, Love and God in Times of Transition, says much the same thing about faith as Kierkegaard and our Hebrews passage. In a description of his painful struggles as he tried to decide whether to leave the monastery where he had been cloistered for many years, he writes, "But reality is not something which is simply possessed. It has to be interpreted. It becomes the place of either our despair or our hope. If we do not hold to faith which gives assurance, that the transcendence of time and space, of all that seems lost, is possible, a faith that offers the fullness of life and the divine in us, there is nothing for it but to see existence as absurd, and to despair. But with faith it is possible to see that reality, irrespective of its limitations, is the place where God gives the gift of himself, where mercy grace and personal purpose are found." (p. 72) Like Kierkegaard, Caulfield sees this commitment to "what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" as a leap of faith. He sees it as a gift of God's very self. He sees it as a choice between embracing despair or embracing the expectancy of hope even though that hope is in things unknown and not seen.

The author of Hebrews, by way of example of the relationship between faith and hope, in the part of this passage that we did not read this morning, speaks of the faith of Abel, and Noah, Isaac, and Moses, and the people of Israel at the Red Sea, but the authors major illustration of hope here is that of Abram, not yet renamed by God. He points to the faith of Abram as described in the narrative of our Genesis passage this morning. Where God asks Abram and Sarah to set out for a place that was unknown to gain the promise of a very unlikely inheritance. Our premier ancestors in the faith, are asked to leave everything they have known to follow their hopes and dreams into a future where their descendants shall be "as numerous as the stars in the night sky" (v. 15:5).

Think of it, a 99 year old man and a 90 year old women, even allowing for the different ways that age was calculated in the ancient near east. These are senior citizens who have not been able to conceive a child in all their years together, and they are supposed to believe in the hope of a family which will eventually net them descendants that are countless as the stars? This is truly an amazing story. And the author of Hebrews reminds us over and over again, that Abraham believed and followed Gods promises by faith." "By faith" Abraham obeyed and setout, "By faith" Abraham stayed for a time in the promised land, "By faith" Abraham received the power of procreation. And this faith, as our Genesis passage reminds us--Was "credited to him as righteousness." (Gen. 15:) This was so, for one simple reason, and one reason alone--just because he believed. This Abrahamic faith that we are supposed to emulate was in the seemingly slim hopes, the barest hints and expectancy of faith in those things that cannot be seen, but have to be believed, because, as the author of Hebrews concludes, by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that "what is seen was made from things that are not visible." (v. 11:3) -

When I was a young girl, one of my friends gave me a little book of simple poetry called Rivers of Thought by Martin Buxbaum. One of the poems talked about hope, and I still hold onto

the simple truth contained there. The poem goes like this, "For what are hopes, but slender ropes fastened to our dreams." It is interesting as we look at this little poem to note that the traditional symbol for Hope is an anchor. Think of Hope College in Holland, Michigan and its anchor logo. This anchor can "ground" us in faith, or on the other hand, could be an anchor with a huge chain that "mires" us in despair holding us fast in one place. The poem says that hopes are "slender ropes" not unbreakable unwieldy chains. The poem reminds us that these ropes are tied to the expectancy related to our hopes and dreams. They are slender ropes because they are hard to see, as our Hebrews passage reminds us. They are ropes tied to the "assurance about what we do not see," but just because they are slender does not mean they are not strong. Some of the strongest string, such as the catgut that is used to suture some surgical patients, or some kinds of fishing line, are very slender indeed. But they are not weak. They can be almost unbreakable.

Our hopes are like that. Our hopes can be based in strength or weakness, As long as our hopes are based on the expectancy, the surety, of Gods unconditional love, we will receive all that we need, all that we dream of. But, on the other hand, if our hopes are based on expectations, rather than expectancy, if they are based on only seeing one final outcome as dictated by ourselves, and not the outcome that God gifts us with, then we will surely be disappointed and fall into despair. As our monk friend, Sean Caulfield reminded us in his book Under the Broom Tree. Remember what he said? "If we do not hold to faith which gives assurance, that the transcendence of time and space, of all that seems lost, is possible, a faith that offers the fullness of life and the divine in us, there is nothing for it but to see existence as absurd, and to despair. But with faith it is possible to see that reality, irrespective of its limitations, in the place where God gives the gift of himself, where mercy grace and personal purpose are found." A calendar quotation from one of those rip-off calendars with a quote for each day of the year summarizes my point, and I believe the message of the scriptures, this

morning better than I can. An anonymous author wrote, and I saved it all these years because it was so meaningful to me, for January of 1994 the following words: "Expectations are real killers. They are set-ups for disappointment. Often, because of our expectations, we are completely oblivious to what is going on in a situation. When we are wedded to what we think should be happening or what we want to happen, we don't see what **is** happening."

"For what are hopes" They are "the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things unseen," as the New Revised Standard version translates the Hebrew. And as Emily Dickinson once wrote in her well-known poem, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers – That perched in the soul – And sings the tune without the words – And never stops – at all . . ." Hopes are things, unseen and unheard, to which we tie our "leaps of faith." They are not chains to hold us back, but slender ropes, strong as fishing line, that pull us forward into the future which God's love intends for us. Hopes are, in short, our very life-line. "For what are hopes, but slender ropes fastened to our dreams." Indeed! Amen.