



Jesus the Christ: Visions of Hope

Lenten Meditations 2012

First United Methodist Church
Madison, Wisconsin



Jesus the Christ: Visions of Hope

The 40-day Lenten journey invites members and friends of First United Methodist Church to focus on the life, ministry and death of Jesus. Though the season is typically seen as a time for sober reflection, we recognize that the journey leads us to the good news of Easter! With the promise of good news before us, our theme for this year's Lenten journey is *Jesus the Christ: Visions of Hope*.

For those who have “eyes to see and ears to hear,” the transformative, life-giving power of the Christ is made manifest in many ways. During this season and beyond, our challenge is to identify, claim, and share the many ways and places we find hope for the journey. Several of our members have been willing to identify, claim and share visions of hope. We trust that the visions shared over these next 40 days will inspire us, strengthen the connections among us, and give us hope for the journey.

Wednesday, February 22

Ash Wednesday

The imposition of ashes serves as a powerful symbol of both repentance and grace; it is a symbol that, in some ways, mirrors our Lenten journey of both sober reflection and anticipation of good news. The placing of ashes in the form of a cross on the forehead or the hand, is a mark of our human mortality and admission of our human failures. But it is also a mark of confidence and assuredness, as we come before God asking for forgiveness and new strength. In this act we express our faith in the grace of God, the one who calls us to accountability, yet also extends grace in being willing to forgive our failings and help us move to new beginnings. It is the movement from the past to the future, the movement from failure to second chances, the movement from the old to the new that marks the beginning of the journey through Lent toward Easter. We find hope even in the ashes.

A Song of Hope from Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be worshiped.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, in the Lord's word I hope;
My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for
the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
with the Lord is plenteous redemption.

Thursday, February 23

Contributed by Ann Herrold-Peterson

During this Lenten season we are exploring where/how we find hope for our journey through life's many adventures and heartbreaking challenges. Our faith tells us that Jesus, the incarnate love of God, is the source of hope. But sometimes, finding and feeling this hope can seem elusive and painfully out of reach.

What is hope? Some definitions that caught my attention as I searched the web referred to hope as "a confident desire," "to cherish a desire with anticipation" or "to expect with confidence."

Often, it seems that we don't search for hope until we are in some kind of trouble or are looking for a positive outcome, when illness or challenging life circumstances are happening for us or a loved one. However, maybe hope (along with faith and love) can become an attitude – to be hopeful each day, no matter what the circumstances are.

How then does Jesus become the source of hope for us now? I imagine that being in the presence of Jesus was captivating and life changing. People sought him out, followed him, and were astonished as they witnessed wholeness restored where broken bodies and spirits had been. He listened to them, ate with them, and spoke to their deepest longings.

In relationship with Jesus, people felt a sense of hope and possibility. They began to allow themselves to hope for healing. They began to "cherish a desire with anticipation" and "to expect with confidence." In his presence, their fears were being replaced with a new sense of confidence and strength, one that they could begin to trust.

What is your experience with love moving fear out of your life and replacing it with hope – “to expect with confidence?” I believe that seeds of hope are planted and nourished in us through prayer, study and relationship in the Christian community.

Let us use this Lenten season to seek a deeper connection with Christ, both personally and in community, so that we can be renewed by the Spirit and captured by Hope. We can then BE that HOPE to all whom we meet along the journey.

Friday, February 24

Contributed by Ellie Hein

This May Be Friday, but Sunday’s Coming!

Many of you don’t know me but I’m old friends with some. My husband, Dave Hein, was the associate pastor here at First Church from 1982-1988. During that time Dave had his colon removed. Throughout the next two decades Dave faced several health issues and in 2003 he passed away from infections that developed after a liver transplant. However, during those twenty years we knew that because of the power of God’s love we were truly blessed. We watched our children grow into adulthood, participated in a life-changing pulpit exchange to England, and thrived in the midst of two church congregations, First Church and Concordia United Methodist in Prairie du Sac. Each time we learned of another malady we knew God would see us through it, just as God had 2,000 years ago when Christ died on a tree on Friday – but then Sunday came! Even now, I know that when life deals us burdens which cause us to wonder if we can handle it I am reminded that this may be Friday, but Sunday’s coming! Sometimes that means that we must be the vehicle of God’s love that gives hope to someone else. Every day we are made aware of people who are stuck on Friday but, maybe with some help from us, they could experience the wonder of Sunday! Maybe you have a friend who just needs an encouraging word, or one who needs some monetary support. Maybe you know of a group that needs your time in order to give assistance to a special group of people. Take a minute and think about what you can do to give hope to others.

Bringing this all full circle is the fact that for the last 18 months my sister Melody has needed a double-lung transplant – a very long Friday indeed! But on December 2, 2011 Melody received the transplant and is mending beautifully. Someone, or someone's family, was God's vehicle of hope for Melody and took her from Friday to Sunday. There are many others waiting for organ transplants. Maybe signing a donor card could be your way to show that it may be Friday, but Sunday's coming!

Saturday, February 25

Contributed by Peter Hamon

Still Hoping

Once upon a time I felt that I had nothing and no one. Not an unusual situation. I'm sure that in a largely uncaring world most of you have been there too. Then, just when I needed it most, I ran across a very special man from Galilee. At first I embraced all the myths about him (I still enjoy them) but as I learned more, bit by bit their reality was stripped away. Now this should have left me with even more nothing, but it didn't. I think that despite the often impenetrable veil of two thousand years I am starting to get to know him, the real Jesus, rather well. What he said and what he did still confuse me sometimes, but above all else, he gives me hope – hope that this can be a better world; hope that we can actually begin to love one another; and maybe just a touch of that magnificently innocent hope that shines in the eyes of a little child. And I'm not alone. I know lots of folks who follow the way of that carpenter (or maybe he was a stonemason – it doesn't really matter) and I know that they are there for me, indeed for all humanity, just as I try to be there for them. Our Lenten theme this year is hope, and despite the darkness I still have it, and I pray I always will.

Monday, February 27

Contributed by Tom Miller

Journey of Hope

Today's hard times have caused pain for many of our fellow citizens. And while it may not provide much comfort to suggest they offer up their pain as

sacrifice, that is precisely what Paul's message to the Romans teaches us—to rejoice with hope in God's grace; to rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.

Hope is here, present, manifest in the many faith-based efforts such as First United Methodist Church's Food Pantry and Outreach Ministries, Habitat for Humanity, Porchlight and the many others that exist to help. We ought to show our support for these efforts through our gifts and prayers. And when we match those gifts and prayers with works we demonstrate that a community of hope exists. During this Lenten season, we might consider volunteering our time or forgoing that cup of coffee and turning the cost of that coffee into a donation.

Beyond good works, we must continue to believe in Jesus Christ and what He taught us—that Truth is the Way. For without Truth, there can be no integrity, and without integrity there can be no trust. And without trust, there can be no dreams, no hope, no joy and no change. And that only Truth can set us free.

And finally, our Journey of Hope must also be a Journey of Joy. We are God's children and we need to show the joy of childhood. As children, we can sing and dance in the moon and the sun and remember that Jesus is the life that will never be done. We must remember that He'll live in us if we live in Him. For He is the Lord of the Dance and the dance goes on.

Tuesday, February 28

Contributed by Judith Hutchinson

“Hope.” Where do I begin? Hope, its root to me is “faith” propped up by action. The more I take part in doing what I believe to be “God's good,” the more faith I have in my hopes and the more hope I have in my faith. Pretty simple, huh?

Daily opportunities come to each of us. We are honored by God to be His answers to others' prayers and our own as well. I think the very precious gifts God has given each of us individuals are meant to be shared with generosity and joy for the world around us. It may be your experiences,

wisdom, knowledge that will help and lift those who cross your path. It might be your resources: clothes, food, money, transportation. It might be your phone call, visit, your nod or your smile when you pass the stranger on your way through the store, drive-thru or street. It all matters: to those who you interact with, as well as to you, as you fulfill that need. I won't go so far as to high five the driver that cuts me off, but I think you get the message.

In sharing your gifts, look for the coincidence. I believe God often chooses to be anonymous through coincidence. I can't tell you "how" this works, but if I were big enough to believe I understood all or exactly "who" God is, He wouldn't be big enough to hold my faith. I am 61, yet there is a core in me that takes a joy, a child-like happiness by "being there" for what I find as "my" God's calling. My calling is more of a "whisper." The signs for me to get busy are often and easily recognized in my day to day living.

It is my "Hope" you will seek these instances in your lives to also be a link, the answer for God to do for others with your gifts. I assure you it will put a smile in your heart.

Bless you and know all things matter, even our most humble offerings.

Wednesday, February 29

Contributed by Leigh Roberts

Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

We live in a period of national violence as we extend our decade of war in Afghanistan. This has been the longest war in our national history.

One of the largest components in our federal government is the Department of Defense, previously named the Department of War. The agency budget continues to rise even in a time of seeking constraint in federal spending. There have been strong efforts through several presidential administrations to create a federal Department of Peace but this has never moved close to realization.

Wisconsin recently became the forty-ninth state to permit concealed carrying of weapons by its citizens. This occurred despite highly publicized incidents of gun violence causing multiple deaths in schools, on college campuses, within families and in public places within recent years.

Previously I served as a United Methodist missionary in Latin America. One Sunday in a capital city I was invited to preach to a large international interdenominational congregation. My text was the Beatitude used in today's devotion. It was a period in the United States when Martin Luther King, Jr. was prominent in civil rights leadership with non-violent resistance to conflict a dominant motif. In my presentation I referred to Mahatma Gandhi as a peacemaker who advocated non-violence as a response to conflict. Later that day local church leaders chastised the pastor for inviting a speaker who made positive references to a Hindu leader and to a minority person in the U.S. who directed their actions to non-violent expression. Only a pastoral sermonette on the peace loving ministry of Jesus soothed the turmoil.

In this Beatitude Jesus emphasizes peace-making rather than peace-living. What kind of priority do we place on peace-making and do we express it through our actions as well as our words? Jesus' promotion of turning the other cheek was his reference to non-violent response to conflict.

Prayer: We live in a time of violence created through anger and a national response of war to international conflict. Help us to rejoice in peace-making as we live out this Beatitude. Amen.

Thursday, March 1
Contributed by Kate Vanderheiden

Fresh Start

When our son was young, we sometimes got snarled up in power struggles or other trying childhood behaviors. Tempers were lost and we felt trapped in the situation. When things seemed hopeless, someone would finally say: "Fresh start?" That gave everyone permission to 're-boot,' take a breath, start again with a renewed spirit.

One of the central messages of Jesus is the possibility of transformation. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes:

Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18, *The Message*)

We are renewed through God's love and our love and care for our fellow humans. And transformed people can change the world!

Of course, change is often difficult and upsetting. Too often it is inflicted on us, and we don't always see it as improvement. (We've all experienced the challenges of rapidly-changing technology, for example.)

But the ability to change – to transform – is a great gift. And God's grace and willingness to forgive us and let us have a "fresh start" as many times as it takes gives me hope that we can change ourselves and our world for the better.

Friday, March 2

Contributed by Marion Beachley

Love: Food for the Heart

Volunteering to be a greeter at church on a week-day morning was the result of a deep feeling of commitment to the mission of the church. It was recognition of a personal part I might play in furthering the success of our goal of service. As the recession intensified the number and variety of people coming for not only food, but also needing acceptance and love increased.

There were:

Mary:* Pushing a baby in a stroller, seriously limping and with great difficulty speaking and being understood seeking food to help her through the week.

Joe: Speaking through a mouth with few teeth, smiling as he receives his pantry number.

Dwayne: Asking if it might be possible to get a shower and a clean shirt, because he was homeless and hoping to get a job interview.

Sam: Explaining he was diabetic and could not afford to pay for his prescriptions.

Was there anything we could do for him?

Daria: Asking where could she get help to travel to be with her dying mother?

I was learning a lot about what it means to be homeless, jobless, hopeless, and loveless.

There is a team of people in the food pantry handing out food, hope, and love that seems to have a sometimes magical effect. At times it almost seems as if the most important item for some is the love they receive. Many of us take love and support of family for granted. One only needs to spend a Monday at the church to begin to comprehend the needs of many of our neighbors.

Our church, taking action to help fulfill some of these needs represents Christ's response to the Pharisees when he said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22: 39) Another benefit from our service is that we are better able to love ourselves as a result of loving others.

** All names are fictitious.*

Saturday, March 3

Susan Jeannette

Most Christians believe in heaven. I've wanted to, but there's always been this nagging doubt in the back of my mind. I know this is a lack of faith, but the existence of heaven was something I wanted to know for sure, not just believe in or hope was true. When my husband, Bob, was dying, we had a few conversations about heaven and eternal life. I asked him that if there was, to send me a signal so I knew for sure. I suggested a number of signs

he could send me, but he didn't like any of them, and in the end, we never agreed on one.

We were out in the garden one sunny afternoon, me weeding and Bob enjoying what turned out to be his second-to-last day of life on earth. As I pulled weeds, he apologized to me for pulling up all of my Black-Eyed Susan plants. Five years before, in an attempt to "help" me weed the garden, he inadvertently pulled up most of my flowers and ALL of my Black-Eyed Susans. (For obvious reasons, it's always been my favorite flower.) I hadn't planted any new ones, so when he apologized, I told him I would plant some along with his ashes, an idea he liked.

Well, he had one more day in the sunlight, and then passed away during the night. The next week was a blur to me, and I'm not even sure how I managed to organize his memorial service. The day after his service I went to the Farmer's Market and bought a Black-Eyed Susan plant. I got home, found a trowel in the garage, and went out on the deck to decide where to plant it. As I walked outside, I literally dropped to my knees in awe. My entire garden was filled with blooming Black-eyed Susans – there were thousands of them waving gently in the wind. They covered the entire garden, even though originally I had only five or six scattered clumps. Bob not only sent me a sign to show he was still close to me, he gave me proof that there is a heaven and there is eternal life. This miracle sent from heaven about life after death gives me hope in my life here on earth.

Monday, March 5

Contributed by Sandra Haynes

Hope. What is it? The dictionary defines hope as a feeling that what is wanted will happen. In other words, desire accompanied by expectation. If we're hoping, we want and expect. So what will generate this type of feeling for us? For me, there are a number of ways. Here are some of them.

In today's world, people are hungry for a message of hope. Difficulties come to everyone. No one gets through life unscathed. When my sons went off to war in Iraq, it was a terrifying time in my life. My son Paul was in the first Iraq war, Desert Storm. And my son Jim did four tours of duty in the

second Iraq war. And while Jim was on one of his tours of duty, I was told I had an acoustic neuroma brain tumor and needed a long, risky surgery.

How did I find any hope during times like that? Prayer always gives me hope. I know God listens and answers our prayers. We may not always get what we ask for, but over time, we know that things will turn out well, because God wants us to be happy.

It also helps me when I look back in history. My ancestors faced some very hard times. They survived them, and I can too. My grandparents came over to this country as immigrants from Austria because they were looking for a better life. It was very difficult to uproot themselves and come to a strange land, but they were willing to do it because they had hope they would find a better life. And eventually they did.

During the Great Depression, times were very hard. But my parents got through it by continuing to struggle and never losing hope for a better time. Our country did pull out of its economic woes then and it will again.

Spending quiet time in nature never fails to give me hope and inspiration. And nature can be as close as outside my window. I can watch the fat squirrels chase each other up and down our trees, or see the silly squirrel that hangs upside down and reaches over to lick the suet in the neighbor's bird feeder. Or I can go for a walk in a park or woods. The fresh air and sunshine on my back always make me feel better, as do the lovely colors of leaves in autumn, which fall and crunch underfoot.

My sons both came home safely from the wars. Neither one ever had any major injuries, nor has suffered serious consequences from their experiences. And my brain surgery went well. After a long period of physical therapy and recovery, I am able to live a normal life again. Praise the Lord!

Tuesday, March 6
Contributed by Anna Peterson

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus

said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." (John 2:6-10)

At weddings in Jesus' time, it was customary to serve the best wine at the beginning of the wedding, and once the guests were too drunk to notice or care about the quality of wine, lesser quality wine was served. Today, we often operate like this. We start off tasks and goals strong, but as time goes, we start to slack off and let our success at the beginning pad our lagging effort. Luckily, Jesus does not operate like this. He gave the bridegroom the best wine (not some box wine) to finish the evening. This was also Jesus' first miracle. Every miracle hereafter gets bigger and better (from healing, to walking on water, to casting out demons, to raising Lazarus from the dead, to, finally, conquering death and rising from the grave!). This should encourage us in that, whatever God is doing in our lives and in the world now, he has even bigger and better things planned for us, and this is just the beginning. This should also be a challenge to us to constantly build our relationship with God, to aspire to a bigger and better relationship with Him. We should not be content to think, "Oh, I accepted Jesus, now I can rest on my laurels," but we should be constantly striving to grow in Him.

Wednesday, March 7
Contributed by Judy Lyons

From Despair to Hope

Sometimes my attitude toward life in general and the church in particular is NOT one of hope but of despair. With the many negative forces at work on any given day, I ask myself, "Have we learned *nothing* from Jesus' ministry?"

In fact it seems we have forgotten how to be Christian, suggests John Shelby Spong. But, he goes on to say, when our faith works, "What Christianity does is lift us... into a kind of humanity that can give itself away in love." That gives me hope. That puts action into our words of faith. Then I see Habitat builders giving themselves away in love. I see prayer shawl knitters giving themselves away in love. Then I see church school teachers giving themselves away in love. I see food pantry workers giving themselves away in love. I see our congregation giving itself (and its parking privilege!) away in love.

If I look, I will see on every hand others whose faith has "lifted them into a humanity that gives itself away in love." **If you look**, you will see acts of selfless love, lives of selfless giving, moments of giving self away in the same spirit. It gives me hope that Jesus' example continues to lift us to a place and shape us into a people who can give ourselves away in love. This brings hope.

Look for it.

Thursday, March 8

Contributed by Kirke Anderson-Elsass

Ecclesiastes 9:4

"But he who is joined with the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion."

In the global humanity that we are increasingly aware of our role in, there are getting to be some great hopes. Recently, most of us have experienced great hope relating to state or national politics, the War on Terror, Palestinian-Israeli relations, global anti-poverty or anti-disease initiatives, or international actions to minimize climate change.

For me, putting hope in big things like those can easily turn into expectation. When I realize my expectations for global fixes are unrealistic, I can get pessimistic and bring down my expectation for positive change to nearly nothing. Then it translates back to having little hope. Being tired of that hope rollercoaster led me to seek a verse that would recalibrate my

hope a little, and this passage from Ecclesiastes – fatalistic as it is – does that for me. It brings my attention to the need for baseline, day-to-day, smaller hopes.

I believe that great hopes are important and certainly our faith encourages these, but great hopes alone are not sustaining. I need to have smaller hopes, like hope that tomorrow I will make good on an opportunity to help someone, or to accomplish something new, or hope that someone or something will pleasantly surprise me. They are the balance to the swings of optimism and pessimism that can accompany great hopes. These lower-risk hopes are also important building blocks to the realization of our biggest hopes.

As I write this in January, I am reminded of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Dr. King’s list of dreams has a big hope theme, but it is rooted in small hopes – individuals of different races acting with love toward each other. These hopes are unquestionably realizable, because they pertain to interactions between people who have the option and ability to do good and feel rewarded. This is a hope that is essential to being a successful Christian. It’s a hope that in every little situation we encounter, we can choose the action that would make Jesus proud. And when that hope is realized, we know it feels great and brings more hope.

Friday, March 9

Contributed by Linda VandenBerg

When I heard that this year’s theme would be “visions of hope,” I immediately thought to myself, “What does hope look like to me?”

I’ve had cancer for the past 2 1/2 years and, for most people, the word hope links inextricably with the word cure. At the outset, I suppose that I, too, looked at it this way. Now I don’t.

My hope resides in the moment, not in the cure. In this moment, I feel very well. In this moment, I feel very happy. In this moment, I feel downright joyful. Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God is here with us NOW and that means that the Kingdom resides in each and every moment of our lives if we choose to embrace that vision.

Vision is not merely seeing, but being AWARE of what you are seeing. I choose to see hope suffused in my life because I choose to see the Kingdom of God in the moment.

Sure, not every moment is peaceful or happy or joyful or even comfortable, but the Kingdom is present in every moment because the Kingdom resides in my heart. Hope resides in my life in a way that it never did when I was well.

Did I give hope any thoughts in the past? Sure, I hoped like we all do. I hope my pension doesn't get cut again this year. I hope my loved ones are doing well. I hope I enjoy my vacation. I hope so-and-so isn't mad at me. I hope it doesn't rain today. And at a deeper level, I know I hoped that I would figure out what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

And then cancer came and instead of losing hope, I was (after some periods of grieving) infused with more hope than I had ever had. I knew that this was God's plan for my life, not that I would be ill, but that God would be with me. My faith became more real to me once I dropped into the land of illness.

My hope resides in the promises that we've been given: the Kingdom is now, God is love, you will not be alone. My job as a Christian is not simply to hope in a passive way, but to ACT on those promises. Be here now. Show God's love to others. Reach out to God when fearful or in pain. Try to set a good example.

Visions of hope are everywhere and for everyone.

Saturday, March 10
Contributed by Curtis Wittwer

Sharing a Vision of Hope

Last year, I laughed, cried and learned a few things from the members who submitted an entry for the Lenten meditations booklet. So I feel moved to share my four visions of hope:

- I hope our country is more careful about invading another country. What are the lessons learned from the two wars we are trying to wrap up?
 - When I go to the conference website, I see two slogans: “Live, Give, Love Beyond all Expectations” and “Our Hearts, Our Minds and our Doors Are Always Open.” I hope that these slogans will help the Methodist Church live by these words. One glaring example of exclusion: preventing LGBT folks from becoming pastors.
 - I realize that we can’t get involved supporting one candidate for the presidency, but we can speak out on the hot button issues. I hope that our pastors preach on these issues but also find a way for members to discuss them.
 - In Rueben Job’s book, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living, he suggests several practices that help all of us stay in love with God. I hope that our members embrace these practices: daily time of prayer, reflection upon and study of the Bible, and regular participation in a Christian community.
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Monday, March 12

Contributed by Jim and Cindy Hoyt

At a recent meeting, George Wilding, the Director of UW’s Carbone Cancer Center, was given a daunting task: “Summarize your job – in ONE word.” Dr. Wilding hesitated only briefly before responding: “Hope.”

What a wonderful – and meaningful – response. His job, after all, is all about hope – providing hope for cancer patients, hope for finding new cures, and hope for his research teams. We think he hit the nail on the head.

But in a broader sense, isn’t that what all our lives are – or should be – about? We’re providers of hope and we’re beneficiaries of hope. As children we hope to grow into adults like our parents or others we respect. As teenagers we hope to be popular and intelligent. Then we hope to further our education and obtain a desired job. As adults we hope to succeed in a meaningful job which allows us to support ourselves and perhaps a family. As parents we hope for the success and well-being of our

children. And as individuals we hope to find happiness and satisfaction throughout our lives.

We all have visions of hope. But where does our hope come from? Hope comes not only from others, but, most certainly, from God. Our God is a God of hope. He gives us hope – visions of hope. When we need it, hope is at hand. But it might not always come as we expect it.

During those difficult months before our spouses died, we each thought all hope was lost. Yet we now realize that hope was sustaining us even if we didn't know it then. When Cheryl and Rick got sick, we first hoped for a cure. When that was not to be, we hoped for remission. When their cancers continued to progress we hoped for more time. As time grew shorter, we hoped for comfort...and for peace. Hope sustained us – we just didn't recognize it at the time.

Because we have faith, we have hope. Our faith is in God and our hopes flow from God. As a result, our hopes never end. We merely hope for different outcomes as our life changes. Please join us in thanking God for the ongoing presence of hope in our lives.

Tuesday, March 13

Contributed by Sarah Schroerlucke

As I write this reflection, I hold in my lap a three month old baby with chubby, rosy cheeks: Ilah Jean. The name Jean was given to her in honor of both of her grandmothers and two of her great-grandmothers, all of whom share a middle name. She has become a living reminder of the love that runs through our family, and I can't help but think about this when I consider the incarnate love of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus at the cross reminds us of these relationships in John 19:26. *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother."* Here stood two people for whom Jesus felt affection, and with affection, he redefined their relationship—bonding them to one another in a relationship that is traditionally understood as one of particularity and unconditional love: that of a parent and a child.

I do not—I cannot—love as God loves; rather, I love *because* God loves. Love for God is a response; it is an acknowledgment of God’s love for us—a love we can never fully reciprocate. Because of God’s love, however, we are enabled to love one another. It is within the parameters of our limitedness that we learn to love with our perfect imperfectability—as human beings, created out of Love for Love. Though we cannot love perfectly, love for one another remains a necessary pursuit as we actively live into love with God. Love becomes an act of hope in the particular, intimate relationships in which we are embedded.

This is where I find hope in the journey--in the loving relationships we are encouraged to form with one another, because of the incarnate love of God in Christ-- as extensively as our finiteness will allow, as inclusively as our limited embrace can reach, and as affectionately as we have learned how to love those “nearest and dearest” to our hearts.

Wednesday, March 14

Contributed by Mary Bean

Varieties of Hope

In *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a king describes the child for whom they search. Amahl’s Mother exclaims: “Oh no, wait! Take back your gold! For such a king I’ve waited all my life... and if I weren’t so poor I would send a gift of my own to such a child.” That child is her Vision of Hope for her world and ours.

Jesus held out hope to his followers when he assured them they would do even greater things. We understand from the Bible that Peter and other disciples, following Pentecost, were able to take part in teaching and in healing among the people. People in our time give hope by teaching and healing.

Jesus called disciples from among the ordinary people and taught them by example to accept all people as they are; to become aware of their needs and to gently help them look at their situation with new eyes. Today there are groups, informal or non-profits, made up of “ordinary” people in this

community dedicated to bringing diverse people together promoting hope for a more just and peaceful community and world.

When Jesus invited himself to dinner with the Tax Collector, he demonstrated that breaking bread together leads to greater knowledge of and respect for each other. We gain hope through sharing a cup of tea or a meal with one or two others. If we practice being an intense listener, making quiet helpful responses, we give our old and new friends hope for their ongoing journey.

Hope replaces fear as Jesus demonstrated in his contacts with Pharisees and Sadducees.

There is no room for fear when we remember to focus on hope.

Hope is expectation. At the end of a long day my muscles relax onto the bed. Prayers for others, a review of unsolved problems and solid sleep with expectation of brain activity, bring good ideas and solutions upon waking!

Hope whispers in our heads, in our hearts, with gratitude. Gratitude is a continuing thanks for the blessings of our lives which become Joy and reinforce Hope for a new day.

Thursday, March 15

Contributed by Cal Cobb

In today's world it's easy to be discouraged. The 24/7 media bombardment of daunting news, war, natural disasters, financial distress, high unemployment, corrupt politicians, economic malaise. The mantra seems endless, tireless, relentless. Every day, same, same, same. And much of what is reported is real in a very personal way to many. Knowing this, that these reported circumstances affect many people directly and profoundly, how does one keep a positive outlook on life? Through hope.

I find comfort by putting things in an historical perspective. On the whole, is the world a better place today than it was twenty, fifty, a hundred years ago? Are things mentioned above unique to our time? No. Wars have been fought since the beginning of human history. Are there more wars today

than before? There have always been natural disasters. Technology provides for widespread conveyance of these events, but are there really more floods, earthquakes, tsunamis now than in the past? Politicians have been corrupt since the tax collectors and money changers of the Old Testament and before. Nothing new or unique to our time here. The "Great Depression" occurred over eighty years ago. Before that there was the tulip panic and the failure of the French banking system. Again, nothing new here, either. Mankind has not only survived but has prospered in spite of the wars, natural disasters, corruption, and economic failures of the past.

Today we live in a world with the most advanced civilizations ever known. Science and technology have combined to make life easier to live, extending life expectancies almost two-fold in a little over a hundred years. In the United States more than two-thirds of the citizens identify themselves as Christians. Americans contribute billions of dollars to charity causes each year. Millions of Americans volunteer for social causes like Habitat for Humanity, church mission trips, Peace Corps, and hundreds of other charitable and socially conscience endeavors.

The fact is, in spite of all the negative news, the world is a better place today than it was even twenty years ago. We live longer, healthier lives. We have ways to connect with each other that could not be imagined even ten years ago. And people continue to make positive contributions to the lives of their fellow man through active volunteerism.

Think about the progress mankind has made. The human frailties and sinful nature of man will always influence human activity, causing war, corruption, financial distress. The cycle goes on. But on the whole, mankind, civilization has progressed. Life is better today than it was then, even just a few years ago.

When I look at the world in this historical context, it gives me hope. The process of improvement isn't smooth and linear. It comes in fits and starts, is hindered by man's arrogance and ignorance, and acts of God but it is, historically, relentless. And it is this relentless process – the betterment of the human condition over time, the advancement of civilization and society, the increasing awareness of the need to nurture the planet, to nurture each other, to give back through charity and philanthropy, to develop spiritually and intellectually – that gives me hope. Just as Christ calmed the storm on the lake, the knowledge of salvation through Christ brings calm to the daily

mantra of worldly troubles. And through the calm, as I view the world as a better place, then I have hope for the future.

Friday, March 16

Contributed by Patrick Rowley

And There Was a Calm

A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (Matthew 8: 24-27 NRSV)

As someone who has studied meteorology and educates the public about weather and climate, I admittedly become rather giddy when large storms like blizzards and hurricanes are in the forecast. There is something about the power of such storms and knowing how so many variables had to work together just right for the storm to occur that is particularly intriguing. Sometimes, however, these storms can have catastrophic, potentially long-lasting consequences. Last year brought about many devastating disasters, including a record-breaking number of tornadoes, several large earthquakes, and a major tsunami.

All of these events, however, have several things in common – and I'm not talking about the right combination of mixing ratio, wind shear, and pressure gradient. I'm talking about the fact that every one of these events came to an end, and every one of these events was followed by people from around the world offering their time and resources to provide relief. All of us have and will face challenges, both large and small. Like tornadoes, some challenges will come and go quickly, whereas others will last for what seems like an eternity. But like the storms, the challenges will eventually end. In Matthew 8:26, Jesus calms the storm, something previously reserved for God (Psalm 107:29), further revealing Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God.

Not all storms are big and predictable. My family was sailing one evening in the Chesapeake Bay, when a severe thunderstorm popped up without warning. While trying to make it back to the marina, the storm intensified, at times spinning the boat around and sending waves crashing over the boat. With the power out in the city, visual landmarks were lost. Like Matthew, we were definitely saying something along the lines of, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” Fortunately, there was some light near their marina and upon arrival, other boaters were there to help.

By keeping a community of friends in Christ, we will be there for each other during our storms and will work together to help others in our community and around the world. By keeping God and Jesus Christ as your beacon, “when sorrows like sea billows roll,” you will eventually find safe harbor, allowing you to say, “It is well with my soul.”

Saturday, March 17

Contributed by Laura Wendt

The day after our honeymoon in 1997, Max’s friend Jim called. Jim wondered if we could adopt his dad’s puppy Moses, who was going back to a shelter if we could not. Of course, we said yes. I remember that feeling of excitement and hope that a new puppy brings, and we were happy to teach him about the world. He was a wonderful dog for us, and later, for our kids, during the nearly 15 years that we had him. During the last year of Moses’ life, joint problems made it difficult for him to enjoy all the activities he used to love. There were times that I sat down to pet Moses as he laid on the floor, when it was hard to remember that he was once an active dog, who could catch a Frisbee, or go for a walk. For the last four months, he couldn’t even walk downstairs, and Max or I would carry him down each day. Moses’ eyes were still so animated and expressive, that we started to lose hope. His lively, even sassy, spirit was trapped in a broken body, until we could see that he started to feel hopeless too. It was difficult to say goodbye after such a long life, but we knew what we had to do for him.

Weeks later, we realized with heavy hearts and plenty of guilt, that we really wanted a puppy around the house again. The decision to adopt a new dog was almost as difficult as the decision to say farewell to Moses. As often happens, we found what we wanted at a time when we weren’t even looking for it, on a routine visit to the pet store for supplies for Julia’s

fish tank. Max and I felt so much hope and such a beautiful vision of our family's future as we played and snuggled with a puppy named Trixie. She is growing so quickly, and is a sweet and energetic addition to our family. We are so excited to have another sweet pup to introduce to the world, and we look forward to knowing Trixie as well as we knew Moses.

Monday, March 19

Contributed by Sandra Schroerlucke

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. **Romans 15:13***

While listening to the Advent Reading as the candle of HOPE was lit during our worship service on the First Sunday of Advent, I became increasingly aware of the powerful meaning of the word "hope" and how "hope" can affect one's outlook and state of mind. Perhaps my heart and mind were ripe for such an awakening, as circumstances had recently been heartbreaking concerning my father. A few weeks earlier my father suffered a massive stroke and major heart attack, leaving him in a semi-comatose state, paralyzed on his left side, with a 5% chance of survival. Feeling devastated by the events and the uncertainty of what life might be for my father should he survive, a sort of numbness permeated my being. Then, in hearing the reading that Sabbath morning, the word "HOPE" touched my heart and soul. It seemed as God was speaking directly to me. I mulled and considered the significance of the word, an acrostic poem ensuing....

Healing
Omnipresence of God
Peacefulness
Expectation

Each word seemingly blossomed with the awareness that God's love, in the midst of our human journey, can transcend and transform our experiences from the "dark" to the "dawn."

The lens through which I was viewing this journey with my father converged as a paradigm shift from blurred and murky to one of clarity. My heart moved from one of fear and sadness to one of hope and love...God's

amazing, comforting, and life-filled love. Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774) expressed it well:

Hope, like the gleaming taper's light,
Adorns and cheers our way;
And still, as darker grows the night,
Emits a brighter ray.

God of the Advent and the Resurrection... thank you for your gift of "hope" given to us. May we open our hearts to receive this gift of "hope" and through each passage and season, may we trust you and the goodness of life. Amen.

Tuesday, March 20

The First Day of Spring!

It may not look or feel like it yet, but at 1:14 a.m. today, Spring arrived! Actually, this is called the Vernal Equinox. The word *equinox* is derived from the Latin words meaning "equal night." The spring and fall equinoxes are the only dates with equal daylight and darkness as the sun crosses the celestial equator. The tilt of Earth is zero (relative to Earth). With no tilt, the North/South Poles are basically straight up and down. The sun crosses the celestial equator going northward; it rises exactly due east and sets exactly due west and we have Vernal Equinox; we have Spring and the promise of increasing hours of sunlight, increasing warmth, and the rebirth of living things that have lain dormant for months of cold. Spring arriving in God's world gives us hope that Spring will arrive for us too. Jesus the Christ, our vision of hope, gives us the promise of rebirth. Thanks be to God!

*Morning has broken like the first morning;
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!*

From the hymn, *Morning Has Broken*
Words by Eleanor Farjeon, 1931

Wednesday, March 21

Contributed by Garrett Farin

This year for track, I decided I wanted to put forth my whole effort. I felt as though I was not able to compete as well as I could have in years past because of all the extra weight I had to carry with me. I tried to lose weight last year, but found that I was unable to do so with any success. I love food a lot, so this has been a hard sacrifice to make. This year has brought an extra challenge, since I eat almost every meal at a buffet. However, I have found some success so far because I started to think about people who are not as lucky as me, and may not eat a meal for days on end. I think about how much more severe their hunger is than mine; I only have to cut a couple hundred calories out of my diet. I hope that for this Lent and longer, I can continue to view my own plight as more of a privilege, that I even have access to good food and am healthy enough to compete in track.

Thursday, March 22

Contributed by Jesse Simpson

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Last April my family received the hard news that my grandmother was sick in such a way that she would not recover. She might have six weeks, or six months left. The doctors weren't sure how long. But she had time enough to make ready.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters: It was beautiful watching Grandma prepare. She seemed determined to love and listen as much as possible in the time left to her. Letting her family know she loved us was her priority, and she succeeded marvelously. She began a "spiritual prescription" of reading the 23rd Psalm, five times a day, slowly and deliberately. It sustained her, and eventually, all of us.

He restores my soul; he guides me in straight paths for his name's sake. As her body weakened, her spirit grew. She became the comforter of *our* tears, assured *us* that all was well. She had a final conversation with one of her children with whom there had been conflict, and both found peace in love that triumphed over pride.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you have anointed my head with oil; my cup runs over. In several talks I had with Grandma, I never heard her speak of fear. She admitted “disappointment” that her time was ending, but was not afraid. She was filled with the peace and assurance which surpasses all understanding, and it overflowed to those of us who were around her in the hard days.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. I remember the love and kindness that Grandma showed in life. I remember her faithfulness to goodness. And I take her last example, her final gift, and look toward reunion in the resurrection of Christ.

Friday, March 23

Contributed by Doug Knudson

As I thought about the concept of a “Vision of Hope,” I came to the realization that I have seen many examples of hope during my life, although I didn’t always recognize them as such until later in life.

One of my earliest recollections of hope goes back to when I was growing up on a farm. Every day on the farm brought multiple new hopes for such things as the right amount of rain for growing crops; sunshine at the right times to dry the cut hay or to make it possible to work in the fields; healthy births and growth cycles for our animals; reasonable commodity prices, especially for milk, sufficient to fund the purchases of necessities; no equipment breakdowns at critical times; and, even for some leisure time to spend with family and friends.

Of course, the specific hopes were not always fulfilled. Sometimes a calf was stillborn, or the crops were stunted because of too little or too much rain, or the hay baler broke in the middle of the field. But such events did not eliminate hope. Hope was not grounded on a single event or outcome. Rather, hope was a constant and ongoing part of daily life. When an outcome was not the hoped for result, God was not blamed for failing to provide what we needed. Instead, plans were adjusted or new plans were made to deal with the complications. Hope was focused on the future and

was a belief that the next day could bring better results, like a healthy litter of baby pigs or a higher price for milk.

Such a background has led me to see the message of Jesus to be one of hope. Although some days the news makes it difficult to see any signs of hope, I think back to my life on a farm and conclude I have a responsibility to do what I can to participate in the providing of hope for others.

Saturday, March 24

Contributed by Kathie Nichols

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Heb. 11:1

This scripture reference was written on a lunch bill we received last Spring from our waitress at Ed Debevic's (a unique diner in Chicago). Seth Schroerlucke and I were there with the confirmation class. We had told her that we were from a church in Madison. At first, we puzzled at the notation, which simply read, "HEB 11 1." Eventually, we deciphered it and I was able to look up the verse on my smart phone. (Yes, those smart phones really can come in handy!) We were all amazed and delighted that she had communicated with us in this way!

As I began to think about this meditation, I thought of this verse; but I also realized that I was struggling with the meaning of the word "hope." My mind kept returning to the word "trust." What I kept thinking about was the idea that "hoping" implied that one is in a bad place to begin with; and hope is the virtual lifeboat that keeps you from drowning. Trust, to me anyway, is a word that brings me a sense of peace. Trust seems to me to be more about confidence. Out of curiosity, I decided to check the dictionary definition of hope. The definition was: *the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.* But, lo and behold, I was amazed to see these illustrations of the definition: "to give up hope," "there is little or no hope for recovery," "her forgiveness is my constant hope." The examples used the concept of hope in a *negative* sense! In other words, the "best" outcome or situation would NOT happen. I then looked up the word "trust." The definition was: *reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, etc., of a person or thing; confidence.* There was no illustration of this definition,

but what a different sense from the words – a sense of being grounded, strong and confident. So, as I looked at the scripture passage again, I realized that the word “faith” was the key word for me; not so much the word, “hope.” Furthermore, the words “faith and “trust” are closely aligned. I trust that God is present with me, when things are going well and when they’re not. So I guess that is my truth, my faith *and* my continued hope.

I feel confident in that faith when I experience coincidental things like sitting at a table at Ed Debevic’s, where, among all of the theatrical, irreverent and sarcastic waitstaff employed there, our youth group happened to land at a table staffed by someone who holds this scripture near to her heart. I can’t be certain of it, but I have faith that that experience was reassurance that my “hope” is not unfounded.

Monday, March 26

Contributed by Katie Stauss

Hope....
What is there to life?
Nothing or everything?
Is there any significance to whether we live or die?
A purpose, an aspiration, a single defining moment making everything worthwhile?
Some say yes and some say no...
For everyone it is a necessary decision,
To decide what path to take.
Will you live without a care,
Focus on personal self-serving goals,
Or live a life dedicated to improving everyone’s lives?
The choice is yours,
But take a moment to think,
What is life without hope?
Hope for more beyond this life?
Hope for better opportunities for those around you to grow?
Hope is one’s endeavor to know everything means something.
Through living a life dedicated to believing anything is possible for anyone and everyone,
It is our purpose

Tuesday, March 27

Contributed by Mary Hasheider

Jesus brought visions of hope into each day and gave hope for a new tomorrow of peace and joy. His words and deeds were so powerful that they are carried across the ages into all the tomorrows that have followed. I see this HOPE seeded in my life in several ways:

Healing. Jesus healed in many ways. My greatest experiences of healing have come through a touch, a smile or a kind word. Such healing, based on my faith in God and the goodness of humankind, is miraculous in simplicity and filled with love.

Opportunity: Opportunities are generally viewed as ways to seize the moment and infuse it with success of some sort. Jesus modeled spiritual opportunity as freedom. I hold dear God-given freedoms. Freedom to act with integrity. Freedom to choose. Freedom to learn. Freedom to err. Freedom to love. Freedom to be all that one is created to be.

Prayer: It's easy to pray during tough times as we cry from the depths of our hearts for delivery from harm. It's comforting to pray for patience and perseverance or peace and plenty. Jesus taught us the prayer that encompasses all. I seek for my life to become a walking prayer where my communion with God is so close that I see only goodness, purity and beauty, regardless of outside circumstances.

Eternal life: The greatest gift Jesus gave us is the remembrance that life is timeless and God's spirit resides in all of us. My vision of hope is to see the ways that heaven on earth is manifest right now.

Sometimes healing is delayed and opportunities seem a burden rather than freedom. Sometimes the answer to prayer may be "no" or "just wait" and life seems small versus glorious. Then I turn again and reflect on the many ways and places God has given me to find hope for my journey. And I am thankful.

Wednesday, March 28

Contributed by Laura Nagle

An Extension of Hope

I always find myself asking, “What are your goals for your child?” You know, as if any parent can find the words in just a few sentences to describe all of their aspirations for their child with special needs. That said, I am in awe of the extent to which many of these parents have carefully calculated their responses. Most describe practical, immediate needs: “To be able to brush her teeth by herself,” or “To sit still during circle time at school.” I typically view these types of goals as safe, obtainable, within the foreseeable future.

Beyond that, however, is a different type of response. One parent said of her son, who has difficulty walking independently, “I want him to be able to dance at his wedding.” It is these dreams that provide me with the motivation to aim for more than logic compels us to believe in. It is in these dreams that I am filled with hope – the faith that it really *is possible*. These children carry the special message of hope with them every day; that there is the potential for so much more to give.

A parent once responded, “Our hope for him is that he will be able to give and receive love.” Perhaps this is where we should all start. It is a simple, yet indescribably complex leap of faith to believe that God will provide us with the love we need and the ability to share it with others.

May we all be brave enough to hope for something more; to believe in the unlikely, improbable, or impossible. It is this extension of hope that enables us to grow and reach our full potential. It is only then that we will truly embrace the hope we see in others and the power of God’s love.

Thursday, March 29

Contributed by Susan Hornig

I have learned many things in the process of raising our children. I have always thought I learned more than I taught. I am reminded of one lesson

learned literally at the hands of our youngest daughter when she was a toddler. I was carrying her around as she was jabbering away about something. But I was not really paying attention to what she was saying - nodding and uh-huhing in the right places, but not really listening, because I was busy thinking of something else. Finally she grabbed my face between her little hands, whipped it around to face her, and said, "LISTEN TO ME!"

As I was thinking about our Lenten theme *Jesus the Christ, Visions of Hope*, that memory came to my mind. God has been working since the beginning of time to tell us what we need to know in order to live the life God knows is best for us, the abundant life. Yet it seems that we do not really pay attention as we should. We are always busy with our own agendas, our own ideas of what life should be like.

I can imagine God thinking, "Over and over I have told you what you need to know about living. Why can't you get it? I guess I will just have to show you. I will have to send a living example of how to live."

That, for me, is Jesus, the Christ. God has taken our faces between God's hands to say, "LISTEN TO ME!" God is saying, "How much more clear can I make it?"

Jesus the Christ is for me the vision for how I may hope to live the life God wants me to have, to live the life that IS life. Jesus, in his humanity, shows the way at every point as we make our journey through this life and into eternity. Jesus, as the spirit and representative of God, is the vision of right living that is ever our guide.

Friday, March 30

Contributed by Earl Madden

"Never, never, never, give up."

This famous, yet simple quote was spoken by Winston Churchill in 1941. The reference of course was to the courage and effort it would take to turn back the most heinous dictator the world has ever known. What specifically was he referring to not giving up? What is the one thing the people of

England and the entire world could not give up? It seems an obvious answer. The one thing they could not give up... was HOPE.

On the morning of September 12, 2001, over 3,000 people woke up and realized they would never see their husband, wife, son, daughter, best friend, alive again. The most devastating attack on American soil had robbed them of their loved ones. The problem now was how to face the day without them. How to even get out of bed. Their lives were now permanently scarred with the images of those planes. Only one thing remained to help them through the loss and pain. The anguish and heartache on this scale was almost unimaginable. But the one thing that could get them through this horror, did. It was HOPE.

These are two very epic accounts of the power and healing qualities of hope. But every day, in every corner of the world, people come face to face with their own personal tragedies. Life is hard. And life can be very cruel. After all of the “why me?” questions, the anger, and denial, it comes down to one question. How can I face a new day? We have all felt those times when the blankets feel like they weigh a hundred pounds. How can I even get out of bed. My life is over... in ruins.

But we do get out of bed. We do face the day. Whether we like it or not, every morning the sun comes up just like it did yesterday, and just like it will tomorrow. It's as if it is God's way of telling us He wants the world to continue. He wants us to keep going. To keep growing. But what force could possibly be strong enough to pull us from our dark hole? What has that much power to keep us moving forward, when every other feeling tells us to quit, to give up. The power of HOPE.

It may come in the form of a hug from a best friend, a kind word from a neighbor, a smile from a family member. It disguises itself in many forms. But it's there. Our job now, is to look for it. Slowly let ourselves back into the light. That tunnel can be awfully long and awfully dark. But that tiny, tiny ray of light is there. And it certainly feels like it will never get any bigger. But it does get bigger. It does get brighter. And we slowly and assuredly get a bit stronger everyday. And eventually, like so many before us who have faced such pain, we survive the turmoil. We have come back into the light. And that light has a name... its name is HOPE.

Saturday, March 31

Contributed by Dan Tyler

The Jesus with whom I seek a relationship is a person not entirely unlike me. He finds clarity during moments of quiet personal time. Prayer, meditation – call it what you will – it quiets a racing mind and draws focus inward. Gently stripping away a layer of self-blame, a world is revealed with problems that are a little bit smaller. But prayer is limited, it can only set the stage; even the most zealous prayer in my living room won't feed someone downtown. So, like Jesus, I seek first a place of confidence and right relationship with God, and then step out each day into the dangerous world, where I encounter myriad other versions of a 'right relationship with God.'"

Jesus was constantly challenged by the surprises and inconsistencies of daily life, but maintained his own kind of hope; he allowed himself to be vulnerable. To find friends in the unpopular, to ask and answer questions honestly, to show compassion to his oppressors. Even in his persecution, Jesus demonstrated love and its ultimate triumph over death.

The Christianity I grew up with is hundreds of years old; Jesus' Christianity unfolded with each step and statement he made in a volatile world. But truly, just because Christianity began long ago doesn't mean that it can stop growing – indeed, like Jesus, I face countless new situations every day. Although Jesus studied holy texts, his life became a holy text of its own – we are both blazing trails. If all I did were throw the proverbial book at the world, I'd miss the chance to see a new covenant. In this, I find great hope.

I believe in the transformative power of compassion, of being willing to be confident enough in my creation that I am willing to be vulnerable. The more I open up, the more I find that all sorts of things can fit in – all kinds of joy, poured abundantly by a God much, much bigger than a God who stays in a building or a book, or limits love to certain individuals. The resurrection miracle gives me hope that if I allow myself to follow Jesus' example of being vulnerable in real dialogue, real understanding, and real compassion, I will come to understand God's real love.

Monday, April 2

Contributed by Contributed by Bobbi Reynolds

Hope is a Butterfly

In Chaos Theory, the “butterfly effect” is a term used to describe how tiny things can affect giant systems – and complex systems – like weather patterns. It suggests that minute actions taken on one side of the world might have huge repercussions on the other side of the world.

Mother Teresa was a butterfly.

When she tended the poor, the sick, the orphaned and the dying in Calcutta, her “butterfly wings” eventually resulted in more than 600 missions in nearly 125 countries.

Jane Addams was a butterfly.

She became a force in Illinois, her native state, through the founding of Hull House, but also because of her work to create legislation regarding child labor and factory inspection. She was an advocate for women’s suffrage and mandated schooling for children. She was the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

We are butterflies.

The hope we express through our various efforts here at First Church have already resulted in positive outcomes in Haiti and El Salvador; the Appalachians and South Dakota; St. Louis and Madison.

We don’t know all of the effects our wings may have, but it is critical that we fly.

Tuesday, April 3

Contributed by Keith Schroerlucke

Living Eternity in the Moment

Paul ends his poetic paragraph in 1 Corinthians:13 with the words: *“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”* All three elements relate to all of life. They can empower us to live our lives knowing there is more than this moment. Paul knew that the Corinthians were placing great value on the temporal gifts of knowledge, that is, they were placing far too much emphasis on the present moment. Their vision was incomplete and according to the idiom, they were unable to see beyond the point of their noses. Perhaps we struggle with the same dilemma today. From the halls of congress to the board rooms of corporations to the sanctuaries of our churches to the very values by which we live and make decisions in our personal lives; we are so locked into this moment that we fail to see what can be. As such, we seem destined to maintain what is because we have no heart and no vision for what can be.

Jesus understood this age-old dilemma. In his kingdom parables, he opens windows of opportunity for people to see beyond this moment into something much bigger than oneself. It is not to undervalue this moment, but rather to see our present situation in the context of something much bigger.

I believe it is this vision that can offer hope as we stand next to the grave of a loved one; as we ponder decisions about policies that govern our life in community; as we discern priorities for life and living; as we seek to live in the larger community of the world. As important as this moment might be, it is but one moment in all eternity. It will pass. However, when we hold that vision, then this moment becomes even more important and our living becomes even more intentional, for our lives today are lived not just for the moment but in the context of a larger vision of what can be.

Perhaps Paul is reminding us that to live this moment in that vision of what can be will require faith, hope and most of all, love.

Wednesday, April 4
Contributed by Tina Lang

Two Stones of Hope

I was in Petra, Jordan. The “Rose-Red City” of stone constitutes one of the most extraordinary and fascinating monumental complexes of the ancient world for the outstanding quality of the architecture hewn from rugged mountains of colorful rock. It takes a full day just to walk from the entrance of the ancient city through the stone ruins and back, and that’s without stopping to spend time at any of the hundreds of fascinating stone structures.

One stop I did make was at the auditorium structure. Rows and rows of seats are carved into the stone creating a semi-circle high above a stone stage platform, orchestra area and front columns. The short break to sit was welcome after walking on rocks for several hours and knowing there were more hours of rocky paths ahead!

As I rested on a stone bench of the auditorium, I was approached by a Bedouin child. She pulled on my arm and turned my hand so that my palm was up and open. With a bright smile on her face and animatedly speaking words I couldn’t understand, she placed a stone in my open hand. I smiled back at her, nodded my head, and started speaking animatedly myself as I carefully inspected the stone. But I soon realized that she wasn’t just showing me her stone, she was trying to sell me her stone! Who, but a child would try to sell stones in Petra, the place so full of rocks it is *named* Rock? I was both troubled by her desperate need and blessed by her indomitable sense of hope.

On their way to Jesus’ tomb the women worried and wondered, “Who will roll away the stone for us?”

I am like those women, often worried about moving stones only to finally realize that God has moved the stone and done so much more! I want to be more like that little girl with the stone. I want to live with a hopefulness that reflects what I know to be true: God’s solutions are far greater than even my wildest imaginings.

On a shelf in my office there sits a precious stone purchased from a little girl in Petra.

Thursday, April 5

Maundy Thursday

Hope in the Night

After supper, Jesus went to the garden to pray. As he communed with God, he found strength for what lay ahead and was able to say, “Thy will be done.” God’s will is for goodness, and though a time of deep darkness was still ahead, Easter did arrive.

A stanza from Miriam Therese Winter’s hymn titled *Wellspring of Wisdom* (#506 in the United Methodist Hymnal) may be our prayer as we encounter the deep darkness.

*Dawn of a New Day,
put to flight
the terrors of the long, dark night.*
As bearers of your loving light,
we huddle closer to your fire,
lift the lamp of hope a little higher.*

*adapted slightly

Friday, April 6

Good Friday

Mark 15:33-39

“*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” Words of deep despair, but could they also be words of faith, even hope?

Jesus was not the first to utter these words. Move from the gospel narrative of Jesus’ death back to the Old Testament and read all of Psalm 22. You’ll recognize many striking similarities. Over the centuries, some Christians have concluded that Psalm 22 was a prophetic word about Jesus’ death and maybe that’s so, but perhaps there’s more to it.

In Jesus' time, the Hebrew people were well versed in the psalms and would have committed many of the psalms to memory. Psalm 22 provided the verses that were to be recited in times of peril and particularly at the time of death. In his hour of death, Jesus' religious heritage is at work and as we hear him recite words from Psalm 22 we hear him speak words of faith and hope. Psalm 22 begins in despair, but ends very differently.

As the Hebrew people learned and recited psalms, they were taught that, when necessary, even one word could say it all; reciting the first line, was, in a sense, as complete as reciting every line. They trusted that God already knew the ending and that God would hear their affirmations even if circumstances prevented them from reciting the entire psalm. From God's perspective, the psalm was present in its entirety, the story was complete, even when only a few words could be uttered.

We claim this day as good, because we know the rest of the story. We know that Jesus' agony on the cross was not the end. On this day and in the days to come, may we, like Jesus, call out to God with faith that sees beyond present distress, with confidence that we are beloved children of God, and trusting that God is with us now and always. With Jesus the Christ as our vision of hope, an horrific Friday becomes Good Friday.

Saturday, April 7

Holy Saturday

This is the day we wait. Hope and faith are all we have, but that is all we need. Thanks be to God.

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection: at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

In 1985, composer Natalie Sleeth, wrote *Hymn of Promise* found on page 707 of the United Methodist Hymnal.



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