

We Are Called to Hope

There is a saying that circulates on social media, and other places:

“A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit.” It is often quoted as being a Greek proverb. There is no evidence of it being that old, though it arguably fits within the principles of Ancient Greek Stoic philosophy.

It is a saying that probably comes from the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who lived between 1861-1941 in Bengal, India. He said,

“The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life.”

Both sayings call us to a stubborn hope. It is one thing to work hard to reap the benefits immediately, but it requires hope to work hard knowing that someone else will reap the benefits. Planting a tree is hard work, tending it and waiting patiently for it to grow is hard work. Hope comes in the knowing that someone else in the future will benefit from the fruit and the shade.

Sometimes it feels foolish to plant a tree knowing that it may not survive the heat, it may not survive a season with too much or too little rain, it may not survive the next storm or critter infestation. If it is beside a road, it may not survive the pollution or being damaged by vehicles or people. And even so, we do plant those trees, in the stubborn hope that they will survive, that someone will be able to sit in its shade in the future, that someone will be able to pick the fruit.

God calls us to this sort of stubborn hope. One tree at a time.

Abram, for God has not re-named him Abraham yet, Abram is called to leave his familiar surroundings and start on a journey without knowing the exact destination, to give up all that he is accustomed to, the old ways and the traditions.

It is a journey undertaken in faith and obedience. In return, God will bless Abram, make his name great and promises that he will be a blessing to others.

Despite the uncertainty and the challenges ahead, Abram sets out on his journey, demonstrating a remarkable willingness to surrender his own plans and follow God's lead. No maps, no charts, no plans. It would have been much easier to stay home and enjoy a comfortable retirement.

When they arrive in the land of Canaan, the Lord appears to Abram, and says to him, “To your offspring I will give this land.” It was not the land that Abram would see, but the seeds planted, the trees planted would feed the generations to come.

Speaking of generations to come, Abram set off on his journey without descendants. Both he and his wife Sarai were well beyond childbearing years, with a promise from God that he would be the father of many nations.

As Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans, that it was “against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.”

Whether it is politics, economics or the environment, our world can feel precarious at times, our lives can feel precarious. Yet we are resurrection people, we believe that it is only when

you go down into the darkest tomb that life springs forth. We believe that God will save our world.

We are people of stubborn hope.

When someone asked Archbishop Tutu how he could be such an optimist he replied: ‘No, I’m not an optimist. I’m a prisoner of hope.’

We too, against all hope, in hope believe that we will see the renewal of this earth of all of God’s creation, both the communities and the environment.

It is faith that gives us the hope for the future.

It was faith that brought the leader of the temple to Jesus, in the hope that Jesus could bring his 12-year-old daughter back to life. The leader begs Jesus to touch her, believing that the touch will bring the girl back to life. The mourners are already at the house when Jesus arrives, scoffing at him for saying that she was not dead, but sleeping. Jesus proceeds to the room where the girl is lying, takes her hand and she arises from the dead. The leader’s faith gave him hope to ask for the life of his daughter.

It was faith that brought the woman who has suffered from a stigmatizing disease for twelve years to seek healing and relief. The woman approaches Jesus from behind and touches the hem of his cloak. Jesus turns and sees the woman and says, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” The woman’s faith gave her hope to reach out to be able to truly live her life.

Yet, we are reminded in these stories that faith and hope are dead without action. Jesus reached out to take the hand of the girl and the woman. Abram set off on the journey, leaving his country and going to the land that God will show him.

The tree that will provide shade needs to be planted and nurtured, whether we get to sit under it or whether some else can get relief from the heat.

Our faith in God gives us hope. And we believe that faith without works is dead. Action is needed.

Whether we are building better relations in our community here or helping those on the other side of the world.

Whether we are seeking to heal a rift or stepping out to new places to build a bridge.

Not every call is to leave home; sometimes we simply need to look around the corner.

With faith in God, we have hope and can plant that tree.

Thanks be to God for the call to hope. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26
Genesis 12:1-9
Romans 4:13-25