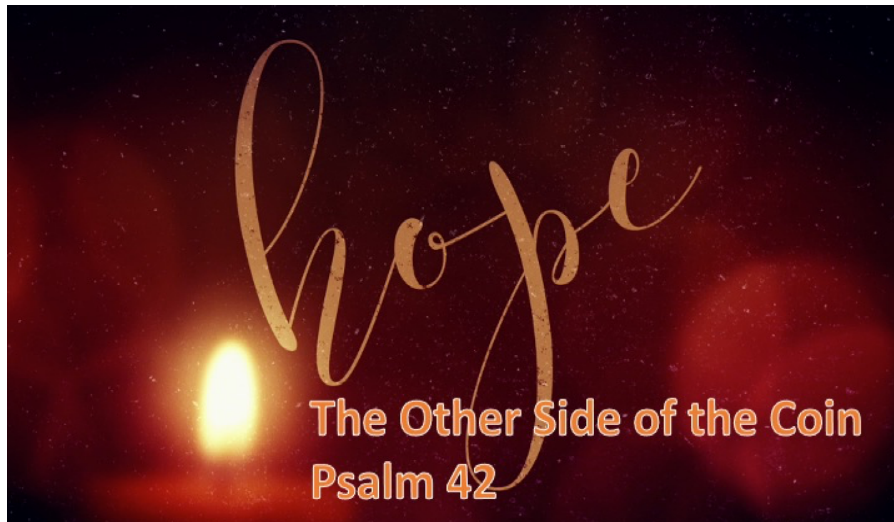


January 15, 2023
Psalm 42



In June of 2020, the CDC released data showing that one in four adults ages 18 to 24 have considered suicide. 1 in 4. And, according to a recently released Harvard Youth Poll of Americans ages 18 to 29, 51% of young Americans said that at least several days in the previous two weeks they had felt down, depressed or *hopeless*.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/10/51percent-of-young-americans-say-they-feel-down-depressed-or-hopeless.html>

Last April, *The Atlantic* magazine published an article about the rising rates of mental health struggles among young people. It reported an alarming rise in sadness, depression, and hopelessness.

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/04/american-teens-sadness-depression-anxiety/629524/>)

Last September, *Psychology Today* published an article that supports these very concerning results. Titled *Today's Epidemic of Hopelessness*, in that article, the author, a psychologist, states that *it is rare that a young person I work with expresses real hope about what lies ahead*. The author also went on to say of himself, *I'm not in fact sure whether hope is warranted*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cultural-psychiatry/202209/today-s-epidemic-hopelessness>

Mental health struggles have always been an issue, and every generation throughout history has faced challenges leading to those struggles. In the past few years, however, it seems that the levels of mental health difficulties have increased exponentially. The causes run very deep and are greatly varied, but of all the causes of this crisis of mental health, I believe the greatest factor is a loss of hope. The loss of hope makes this not only a crisis of mental health, but also a crisis of spiritual health.

This morning, we continue the series of messages titled *Faith, Hope, and Love*. The past two Sundays I have followed the theme of *faith*, and this Sunday we move to *hope*, which ties us directly to the crisis we face today.

I have titled today's message *Hope, the Other Side of the Coin*. To me, *hope* is very much tied to *faith*. It is our *faith* that provides us with *hope*. Can we, without *faith*, have *hope*? They are two sides of the same coin, so to speak.

Our Scripture text for today comes from the 42 Psalm. Follow along with me as I read that passage – Psalm 42:1-11.

¹ *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.*

² *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*

³ *My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

⁴ *These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.*

⁵ *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

⁶ *My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the*

- land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.*
- ⁷ *Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.*
- ⁸ *By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.*
- ⁹ *I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”*
- ¹⁰ *My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”*
- ¹¹ *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

The first word I would like to say this morning about hope is –

1. Never lose hope.

That’s a very simple 3-word phrase, isn’t it? And much easier said than done, I might add.

I recently received a card in the mail from someone, and it included a page with this quote – *hope never abandons you; you abandon it.* That is an interesting quote, and I have kept it on my desk since receiving it. When, I look at that quote, I fear that many in our day and age have abandoned *hope*. In saying this, I am not condemning anyone who has given up *hope*; I am simply stating my sadness about the reality that hopelessness has become such a hallmark of our day and time. And, I will add, there are understandable reasons one can have for struggling with *hope*. We live in a time when there is more than one existential crisis that is facing humanity, and it often appears that we are not making much, if any, progress towards solving those crises.

Do you ever feel hopeless? Do you feel as though your sense of hope is hanging by a thread? Would we, all things considered, be justified in giving into hopelessness?

I think not. I *hope* not. Hope is an essential element to the human condition, and when hope is lost, nothing good follows. We too often see the tragic results in situations where people have lost hope. In

neighborhoods, for instance, where economic fragility, a lack of basic services and infrastructure, and lack of opportunity is overwhelming, people live out that hopelessness in violence and other destructive behaviors.

I love the book of Psalms for a number of reasons. One of those reasons I love it is because of the way we are presented with the full range of human emotions. The psalms do not sugarcoat the realities of life. It was, after all, one of the psalms (Psalm 22:1), that Jesus quoted on the cross, when he said, *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* So many of the psalms confront us with the emotions of despair and a sense of abandonment.

But even in the midst of that despair and abandonment, we always find a sense of hope. In fact, in the parts of the Bible where we find people at their lowest points in life, we find affirmations of hope. Job, for example, who is arguably the Biblical character who confronted despair, suffering, and abandonment in the most acute sense, still expressed hope. When I first read the book of Job, I was in middle school or early in high school. At the time, I was beginning to wrestle with the questions about evil and suffering, and someone suggested that I read the book of Job to find answers to my questions. Well, I'll be honest and say that I didn't find any answers. The reason I did not find any answers was because I was expecting to find a chapter and verse that plainly stated, in very exact and obvious terms, the answers I was looking to find. It took me a while to understand that, while I thought I did not find answers, I really had found them. I found in 13:15 that Job makes what I believe to be one of the greatest proclamations of hope that has ever been made. Having lost, literally everything, and hanging on to life by a slender, fragile thread, Job says, amazingly, *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.* Isn't that amazing? Let me read that again – *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.* Let's read it one more time – *though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.* Anyone here ever made that proclamation? While that wasn't the type of answer for which I was searching, it was the answer I needed and the ultimate answer. The

answer that Job found was that no matter what we are experiencing, God is with us, and because God is with us we have hope.

The psalmist came to what we often call a *crossroads* moment in life; those moments when we know we have come to a moment of great decision. It's a moment of *which way am I going to go? Am I going to give up? Or am I going to keep going, even though I feel as though I don't have the hope to continue?* What will we do? The situation for the psalmist came down to this choice – was he going to hold on to his hope, and his faith, or was he going to lose hope and abandon faith? He made his choice for hope and faith, but also recognized there was still a tough road ahead.

Faith is not a guarantee that things will always be easy. In fact, those who claim that faith means we will be forever immune from the difficulties and challenges of life do us no favors and they also present an erroneous vision of faith. So, the psalmist ends the psalm on a note of optimism, but one that is also tempered with some realism – *why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God* (verse 11). Life is not always easy. Life can be very, very difficult, and the difficulties that visit us in life can wear us down and can even bring us to the point where we consider abandoning hope, and by extension, faith. But until we see the results of our faith, we hold to hope. Hope is what reminds us that we will, one day, see the promises of faith.

So, never lose hope, because –

2. *There is always hope.*

Well, while Psalm 42 ends on a positive and hopeful note, most of the verses in that psalm are not going to make their way into a greeting card! Imagine a Hallmark card that says, on the outside, *Here's a note to offer you some encouragement.* And on the inside are these words – *My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ...My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

In fact, some of the verses in Psalm 42 are discouraging to the point of being hard to read. Unless, that is, you find yourself in a similar state of mind and circumstance as the psalmist. If so, those words can resonate powerfully with you because someone else has experienced what you are experiencing, and you can think *someone else has felt the way I feel, and I'm not alone! And not only am I not alone; I can find hope through the experiences of others!*

Reading through Scripture, we find much of what we read set in a context where hope is difficult. I have mentioned Moses in recent weeks, and Abraham and Sarah, and the Hebrew people wandering through the wilderness. Hope was hard for them to find, at times, in their situations. Abraham and Sarah found it impossible to hope that God's promise of many descendants would come to fruition, and their lack of hope – and faith – led to disastrous results. Moses fled Egypt after the privilege of his early life and was living in exile, with little or no hope of ever returning to Egypt, and his people. But God called him to return and tasked him with leading the people out of captivity. It was a joyous day when they left Egypt, but then came the wilderness and there was a lot of hopelessness as they wandered for years. And when they came to the edge of the Promised Land, Moses found he was not going to enter, dashing his hope of walking into that land. And Job, whom I have already mentioned, was in a situation that could be best described as hopeless. The disciples found themselves in more than one situation that could have quashed their hope. Subjugated by Rome. Threatened by religious and political leaders because they followed Jesus. And also Paul, whose life was turned upside down when he began following Jesus, and who eventually was executed for doing so. In Philippians 1:20, the last of his writings and written not long before his execution, Paul writes, *no matter what, I will continue to hope.*

But as bleak as their situations looked, we find the Biblical characters always holding, always clinging, to a glimmer of hope. It might not look as though there is any hope, but there is always hope. That is the message of the psalms. That is the message from the lives of the

Biblical characters. That is the message to which we are called to hold to. That is a message we must, I believe, always hold to.

3. *Hope – real hope – must be tied to something real, and something lasting.*

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, in 15:13-14, 19, Paul connects *faith* and *hope* together, when he says ¹³*If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.* ¹⁴*And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* ¹⁹*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

When we speak about hope, certainly in the Christian sense, faith provides us something in which we can believe, which in turn provides us with the hope that life has meaning, purpose, and continues, even after death. In that sense, hope is tied to something that is specific, real, and provides a tangible result. In the passage quoted above, Paul ties hope to the promise that life is more than a random occurrence. To me, this is one of the foundational realities of hope – that we are not here by accident, but by design. And if we are here by design, that means there is meaning to life, and a purpose to life, and there is something that comes after this temporal life.

Some years ago, I was visiting a church member in the hospital. The person was early in their battle with cancer, which would, eventually, take their life. As we talked, I was leaning against a recliner at the foot of their bed. After a time of talking about a number of casual topics, the person suddenly said, *Jesus has been visiting with me.* Now, this was not the first time I had heard a person make such a statement. Over the years of my ministry, I've had numerous conversations such as this one. And, I should add, I'm sure the person I was visiting that day was not under the influence of any medications that would cause hallucinations. It is as though some people, particularly when they are in the midst of a health challenge, have the curtain between the temporal and eternal pulled back and are able to get a glimpse of what is on the other side. I replied to the person, *tell me about your visits with Jesus.* Well, they

said, *I do most of the talking. Jesus mostly sits and listens. Where does he sit*, I asked. *In that chair you are leaning on. Is he here now*, I asked. *Yes, he is*, they replied. At that moment, I decided that perhaps I shouldn't lean against the chair.

The reality is this – Jesus is always here, and is always with us. Last week, I spoke about the story of the man who brought his son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus was on the mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John when the father arrived. When Jesus and his three companions came down from the mountain, they were greeted by a rather chaotic situation that had arisen. I didn't say this last week, so I want to conclude today with this element of that story – everything changed when Jesus showed up. That Jesus shows up, and that everything changes when he does, gives me great hope. I don't think that means every problem in life suddenly disappears, but for me, I'm content just knowing that Jesus shows up. I don't expect, or even ask for, an answer to every question I have or for a solution to every problem. I just want to know Jesus is here. At this point in my life, I don't expect that everything I might ask of God would be granted, and I'm not bothered if it is not. While I would like for life to be easy and perfect, I realize it never will be, and that's okay. I'm content to know that when Jesus shows up, he will walk with us through the chaos and difficulties of life. That Jesus always shows up gives me more hope than I could ever express.

The psalmist spoke some difficult words. I don't know what it was that the psalmist was experiencing, but the final words of the psalm tell us to *put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God*. What an affirmation of hope that is! Let us hope, today, and always!