

For the Hope that is In Us
Sermon - 5/21/17

Scriptures: John 14: 15-17 and I Peter 3:13-18a

It's a joy to be with you this morning, and to be starting my ministry in a warm, welcoming congregation such as this. There was a recent period of several months in my life when I had no regular place of worship to go to on Sunday mornings. Since ending my most recent interim position last November I've been doing a bit of wandering in the wilderness, bouncing around from congregation to congregation as a worshipper and as an occasional guest preacher. And I'll let you in on a bit of a confession: there were some Sunday mornings in the depth of this past winter when I just sat home and read the paper instead of going to church! This was at first an attractive idea to one who's spent most of his adult life rushing off to lead worship services every Sunday morning, year in and year out, rain or shine. What more relaxing way to spend a Sunday morning than not to have to go to church at all and just brew a cup of coffee and read the Sunday morning paper at a leisurely pace instead!

But I can't say there's been much uplifting news in the paper to read recently. It seems we've had a spate of bad news coming at us since last fall: genocide in Syria, the international refugee crisis, North Korean saber rattling, political chaos in Washington, Russian tampering with the presidential election process ... and this week it all seems to be getting murkier and murkier indeed!

Just when we thought it couldn't get much worse, earlier this month you may have read an article in the Boston Globe or seen something on-line about the prediction by British science genius Steven Hawking that the human race is going to need to find another planet to inhabit within 100 years or face extinction. His dire prediction comes as a bit of a shock to our system, if we take it seriously. Based on his best estimate of the rate of destruction of our environment due to global warming, and factoring in the dual threats of nuclear war and incurable plagues having the potential to wipe out the human race, Hawking's prediction is nightmarish news indeed. It sounds like the stuff of science fiction, yet with the way the world is going so far in 2017, there's just enough realistic ring to it to make us sit up and pay attention.

Now with so much bad news like this coming at us all at once, it could lead us into a state of overwhelming anxiety and paralyzing fear. We could become like deer in the headlights as a human race. That's why it's so important for us to go to church and be part of a regularly gathering faith community that equips us for life in these dark and trying times. That's why it's so crucial to read the Bible and have hope in the midst of these challenging circumstances. That's why we must look to Jesus as the "*pioneer and perfecter of our faith,*" our beacon of light pointing the way forward to how we should live as his disciples in this troubled and rapidly changing world.

As Christians I believe that we have a sacred treasure the world so needs. It's Christ's gospel, his good news, our grounds for hope. We have a faith in the One who

gives us this hope and thus an assurance that there's more to life than just the three dimensions anyone can perceive or scientists, however brilliant, may analyze. There's a fourth dimension too, the dimension of timeless eternity, an eternity which our loving God has created and into which Christ welcomes us. "*Do not fear what they fear,*" we are told. And as Christians, at a deep level we get it!

"Be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." writes the author of the pastoral epistle I Peter. It's this "*hope that's in us*" that's grounded on our faith in Christ's Resurrection, his triumph over the powers of destruction and death. and this is what gives us the strength to go on, even in the midst of this chaotic and frightful age in which we live.

Christ didn't leave us orphaned in this world. As Psalm 23 from our lectionary lessons a couple of weeks ago, says: "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear. For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they guide me.*" And in today's gospel lesson from John 14, Jesus promises his disciples the Holy Spirit to remain with them and with us as our Comforter and our Guide. "*You know him,*" Jesus says, "*because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*"

Three years ago this month I had the opportunity to travel to the Czech Republic with a group of folks from the House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul where I served for 13 years as associate pastor. We went to participate in an international seminar on how the Protestant Reformation developed in Bohemia and Moravia, the two central European states that make up what is currently known as the Czech Republic. Both these states were once kingdoms in their own right, and together they were a hotbed of dissent against certain corrupt practices going on in the 15th Century Roman Catholic Church. The movement was spearheaded by a Catholic priest from southern Bohemia named John Hus, or in Czech, "*Jan Hus.*" Though from very humble origins, as a priest Hus was taught how to read and write Latin as well as being able to speak his native language, Czech. In his studies he was influenced by the writings of the early English church reformer, John Wycliffe, who had had the audacity to translate the Bible from the Latin Vulgate version into the language of the English people, so they could read it and be moved by it's message of hope themselves. Hus thought translating the sacred Scriptures into the vernacular made good sense, and so he translated the Latin Vulgate Bible into his own native Czech, which prior to the 1400's had only been a spoken, non-written language of the Slavic peasants of Bohemia and Moravia. For this unauthorized action and for other bold stances he took and championed, he was branded as a heretic by the Church in Rome, and was brought in chains to be tried by the Council of Constance in 1415. He'd written a defense of his views based on I Peter 3 and his understanding of Scripture, but he was given no chance to read this to the Council. Rather, they demanded him to recant his blasphemy, and when he refused, asking where was there anything in what he was advocating that was contrary to Scripture, he was burnt at the stake as a heretic.

It's said of Hus that as the flames rose around him he could be heard singing hymns, some of them that he'd written himself, which later became the basis of his followers' church hymnody. After his martyrdom, the Hussites, also known as the Bohemian Brethren, continued to cause quite a stir in 15th Century Roman Catholicism in Central Europe, and they ignited one of the many sparks leading to the conflagration a century later that we've come to know as the Protestant Reformation.

So why do I tell you all this ancient history? Why would someone from 21st Century America be interested in all this historic detail and travel to the Czech Republic to study it first hand? Those are worthy questions to ask, of course, because after years of foreign domination starting with the Austrians in 1620 and then years of more recent totalitarian regimes like the Nazis and Communists, Czech history and its faith tradition have been so crushed and stamped out by surrounding prevailing powers that even today the Czech Republic has the lowest rate of church affiliation of any country in Europe. Most of their young people have no familiarity with Christianity, which they view as a dead religion, a museum piece, perhaps, but nothing more.

As part of the week in May 2014 that I spent with our group in Prague we went to visit Jan Hus' original church building, called the Bethlehem Chapel. Our guide and docent that morning was a young Czech woman who serves as a pastor in the tiny Hussite Protestant denomination. She was eager for us to see the site where Jan Hus first preached in Prague, so we bought our tickets to the Bethlehem Chapel. Since the Communist era it's no longer an active church but has been run as a state museum and monument to this page of past Czech history.

We were ushered in through the turnstile by a rather dour, gray-looking Czech woman who was the ticket-taker, an employee of the state agency that runs historic monuments, and then we entered the large square room that once had been the sanctuary. On the walls were ancient frescoes, uncovered by archaeological restoration of the original interior church walls, frescoes depicting the life of Jan Hus, his preaching, his martyrdom at the stake, and also ancient gothic-looking musical notes in bars and clefs, running across the walls here and there.

After describing the significance of the sanctuary and décor to our group, our Hussite pastor docent offered to sing a few of the melodies painted on the walls for us, for she said these were hymns of the Hussite tradition, attributed to Jan Hus himself. Besides our group, a group of rambunctious high school youth were the only other visitors present in the room at the time. So it seemed a good spur of the moment idea to have a little acapella concert, and our pastor docent broke into song. She had a beautiful straight-tone voice, and suddenly the ancient Gregorian chant-type sound rang through the high-ceilinged room like a rare and precious thing brought alive by the unlocking of some lost and ancient code.

The next thing we knew, the dour ticket-taker lady was standing there by our group shouting and gesturing, saying: *"This is not a concert hall and you have no right to be doing this."* She snorted disapprovingly and marched back to her office, figuring

we'd stop. But our pastor docent was in mid-verse, and, with our encouragement, she continued softly to sing. The ticket-taker lady returned, this time angrier than before. "Get out!" she shouted... "Now! Or I call the police!"

We were stunned. How could she be so nasty? How could she be missing the point so badly of what this sacred place truly meant? But there was no mistaking her words and her body language. She was intent on shutting our impromptu concert down, now. As she marched across the room back to her office to call for security guards, we stood there in incredulous silence.

Then suddenly, the youth group that had been so rambunctiously messing around paying no attention to their own guide on the other side of the sanctuary broke forth into song too. It was Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," which apparently they knew by heart (maybe in their repertoire as some youth choir they were part of), and the whole sanctuary was transformed in a magical moment. We were witnessing the power of an ancient faith tradition springing back to life before our very eyes! A musical resurrection of something thought long dead and gone... much to the chagrin of the state employee charged with guarding the site! She had now totally lost all control of the situation, wrested out of her hands when a younger generation of Czechs had suddenly caught the spirit!

At the door as we exited, the dour woman's other colleague, the gift-shop lady, stood there in tears, apologizing to us for her colleague's behavior. She got it, we got it, and the kids also got it. And that's what mattered.

So I want to close with this thought: There's a good reason why we come together as a community of faith to worship each Sunday. We have an antidote to the power of bad news that so dominates the world's attention these days, an antidote shared in the context of the gatherings wherever Christians come together to worship. When we hear the words of Scripture read and proclaimed and applied to our lives as disciples seeking together to live out our faith as followers of Jesus Christ, we are given grounds for hope, and have nothing to fear.

Yes, may we always be ready to share "*the hope that is in us.*" As disciples of Jesus Christ, called together in this time and place to be the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, part of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that traces its history back to the Protestant Reformation and to courageous reformers like John Calvin and Jan Hus, and as the Church throughout the world and through all the ages long, we have a sacred treasure, planted deep and for eternity in the words of Scripture, like an ancient code that can spring to life anytime and anywhere we actually take the effort to share it with others, through our words, our songs and our deeds. The message of Christ's Resurrection and the hope of the life eternal it offers to all who will hear will triumph over any disasters or obstacles of human making, come what may. This is the good news, the life-giving message, lying deep in our hearts at the root of our souls. This is "*the hope that is in us,*" and for this we can truly rejoice! Thanks be to God! Amen.