

HOPE

A sermon for the Holy Supper by Rev. Michael Gladish
February 17th, 2019

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His Word I do hope.... Let Israel hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Psalm 130:5, 7-8).

In Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews (11:1) we find the statement that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Some have interpreted this to mean that experience and reason have no part in faith, but that is clearly not what Paul meant. Rather, faith has to do with spiritual things (like love) that we can’t see with our natural eyes, but that we *can* experience spiritually. Indeed, the very word, *evidence*, tells us that faith does go hand in hand with things we can see, at least in our mind’s eye, so in the end, “seeing really is believing” and to believe without seeing actually is to make one’s self vulnerable to all sorts of falsities and abuse.

Hope, on the other hand, is a whole different story. It, too, depends on our ability to see, that is, to visualize something in the mind, but the vision is of something in the future, something not yet realized, something that may – or may not – come to pass. Can we, should we have faith in these things? Well, consider the popular saying: “A failure to plan is a plan to fail,” or “He who fails to aim aims to fail,” or again, “If you aim at nothing you will surely hit the mark.” The point of these sayings is to call attention to the fact that real hope requires an investment of real, focused, practical thought. It would be silly to trust that just because you have a dream it will come true; if you’re not clear about what you want or need, how can you properly prepare for it or take the appropriate steps to get it. For that matter, how would you even know if you got it?

“The very delight of reason,” we read, “is to see from love the effect in thought – not the effect in its attainment, but before it, that is, not in the present, but in the future. Hence a person has what is called *hope*, which increases and decreases *in the reason* as he sees or looks forward to the event” (DP #178).

I suppose you could say the same things about dread, the anticipation of something awful, but in *faith* we know that the Lord’s Divine Providence is always working for good, foreseeing evil and turning it insofar as possible to *something* good. And what *makes* this possible is our co-operation – not that evil won’t be done, but that our response to it will be just, unselfish and forgiving. “Nothing,” we read, “is ever allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it” (AC #6489).

But how can we have hope when we are in despair? How can we have any sense of encouragement when we are oppressed? As the Jews in Babylon put it, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4).

Yes, there are times when hope seems very far from us, when all our efforts just feel futile. Whether it is something at home, something in the church, politics or the environment, or something about our own spiritual states that plays on our fears, if we’re not careful we can get pretty

darned discouraged. What then?!

Well, then we need to remember that hope is not just a feeling, it is really a feature of a good understanding drawn from the truth (AC #6578). And that truth is not just the miserable state of our natural lives – which, let’s face it, *can* be pretty miserable! – it is primarily the revelation of the spiritual realities that look to our eternal lives. It is the truth of the Word in which we learn about the Lord’s creative, redemptive love and wisdom, His all-seeing providence, His preservation of our free will, His preparation of a specific place for us in heaven if we will only accept it, and much, much more.

The truth that gives us real hope includes the fact that nothing really good or evil originates within ourselves, rather it comes to us as *an influence* that we can either accept or reject, especially with the support of fellow church members and friends. It depends on our ability to visualize the thing we need or want and to recognize at least that with the Lord’s help it is *possible*. And then, as the saying goes, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with *one step*” – not a thousand steps, not a hundred steps or even ten, but one step – and then another, one day at a time. This is why we ask in the Lord’s Prayer that He give us “*this day* our daily bread,” or as it says in Luke, “day by day.” And of course it’s why the manna given to the Children of Israel *rotted* in the wilderness when they tried to save it up from one day to the next: all our own efforts will also prove rotten, and in fact stink, if we try to take on more than we can handle at once. But we do need to *visualize a positive outcome* and we do need to have a plan. To put it in common language, we need to “keep our eyes on the prize.” Remember Peter, sinking as soon as he took his eyes off the Lord and started thinking about the storm (Matt. 14). This is why the words of the Psalmist are so important: “Let Israel hope in *the Lord*; for with *the Lord* there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption.”

In this connection it may be useful to reflect on the history of the churches that have worshipped the Lord through the ages. The people of the most ancient church, as we know, had an all-encompassing love for the Lord, even though they never saw Him except as He was represented by angels. But when that love was corrupted they could no longer be conjoined with Him in that way. “Therefore,” we read, “the promise was then made respecting [His] coming into the world, to unite the Human to the Divine, and by this union effect *in Himself* the conjunction of the human race by means of the faith of love and charity. From the time of the first promise (spoken of in Gen. 3:15) the *faith* of love *in the Lord who was to come* effected conjunction. And when there was no longer any faith of love remaining in the whole world, then the Lord came and united the Human Essence to the Divine Essence, so that they were altogether one [in Him], as He Himself clearly says...” (AC 2034:6-7).

In other words, the whole possibility of staying connected with the Lord until His Advent rested on the promise of that event, based on the knowledge that was given through prophecy for literally thousands of years. Truly, then, *hope kept them alive* – not vague hope, not foolish, empty hope, but very specific hope based on very specific teachings from Genesis right through to Malachi, including every lesson the Children of Israel had to learn – usually the hard way – about their need to co-operate with the Lord in order to stay connected and benefit from His support. As Paul said, speaking of the Word, “whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). The bottom line? – If you want to have hope get specific, and if you want real, *spiritual* hope read, study and reflect on the Word.

Last week you heard the minister speak about Peter walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee – *until He took his eyes off the Lord* and began to think about the wind and the waves, at which point he began to sink. You also heard this passage of the Heavenly Doctrine relating to that highly symbolic situation: -

“Temptations involve feelings of doubt regarding the Lord’s presence and mercy, and also regarding His salvation. The evil spirits who are present with a person at such times and who are the cause of temptation do all they can to infuse a negative outlook, *but good spirits and angels from the Lord in every way disperse that doubting attitude*, all the time preserving a feeling of hope and ... strengthening an affirmative outlook. Consequently a person undergoing temptation hangs between a negative and an affirmative outlook. Anyone who gives way in temptation remains in a doubting, and sinks into a negative frame of mind, whereas one who overcomes *still experiences feelings of doubt; yet allowing himself to be filled with hope he remains steadfastly in an affirmative outlook*” (AC 2338).

Notice those words: “*allowing himself* to be filled with hope.” We don’t manufacture hope, and we certainly don’t get it from wishful thinking apart from any effort on our part. It comes from the truth we learn and apply to our lives, truth from the Word that informs our understanding, delights the reason, and attracts the influence of angels who keep us thinking affirmatively.

Again, we read,

“All temptations appear evil, for the reason that they are interior anxieties and griefs, and as it were damnations; for a person is then let into the state of his evils, consequently among evil spirits who accuse him, and thus torment the conscience; nevertheless the angels defend him, that is, the Lord through angels, for the Lord keeps him in hope and trust, which are the forces of combat from within whereby he resists” (AC 6097).

Now imagine hope and trust as “forces of combat.” It’s an unusual way of thinking about these two qualities, but it’s important because love, as we know, doesn’t fight; it doesn’t even argue, and so it can hardly even resist falsities and evils, especially when they are presented as in any way desirable. But real hope and trust are based on the truths that the Lord teaches us, and these truths empower us to plan well, to make wise decisions, and to stay positive in spite of what may at first appear to be insurmountable obstacles.

Dozens of illustrations may come to mind, but here’s one facing this whole congregation right now. We are in the midst of a very challenging process of calling a new pastor to lead us – and we say challenging not because we could go wrong but because all our options are excellent, and it’s a tough choice! We have good but obviously limited information about each candidate, good but also obviously limited perspectives on our needs as a congregation, and we certainly don’t know the future. What can we do? What if we don’t all agree on the committee’s recommendation? If some have been hoping for one outcome and others for another, how can we pull together for the health and welfare of the church?

Well, first of all, let’s acknowledge that it may not be easy. Then again, reformation and regeneration are not easy. As for going to the Word for direction, we know that the Lord is not going

to tell us which minister to choose. What He *will* tell us, however, is to shun the evils of a negative attitude, look to the good, insofar as possible excuse the bad, and do whatever we can to encourage and support the man who is chosen. It's not just the congregation: we are ALL in transition. We are ALL going through significant challenges in our lives and we all have to face our fears and keep going.

In fact, when all is said and done it's not about any one particular person, it's about how well we can support one another – in boards, committees, councils, personal networking and worship services – to honor what the Lord Himself teaches us. ***HE is our one real pastor***, He is the one real shepherd of His flock, and our job as members of the flock, from the corporate level to the home study group, is to keep our eyes on Him, listen for His voice, and follow His direction.

If you've ever been lost – or felt lost – you know how important it is to hear a voice calling for you, or to see a light that guides you out of your confusion. Let's not forget that the Lord is ***always*** calling for us, ***always*** shining His light to guide us, and let's not allow a pre-occupation with our problems to keep us from hearing that voice or seeing that light.

If you've ever climbed a mountain, or even a very tall ladder, you know that looking down can be terrifying. One slip and it's a LONG, painful way down. But if you focus on what's right in front of you, or even more on something positive ahead of you it's much easier to maintain your courage and keep going. And what more positive vision could we have than that of the Lord Himself, made visible in the teachings of His Word clearly explained in the Writings for the New Church? “Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose ***hope*** is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps truth forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry” and so much more, as you heard in the second lesson this morning (from Psalm 146:5-7).

Let us therefore think and say together, “I wait for the *Lord*, my soul waits, and in *His* Word I do hope....” Can we do that now? Can we actually say, together, “I wait for the *Lord*, my soul waits, and in *His* Word I do hope....”

So “Let Israel hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Psalm 130:5, 7-8).

Amen.

Lessons: *Numbers* 22-24: selections
 Children's talk on The Story of Balaam

Psalm 146
Divine Providence #178