Turn to Hope

Lenten Sermon and Study Series

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(Joe Wood photo)

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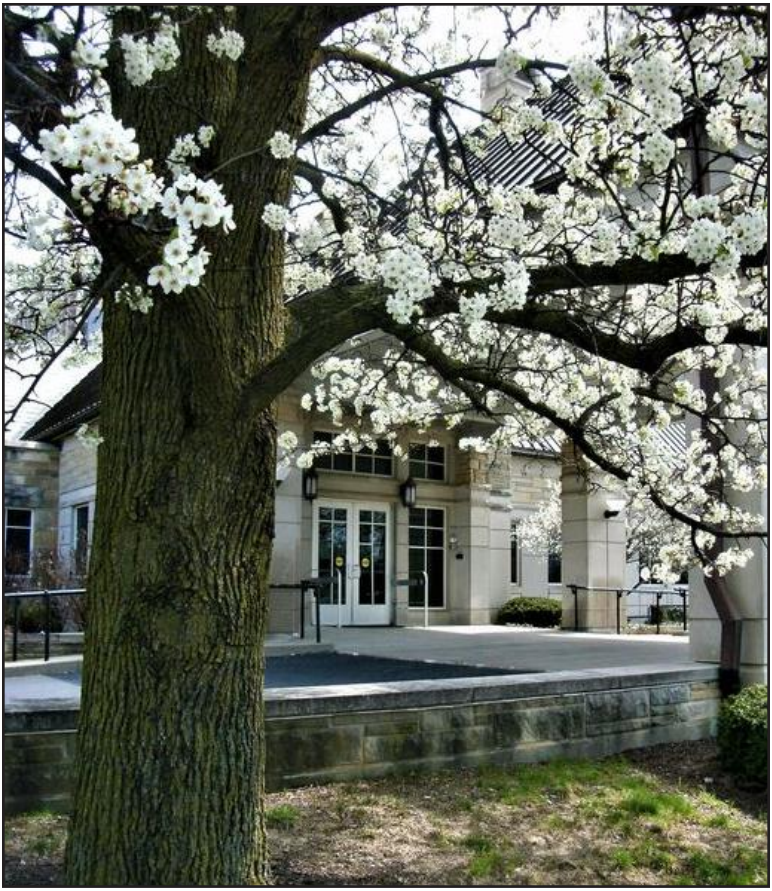

(Joe Wood photo)

INTRODUCTION

For me, the end of February is the ugliest time of the year. The grass and the flowers have not started growing, the ground is still brown and muddy, and it is hard to see signs of spring. It is also the beginning of Lent, and at the beginning it is hard to see signs of the hope of Easter. Yet it is the season to reorient us toward God's hope in the risen Christ. And so our Lenten study is called "Turn to Hope."

This Lent we desperately need to reorient ourselves toward hope. Whether it is a personal challenge or a social crisis, we need hope — not just the idea of hope,

but to experience hope with all our senses. Each week in Lent we will ponder and practice God's hope with the stories of people in the Gospel who were searching for hope. To guide our search, we will also examine the Hebrew prophets' visions of hope.

Discovering God's hope requires us to turn away from things that distract us. Lent is the perfect season to make this turn we call repentance. Specifically, we will explore practical ways to turn away from consumerism, traditionalism, fatalism, and pessimism. These "isms" get down in our souls as well as float around in the culture. Turning away from them is essential for us to fully embrace the greater hope Christ offers us.

This study guide is designed to help you turn to hope. Each session you will read and reflect on the two scripture lessons which will be featured in Sunday's worship. Instructions for repentance and exercises of hope are included.

Guide to the Readings

Before you dive into each session, it will help to understand some key concepts in the scripture readings:

The Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophets

The Old Testament lessons are visions of hope that come from the time of the Exile and soon after it ended. The Israelites were taken captive by foreign invaders after a long series of conflicts, first by the Assyrians in

740-720 BCE and then by the Babylonians in 606-586 BCE. After the Persians conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE, they repatriated some of the Jews. During this time of political and spiritual dislocation the prophets offered visions of hope for the community. These prophetic visions form the background of Jesus's teachings.

Kingdom of God

The "Kingdom of God" was the central message of Jesus's teaching and the key expression of God's hope. The phrase can be translated in a variety of ways: Kingdom of heaven, reign of God, God's realm, God's imperial rule, etc. It is God's picture of salvation that is experienced both in the present as well as for eternity (in other words, it is much more than "heaven"). The phrase is prominent in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (also known as the Synoptic Gospels), but rarely appears in John's Gospel or Paul's letters.

From the parables and direct teachings about the Kingdom we learn six things about the Kingdom of God:

• ***The Kingdom of God is the new era of God's life-giving power*** (parable of the mustard seed, Mark 4:30-32).

• ***The Kingdom of God reverses the power dynamics*** between the weak and the powerful, the poor and the rich, the accepted and the outcast (Matthew 25:41-46, sheep and goats; Mark 10:23-27, rich man entering; Luke 14:15-24, parable of great banquet; Luke 6:20-26, beatitudes).

• ***The Kingdom of God welcomes the poor and outcasts*** (Matthew 25:34-40, sheep and goats; Luke 18:16; Luke 6:20, and Matthew 5:3,10 beatitudes).
• ***The Kingdom of God is marked by a tension between now and the future.*** In some passages it refers to the Kingdom being a present reality (Luke 17:21 'among us') and in other passages it is a future hope that will be fulfilled (Luke 22:16), and as something that is just beginning to take place (Luke 21:31, 'near'). Until it is fulfilled it remains interspersed or saturated in the world alongside the forces of sin and death (Matthew 13:24-30 parable of wheat and tares; Matthew 13:47-50).
• ***The Kingdom of God begins in small and insignificant ways but grows*** (Mark 4:30-31, parable of the mustard seed; Luke 13:20-1, parable of yeast).
• ***The Kingdom of God challenges respectability and is found in the scandalous.*** A number of the parables use imagery whose regular usage implied impurity (yeast); annoyance (mustard seed), and violated standard norms (the behavior of the father in the parable of the prodigal). They use shady or despicable people as the protagonists (the shrewd steward, the forgiving king) and they compare God's reign with social entities that Jesus's audience would have had a severely negative perception of (elite households, the bureaucracy of a vassal king).

The Kingdom of God is not the maintenance of the status quo which keeps the wealthy and powerful in place while segregating and oppressing the poor. It is not merely a spiritual reality, but is also felt and seen in

the physical world and in society. It cannot be reduced to a human ideology.

Participation in the Kingdom of God is marked by four themes in the teachings and parables:
• ***The Kingdom of God is a gift*** which we receive from God who gives it and expands it (Mark 4:26-29; 10:27).
• ***The Kingdom of God requires repentance and sacrifice*** (Mark1:15; Matthew 13:44-46,parables of pearl, treasure).
• ***The Kingdom of God requires us to demonstrate hospitality, equality, and compassion*** (Matthew 18:23-35, parable of unforgiving servant; see parable of great banquet).
• ***The Kingdom of God requires tenacious patience and cunning*** (Mark 4:1-9, 13-20, parable of the sower; Matthew 25:1-13, parable of the virgins; Matthew 25:14-30; parable of talents).

This Lenten study begins with parables about the Kingdom in Matthew's Gospel to give us an overview of God's big picture of hope before we look at the stories of individual seekers in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John

John is different from the Synoptic Gospels. It has a different storyline and includes many teachings that are not found in the other three. There are two features that are important to be aware of as you read:
• ***Two-Levels of Meanin***g — Throughout the Gospel, people misunderstand Jesus because he is speaking

on two levels. Whether it is about being “born anew” or drinking “living water,” the phrases can be understood on a simple, literal level or on a deeper, spiritual level. Often this gets lost in translation from the Greek to English.

• ***“I Am” Statements*** — Jesus expresses his self-understanding through a series of “I am” statements. The phrase “I am” echoes the revelation of God’s identity to Moses in Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am.” With these titles, John is conveying the divine identity of Jesus. There are seven: the Bread of Life (6:35), the Light of the World (8:12), the Gate (10:7), the Shepherd (10:11), the Resurrection and the Life (11:25), the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6), and the True Vine (15:1).

In addition to this study guide, consider using the liturgy in each week’s bulletin as part of your weekly prayers and study. In particular, you will find great value in the prayers of confession to assist your turn to hope.

Pastor Darren
Lent 2026

SESSION ONE

Read Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46 and Ezekiel 17:19-24.

Introduction

The poets know that hope is best understood through images. Whether it is Emily Dickinson and a bird, Walt Whitman and a road, or Maya Angelou and sunlight — Hope is imagined more than analyzed. Jesus had the same idea when he told parables about the hope he called the Kingdom of God (which Matthew called the Kingdom of heaven).

There are three things these parables tell us about the Kingdom of God.

One, God's reign gives and protects life. The images of birds nesting in a tree and the baking of bread with yeast emphasis that when God reigns, life is not threatened or destroyed.

Two, it will require us to search and sacrifice to discover the realm of God in the world. Like a precious treasure or valuable pearl, participating in God's Kingdom is worth the effort.

Three, the Kingdom of God is a surprising gift. One wouldn't have thought to compare it with yeast, that is hidden and mixed with other ingredients, or with a tiny mustard seed that can grow into an invasive bush.

Lent is a time to seek the hope of God's reign at all cost. It requires us to take risks and to go beyond our safe and comfortable ways of thinking about ourselves and God. This is why Jesus described it using parables. Parables are meant to inspire and provoke more thinking and pondering and different ways of seeing ourselves, the world, and God. He grounded his parables in the social visions of the prophets, like Ezekiel, because the Kingdom of God is a hope for society as well as every individual. This risk-taking, imaginative work is the stuff of hope.

Reflection Questions

Look at how you spend your time, money, and emotional and mental energy. What does this tell you about what you value most?

How is joy about the reign of God different from what society finds joy in?

The Kingdom of heaven happens when we submit to God's commands and Jesus's teachings. What would our society look like if we seek the Kingdom of God and not human kingdoms?

In the parable, the Kingdom of heaven is like a tree for birds to take shelter in. In what ways can we provide shelter for others in our community — physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual shelter?

Repent of Consumerism

This Lent, select one unnecessary expense and eliminate it from your spending for the season. Donate the money to a cause that reflects the values and vision of the Kingdom of God.

Taste Hope

This week, for one meal select a food that symbolizes for you the vision of hope for God's realm. (For example, bread is a symbol of life in many cultures.)

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters — that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord.

— Jeremiah 29:4-9

SESSION TWO

Read John 3:1-17 and Jeremiah 29:4-9.

Introduction

Nicodemus was a prominent man who appears at key moments in John's Gospel. He was a respected Pharisee who demonstrated sympathy for Jesus's ministry. In chapter three he praised Jesus for his teaching and the signs he performed. When Jesus is standing trial before the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin), Nicodemus reminds the leaders to give him a fair hearing. When Jesus is taken to be buried, he provided the spices for his embalming.

All of Nicodemus's scenes in the Gospel take place at night. The darkness is symbolic of his limited understanding of Jesus and his message of hope. Chapter three is the only time John uses the phrase "Kingdom of God" to describe God's hope. Jesus tells him that one can only participate in this hope by first being "born again" or "born from above." The Greek can be translated both ways, which creates a double meaning that throws Nicodemus off. The Spirit of God is beginning to rock his assumptions and comfortable position like a strong wind.

The hope Jesus brings also has a double meaning. Whenever the Gospel of John uses the phrase "eternal life," it is a life no longer defined or animated by human

will but by God, and it is more than a promise for the afterlife but rather it is the new life created by God that begins here and now.

This new life began in exile for the Jews of Babylon. They had been captured and deported and they assumed that it would be temporary, so they asked Jeremiah what they should do. Yet, like Nicodemus, they had a limited understanding of God's hope. God told them to put down roots and seek the shalom of the city. Shalom, which can be translated as "peace" or "welfare," is the vision of cooperation, compassion, justice, and prosperity. It is more than the absence of conflict; it is the possibility of human flourishing.

Throughout Lent we are journeying toward this hope, and like Nicodemus, our limited understanding will be challenged and our vision of what God wants us to do will be blown in new directions by the Spirit.

Reflection Questions

Nicodemus's conventional perspective of Jesus limited his understanding of what Jesus was telling him. How do our conventional ways of thinking limit our ability to imagine the Kingdom of God as Jesus's vision of hope for today?

What hopeless thoughts or actions do we need to let go of in order to be 'born from above' — live life animated by God?

Jeremiah counseled the Jews who were in exile in Babylon to create shalom in the city where they resided. How can our church create shalom in our city?

John 3:17 says that it is God's desire to save the whole world. Do we believe and act like some parts of the world or people in the world are beyond saving?

Repent of Narrow-Mindedness

Confess to God the many ways you have limited the Holy Spirit to inspire your imagination in hopeful ways.

Hear Hope

This week, select a piece of music that gives you hope. Sing it, rehearse it, or play it throughout the week.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord As the waters cover the sea.

— Isaiah 11:6-9

SESSION THREE

Read John 4:1-30, 39-42 and Isaiah 11:6-9.

Introduction

Jesus pushed beyond the boundaries of tradition when he invited the Samaritan woman to experience his "living water."

There was a long tradition of conflict and prejudice between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans are a Hebrew sect that believed Mount Gerizim was the holy place for worship, and accepted only the first five books of the Bible as the Torah. In contrast, the Jews believed the Temple in Jerusalem (Mount Zion) was the proper place of worship.

They had conflicting stories of how the Samaritans originated. The Samaritan Chronicles depicted the schism occurring when Eli usurped the high priesthood and established a rival sanctuary at Shiloh. According to the Jewish books Ezra and Nehemiah, the Samaritans were impure because they had married non-Jews and were immigrants brought into the region by the Assyrians. So when Jesus said that the location is irrelevant to authentic worship, he was pushing beyond both traditions.

He was also pushing the envelope by talking with and affirming a woman as an authentic witness. The con-

versation about her husbands does not imply that he was judging her morality. Rather, he may have been concerned about her marital history because she was trapped in the custom of levirate marriage, which dictated that a brother-in-law had to care for her because her husband had died (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). It may have been that the last male in the family line had refused to marry her. Regardless, Jesus did not require her to have the right marital status to be an effective witness for him.

As we make our way through Lent to the hope of Easter, Jesus invites us to move beyond our traditional ways of thinking that keep us from embracing others the way Jesus accepted this woman. The hope Jesus offers us is a future that includes people who are different from us, which creates a kaleidoscope of peace.

Reflection Questions

The Jews and Samaritans were prejudiced against each other over the proper location to worship God. What negative impressions or prejudices do you have of others because of their religious beliefs or practices?

What makes worship an experience of Christ's "living water?"

Jesus said that authentic worship is done "in spirit and truth." What synonyms for "spirit" and "truth" can you come up with? What would be the opposite of worshipping in spirit and truth?

What can you do to promote Isaiah's vision of peace and cooperation?

Repent of Animosity

Examine your "traditions" of prejudices, grudges, anger, and conflicts you have been keeping. Ask for God's forgiveness and for God to create opportunities for healing. Ask God to show you if there is anyone you need to forgive or to apologize to.

See Hope

Isaiah 11 is known as the vision of the "Peaceable Kingdom" that inspired paintings. This week, create or find a picture, painting, or photograph that depicts peace. Use this image as part of your daily prayers and meditations.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, Because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord , And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

— Isaiah 61:1-3

SESSION FOUR

Read John 9:1-41 and Isaiah 61:1-3.

Introduction

The disciples were limited by their negative thinking. They were working on the assumption that someone was to blame for the man's blindness. Since he had it from birth he could not be blamed, so it must have been his parents' fault.

Jesus flipped the script on them. Instead of focusing on who or what caused his blindness, Jesus told them to focus on the positive: "Let the works of God be displayed in him!"

Even Jesus's miracle operated within the realm of ancient medicine. There was a widespread belief in the medicinal powers of spittle. And Jesus was not questioning the connection between sin and sickness, which was a common assumption. His point was to open their eyes to see the hopeful possibilities of God's future rather than focus on the past causes of the man's disability.

The light of God's hope exposes injustice and cruelty and illuminates truth and hope. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," and his light liberates people from all sorts of captivity like Isaiah described. Lent is a time for us to reflect this vision of freedom and to see new possibilities for all people.

Reflection Questions

The disciples thought the man was blind because of his parents' sins. What blinds us from seeing God's hope for others?

In what ways today are people morally or spiritually blind?

What does it mean for us to do the work of shining the light of Christ in the world?

Who today are the people for whom Isaiah envisioned liberation?

Repent of Negative Thinking

Confess to God your negative and cynical thoughts and attitudes.

Raise Hope

Make a list of people who need God's hope based on Isaiah 61. Every day this week, lift them up in prayer, asking for the prophet's vision to become a reality for them.

SESSION FIVE

Read John 11:1-44 and Zechariah 8:3-8.

Introduction

No wonder Mary and Martha were crying! Their brother Lazarus was dead, and their friend Jesus, who could have done something to prevent it, was in another city on the other side of the river. By the time Jesus arrived Lazarus had been dead for four days.

Mary was observing the Jewish tradition of sitting in mourning with others. But Martha was searching for hope. Like many, Martha believed in a future resurrection day for the faithful at the end of time. Her emerging faith in Jesus was drawing her to find this hope in the present.

Through the power of Jesus as “the resurrection and the life,” the resurrection day began that day. Jesus was confident in his life-giving connection with God the Father that raised Lazarus from the grave. His prayer was not a request or plea but a thanksgiving. It was a doxology to praise God for the hope of new life.

This gift of life begins here and now for us. It is a hope that embraces our social relationships. This is the hope Zechariah envisioned as a celebration of the restored city. As we take our final steps in Lent and approach Easter, let us keep moving toward this expansive hope of new life.

Reflection Questions

Are you mourning a loss? What has been the hardest loss you have grieved?

On a gut level, what do you doubt is likely for God to do in your life or in the world?

What does it mean for your personal future that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life?”

How is the vision of Zechariah 8 a social description of the resurrection hope?

Repent of Doomscrolling

For the remainder of Lent, take a break from all negative social media posts.

Imagine Hope

Every day this week reread Zechariah 8 and imagine what the community surrounding the church would be like if this passage became a reality. What can you do to make it a reality?

Upcoming Services

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 18, 7:30 a.m., 1 p.m., 6:30 p.m.

Weekly Communion During Lent, Wednesdays, Feb. 18-April 1, 7:30 a.m.

Palm Sunday, March 29, 8:30 and 11 a.m.

Holy Thursday, April 2, 7:30 p.m.

Good Friday, April 3, 12 and 7:30 p.m.

Easter Sunday, April 5, 8:30 and 11 a.m.

Join us each Sunday for worship services at 8:30 and 11 a.m. and Sunday school at 9:45 a.m.!

Our 11 a.m. service is livestreamed on the North Church Indy YouTube channel!

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