

Where Hope Meets Fear

Pastoral Message for Noank Baptist Church
Delivered by Jacquelin Gorman on January 26, 2014

"For Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."
Hebrews 11:1

"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight".
Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

When I interned at UCLA Medical Center as an Interfaith Chaplain, early on in our training, we were asked to compose a statement of our ministry, using the particular language of our personal faith traditions. Those of us using the Judeo-Christian theology were expected to form our statements in shape of commandments. Each semester, I would keep working on mine, and I had started with ten, and by the end, had reduced it down to two. I would stand by those two now, although I think they are the hardest ones to keep, in the toughest of times.

1. Do Not Spread Fear.

2. Do not Steal Hope.

A few years ago, eight to be exact, I was sitting in a neurosurgeon's office, and after looking over my brain scans, which had been reviewed by many other specialists at hospitals around the country, he confirmed the medical facts that I had a brain aneurysm that was inoperable and growing uncontrollably. But then he said two more things that were far more disturbing. He said, that as far my prognosis went, I should not buy any of next year's calendars, because I would not need them. And just one more detail of this story you need to know. It was October when he

said this. And then he said something even more terrifying. "The kindest thing I can do for you is to tell you the truth, " he said. "There is no hope for you."

All right, I am not going to spread fear today, so I must repeat - that conversation happened eight years ago. But it still haunts me to think of how devastating those words were for me to hear, and how powerfully destructive words can be to us when we are most vulnerable. What that doctor did that day was break both commandments. He made me afraid that I had no chance of survival, and that there was nothing I could do with the months remaining. Because that is what fear does. It paralyses you. It makes a person stop walking through the dark valley of the shadow, and stay and set up a lonely camp there. And when a person steals your hope, they have also stolen your will to live. Because it is hope that keeps us alive in every present moment.

Hope is to the human spirit what breath is to the human body.

I believe that hospitals are sacred places, what the ancient Celts would call, "thin places", where the veil between the spiritual and the material worlds is so thin as to be transparent at times, where the line between life and death is crossed over, back and forth, in a constant swirl of invisible activity. A young patient once told me that she believed that there are ghosts in hospitals always flying around us, entering and leaving with us, so that was why hospitals had such huge double doors. I was assigned many departments with double doors during my chaplaincy: ICU, Organ Transplant Unit, Pediatric Oncology, Palliative Care, the Inpatient Neuro-Psychiatric Ward, and the Emergency Room every other week-end, all very, very thin places, indeed.

Often I was called into a patient's room when everyone else was leaving. And the first thing I would sense filling that room, was fear so dense, that it worked like a dark curtain of fog to obliterate our vision of all future possibilities. A black curtain, made of many thick threads of fear - Fear of death, fear of pain, fear of loss, fear of abandonment, fear of failing to take care of those we love, and leaving them behind. I learned that is why fear is more incapacitating than any physical illness, because it temporarily disables us, blinds us, and makes us unable to see our way clearly, past or present. And the only thing I, or anyone else, can bring into a room with air deeply shadowed with fear is the gift of our vision, the gift of hope, the belief that there is a reality of help beyond ourselves, beyond what we can see for ourselves though our terribly dimly lit glasses.

Well before Biblical times, Hope was always the prized gift to the human race, in Greek mythology. The well known story of Pandora's Box, when Pandora could not resist opening the treasure chest, and all manner of terrible suffering flew out: illness, pain, war, famine, death, cruelty, on and on? What most of us remember is that the story stands for opening up a can of worms that can't be restrained, and that Pandora's curiosity paid the awful price of endless suffering on earth. Perhaps we don't always remember the last part of the story. That the Gods took pity on Pandora, and on all humans, and decided to leave one thing in the box before it was shut. That one thing was supposed to be enough to deal with all of the other things that had gotten loose. That one gift the Gods let us keep, was hope.

So that is the Good News of our story as well. Our Lord came here to earth, suffered with us, and left us the same priceless treasure. Hope in human form. Jesus

is the absolute embodiment of hope, for us so beautifully articulated in that prophetic line of the Christmas Carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" - ***the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight***. The resurrection is our lesson that the crucifixion was not the end of the story. This is what hope teaches us - that the worst thing in our lives, is never the last thing that God has planned for us.

Now my own experience of hope is that it is **not** a fluttery thing with feathers, as Emily Dickinson once described it. Hope has to be very heavy and deliberate to be the counterweight to fear. So the best examples of hope working in my life, are very grounded and solid, and covered with human skin. Each of us can embody hope to one another, just as Jesus embodies hope to all of us. I have had the great privilege of seeing it happen over and over, where I have had the chance to bring it into a room filled with fear, and have had the great fortune to have someone else bring it to me, and saved me from suffocating in terror. The only thing that differentiates me as the Hope giver and the Hope receiver is timing. We will all find ourselves on one side of the equation or the other during our lives.

There are so many examples of how hope has met fear in my life. I remember when I was pregnant with my first child, and I was also working as a Hospital Attorney, actually supervising malpractice cases at the very hospital where my daughter would be born. Honestly, there is nothing scarier than looking at all the things that can go wrong in a hospital, right before you are about to be admitted into one! I had handled so many litigations over what they called then, "bad baby" cases, but were actually babies who were born with bad problems, and I had a brother

born with birth defects, so that I was unable to sleep at night, so afraid of what the future might bring.

And then one afternoon, my legal secretary, also a dear friend, called me down to meet her in the Hospital Records room. That was 27 years ago, when hospital records were all in paper files. When I went into that room, the aisles were piled high as my head with files that had been taken out of their drawers. Hundreds and hundreds of files. Everywhere my eye could see, were walls of these files, and there was my friend, Debbie, smiling. She said, "Jackie, you have never seen these files because they don't get taken out of the drawers and sent to the Legal Department. These are all the healthy babies that are born in this hospital. And there are hundreds and hundreds more! And your baby will be one of them." That was a gift of hope that gave me faith that there was more to the world of having babies than I had seen in my little office. As we heard in the scriptural reading today from Hebrews: ***Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.***"

Another story. I was called to visit a Psyche patient by the nursing staff, because the man had become belligerent and difficult. He had refused to eat for many weeks. His paranoia had flamed up because he overheard a nurse say that they needed his bed for another patient, and he was afraid that the nurses and the hospital cooks were poisoning his food to get rid of him. When I walked in, the nurses were trying to tranquilize him and prepare him for installation of a feeding tube the next morning. Sometimes the hospital staff would page a chaplain to distract a patient from painful procedures by offering a prayer or Biblical reading.

As soon as I saw how terrified this man was, however, I realized that, in this case, words, no matter how sacred or well intentioned, were going to help make him less afraid. In fact, sometimes a stranger coming into a patient's room suddenly without warning, bringing a Bible and starting to pray is the most fear-spreading action we can take! So, I went down to the cafeteria and brought back a tray of food, sat and ate right beside him, and started to gush about how delicious the tortilla soup tasted, and the chicken enchilada, and the flan for dessert. I offered him some, and he stared at me wild-eyed, and ranted about how hungry he was, starving to death, but he wanted to get out of this hospital alive, to see his grandchildren grow up, and he had to fight for his life. I agreed with this, and asked him to tell me about his life and his family. Indeed, he did have a lot of things to live for, to look forward to, so then I asked him if he would make me a promise.

I asked this quite intentionally because I believe that making and keeping promises are the most life-affirming actions we can take in the face of fear. If I ate half of the meal, and did not die, would he eat the other half later? Because the truth was that I had two young children and I did not want to get sick, and not be able to go home and take care of them. So, he watched me, and he calmed down, and then he ate the rest of the meal, without a word. He did not end up having to get a feeding tube and was discharged home later that week. This is a familiar story about the sacred communion of sharing bread. Jesus gave us hope in the form of food over and over, because it is the most solid nurturing force to overcome the soul-starving effect of fear.

Here is the insidious thing about fear - that it may take treacherous hold over our minds, but it does not have to capture our spirits. It is almost impossible to argue someone out of their fears with words, or logic, or statistics, tools of the mind, but it is always possible to chase the chill away with the warmth of a listening heart and the presence of a kindred soul. When someone is caught in the valley of the shadow, we may not be able to make them move, but we can meet them there right where they are and sit with them in this time. We can stay there and keep them company, until the edge of fear softens and the darkness of fear begins to lighten. And it always will, because hope works that way through our presence.

Speaking of dark times, let's go back to the beginning, now, back to that visit with my doctor, the one who spread my fear and stole my hope. By the way, he is a very good man, and never meant to do any harm with the way he had spoken to me, but it concerned me that he did not understand how his words, whether carefully chosen and well intended, could land so brutally on his other patients. So, a year later, I met him in the hospital hallway, and we talked about that afternoon. By then, my aneurysm had, inexplicably, stopped growing. To his credit, he was willing to revisit that conversation. I asked him why he thought advising me not to buy next year's calendars was a good way to tell me I had what he believed was a short time to live. He actually thought it was a gentler way than giving me numbers. He knew I was a writer and so he thought that the calendar metaphor would be a gentler way to tell me. Except, as I reminded him, that calendars are not metaphors but concrete measures of real time. So real that I still can't stand the sight of them to this day.

So the next question. And why did he take away my hope? He was genuinely surprised I had seen it that way. He thought he was being kind, that he had spared me the delusion of *false hope*. Now I have heard this argument many times before, usually from scientists and physicians, that it is cruel to give false hope. But it is not how I see it. I don't believe hope is ever false. I think that we are getting hope confused with expectation, and what we mistakenly call false hope is an unrealistic expectation. It is easy to tell the difference. Expectation has specific personal goals and deadlines attached. Like the calendar. But Hope is about God's goals and God's time, what theologians call Kairos time. And although none of us knows exactly what those divine plans are for others, and ourselves, we do know that the glorious mystery encompasses more that we can see or experience on this side of Heaven.

A few years after that conversation, I spoke to that neurosurgeon one more time, called him for a consultation, because the aneurysm had started growing again. But this time, the first words out of his mouth were, "I have hope for you, now."

"Finally," I said, laughing. "It's about time!"

And I meant that in so many ways, because in those four years, with my gift of time, I had managed to do so many things, get another degree, finish a book, and see both children graduate from high school, start a new job at a wonderful non-profit, and fulfill a promise I had made to a former patient on the transplant unit, and donate a kidney to a stranger, starting a exchange of donations, and meet that man, become an Ambassador in the Organ Donation Community, and decorate their Rose Bowl float.... all wonderful things.

But the hope that this doctor was now telling me about was that research had produced a new medical procedure that could disarm my aneurysm, not by surgery, but by special interventional radiologist using a kind of glue, shooting it through my main artery without opening up the brain. Only a few doctors could do this procedure then, and none of them were in my HMO. But that did not discourage me and my friends, who were doing their own research, on my behalf, looking for hope. They found a clinical trial going on at a major hospital, but they had just closed it to new patients. I called and asked to be on the waiting list, and when the nurse took down my information, which included the kidney donation, she was silent. And then she said the Clinical Trial was supervised by a doctor whose 12 year old son was waiting for a transplant, and whose health was so fragile, it must be from a living donor. None of the family and friends in this boy's circle were matches. In other words, his son's only chance for survival was the possibility of an altruistic donor coming forward very soon. The nurse said, "we would do anything to help someone who has helped others in this way, and we will help you."

So, I was accepted into the program, flew out the next night, and the following morning, he performed this procedure, without anesthetic, as brain cells have no pain receptors. It was all done in less than an hour, while I was wide-awake. My aneurysm, this time bomb that had been ticking in my head for all those years, making me feel like the alligator that swallowed the clock in Peter Pan, had been rendered completely harmless. ***Hope won out over fear this time***, like paper over rock, covering it completely, keeping it from doing any damage. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. What could I do to repay such a gift? He did not hesitate to tell me.

He said, "Please go visit my son on the transplant ward, and show him what hope looks like. Because I told him that hope for him would come in the form of a stranger giving up a kidney to save him just because he needed it. And my son said those people don't exist. So. Please. Visit my boy and show him that Hope is alive and very real and looks like you."

What does hope look like? It is hard to recognize at first. It is shape shifting, with a different form and appearance for every person and every circumstance. And even if we think we know what hope looks like **to us**, we can never assume we know what hope looks like **to others**. When I want to understand what a person is hoping for, I ask what they are praying for. If I want to know what they want to pray for, I ask what they are hoping for. Hope is the beating heart of our prayers. I have been surprised to find the answer is not necessarily what I would have guessed. I met many ill patients who did not pray for a remission, a new kind of treatment, or even a different prognosis, as I would have guessed would be at the center of their prayers. This is because they are looking for support and comfort far beyond their physical wellbeing, and are focusing their hopes upon their spiritual wellbeing.

This is when praying with someone and for someone becomes a sacred trust. These hopes are often hard to articulate, but they all involve hoping for a greater closeness with God, and help to overcome any obstacles to achieving that closeness. Invariably, the obstacles that keep us far from God, involve our ability to forgive a deeply held grievance, against ourselves or against others. ***So we hope and pray, all the way until the last breath, for the capacity to forgive.***

I have learned that hope has an essential role in the forgiveness story. I think forgiveness is the hardest spiritual exercise, the gold medal event in the Christian Olympics. First, we must define it. A writer once wrote that forgiveness means, **"giving up all hope of a better past."** It is a clever statement, and wise advice, to alleviate the suffering many feel when they replay the tapes of the game long ago lost, worry over the tactics and plays of an old battle, hoping they can make it come out with a better score. But that is not all that forgiveness means, not at the deepest levels of our being, beneath the workings of our brains, into the innermost workings of our hearts and souls, **where forgiveness heals us, completes us, readies us for the future.**

Like the myth of Pandora, there is another chapter of the forgiveness story. Forgiveness may **begin** with giving up hope of a better past, but it does not **end** there, just as the Christian story does not end with the death of Jesus, but must include His rebirth. **Forgiveness also means never giving up hope of a better future.** Even if that future, in chronological time, is just a few moments, a few breaths, or a few years. Our belief in the possibility of future change, no matter how late in the game, is the key to the power of forgiveness to change us, to enlighten us, to save us. Nelson Mandela did not just forgive the men who had persecuted and imprisoned him, giving up all rightful claims to the injustices of his past. In fact, he actually appointed some of those same men to be members of his new government's cabinet, to work side by side with him to build a better future.

When hope meets fear, it has a lot of clean-up work to do. It must first wipe clean the lens through which we see our past, clear it of the ways that fear reflects

the smudges of shame and guilt and regret we smear on the reflection. So many times, I have listened to a person struggle during difficult times with that one sad repetitive lament, "If only", as in "If only I had" and you can fill in the blank. We all carry the burden of those laments. If only I had done this, or not done that, if only I had said this, and not said that.

These are the words chaplains always hear when we have to escort a family member to a viewing of someone who had died suddenly in the Emergency Room. Such a terrible time of shock and grief. It is always the same heartbreaking "if only" sentence. **If only I had told them I loved them the last time I saw them.** Where is the counterweight to the heavy guilt and regret of those crushing words...*if only?* Hope must rebalance the scales, by adding two new words. **Next time.** Next time, we will tell them we love them, if not on this side of earth, than another place beyond, but **next time**, we will say it.

When I hear names lifted in this church during our community prayer time, even though I may not yet have had the chance to know them personally, I will offer this as my prayer, which I am sure I share with many others. I pray that whatever God has planned for them, He will also give them and their families, the strength and hope and faith to move through this dark place to a lighter one, and the knowledge that we will lend them our strength, hope and faith, just as we would lend them our arms to support them across a slippery, dangerous patch of ice. This is how a community of faith serves its members so beautifully when we work to contain fear and spread hope. So, with God's help, their spirits are lifted up and beyond where their bodies have taken them. May it be so.

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal
life.
Amen*