

“THAT WE MIGHT HAVE HOPE”

Matthew 3:1-12

preached December 7, 2008

What’s so important about the Bible? Why do we have these writings, these scriptures? They were written by a very small group of people in the Middle East who were writing to a very specific group in the Middle East. There is only one Gentile author. All the rest are Jews. They speak about events and situations that happened 2, 3, 4 thousand years ago, and a few events more distant than that. What does that have to do with us? Why do we still have this thing around?

Well the truth is that a lot people, even some people in the church have decided that the Bible is not necessary. A few have actually said that, and many others have simply ignored it. Some think that they know everything that it says even though they haven’t explored it for themselves. They take the word of another who claims to know. No one should do that. Each one needs to explore the scriptures for him or herself. If I say something that you do not believe is sound scripturally or doctrinally, please ask why I said that, why I believe that. We all need to explore what the Word of God actually says. We all need to test what is said about scriptures and the lessons in scripture. We need to study it and make it a part of ourselves so that we are not afraid or insecure about what we believe and why we believe it.

I do continue to study these texts regularly even though I know what I believe, because I also know that I might be wrong. And so I look at a variety of opinions and understandings so that I can have a good grasp about what our relationship with God is supposed be; how we are to live. And I know that it is important for everyone to read the texts for themselves because this book speaks about the interaction between deity and humanity, between God and man. It tells of people who met God and how their lives changed. And the Bible is still the place where people can and do meet God. It is the place where lives are changed through the continued interaction between deity and humanity.

The Apostle Paul had a little different take on scripture, and for Paul scripture was only the Old Testament. Yet Paul himself wrote the first books of the New Testament. That is, his were the earliest New Testament writings to be considered worthy and authoritative; the first to be considered scripture. Paul wrote letters to new born churches long before any of the gospels were written. And to the Church at Rome he wrote, *"What was written was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the scriptures that we might have hope."*

How precious is hope? Often we don’t understand its value until we discover that we have no hope, that our hope is gone. When surrounded by darkness and despair it is hope, only a very personal hope that can begin to illuminate our heart, our spirit, our soul. It is hope that enables us to believe that the gloom of night will not continue forever; that there will be a new dawning, a new day, a new opportunity to make things right, to allow life to continue. Hope gives us the strength to try again, to try one more time.

The scriptures give us hope by showing us all the flawed persons who moved from tribulation to triumph; like Joseph, who descended first into a pit and then to slavery and later yet sentenced to prison for a crime he never committed, only to be lifted to the heights of power and glory. Or we can look to the descendants of David and Jesse, who were in line to be kings and yet were cut off from their thrones, and lived in exile for hundreds of years. But through Isaiah, the Lord said that hope had not disappeared. From the stump of Jesse's family tree there will be a new ruler who shall reign from the throne forever. Because the love, the power, the grace of God has touched so many, has lifted the lives of so many in times of trouble, so can the Lord touch our lives. That hope needs to be a part of us day by day. That hope, that grace, that strength and encouragement can be found in the scriptures. That is why we need to keep this Bible around, that we might be able to live in an abundance of hope; that the joy of life cannot be taken from us.

The Bible was written to give us hope, but it doesn't always sound that hopeful, or comforting or soothing. Take this message from John the Baptist: *When he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."* Don't tell me about the faith of your parents and grandparents. Don't tell me how you went to the Temple all your life. I don't need to hear about your spiritual ancestors. When it comes to your salvation, that means nothing. *God can create children of Abraham out of these stones,* but they probably wouldn't be so hard headed. I'll tell you right now that if you want to be invited to God's heavenly banquet, you need to repent now, because *the ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Those words don't sound very hopeful to me. And it doesn't give me any sense of comfort. To make it even worse, John is talking to the people who have taken their faith, their participation in the Temple more seriously than anyone else. These Pharisees and Sadducees had reason to think that they were God's favorites because they did all they could to follow the laws and commandments that had been handed down by God. They studied the traditional teachings handed down by the rabbis and prophets, all the teachings handed down by all the religious leaders throughout history. These were the people who were in Church week after week; who had grown up in the Temple; who were striving to maintain a faithful relationship with the Lord. And John talked to them so harshly. Where's the hope in that? Where's the peace? the comfort?

Yet when the great masses showed up to listen to John, those whose faithfulness was questionable at best, John treated them with honor and respect. These are people who had been told all their lives that the really had no chance of communing with God, of living with God, of pleasing God because they had neglected the right rituals. They were too busy trying to survive to spend all their time sitting in the Temple, making sure that every jot and tittle of the law was being obeyed. These were people who had been told repeated that God did not like them. And the evidence of that was the poverty in which they were living. They had no hope.

When John saw the common masses standing before him, he said, *"The kingdom of God is close at hand."* Or said another way, God is close to you even now. God is not standing far off as many

assume. In fact, God is coming to you, not to bring judgment, but to come in grace. He is coming to give you a new beginning; coming to show that the great desire of God is to enter into a relationship, to just hang out with those who truly love him. It is not a matter of material prosperity or net worth, but the worthiness of the heart. Is your heart seeking God? And if you are ready to turn your life back toward God, you can have a new beginning even now. Come. Wash the sins from your life, for even in this hopeless world, there is hope.

That was an amazing message, and sometimes we forget just how revolutionary the message was, and is. While delivering the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."* When he said that, there must have been a gasp in the crowd, for the practice of Judaism had become so complicated and involved that it was only the rich, particularly the idle rich who could dedicate the time and energy necessary to keep all the laws. And beyond that, the common wisdom then, as it is for many today, is that wealth is a sign of blessing. Occasionally today we will hear a prosperity gospel that proclaims that the reason we don't have unbelievable riches is because we do not love God enough. And if we just prove that we love God by sending a large chunk of money, God will know we love him and give us bundles of bucks in response.

That belief was wrong then and it is wrong today. For the grace of God does not depend on human actions to prove our faith. It only depends of the all-consuming, overpowering love of God. We are never saved by what we do, only through what He has done. It is a love that will not let me go. The love that flows like a river. The love that lifts and leads and creates a new heart within us, so that we can begin to act with acts of compassion and grace. We do it not to prove ourselves worthy of grace, but as a response to having received God's grace even though we do not deserve it.

AThe kingdom of God is near." It is a message of hope, for it says not that we are able to earn salvation, not that we can inherit salvation as though it is our right, but that God's love is poured out on us right now, if we will just receive it. Again in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* and *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* The poor understand that they do not have the resources to purchase the salvation they need. Those who are hungry for righteousness actively seek what they need to live. These are people who realize how much they need God, as compared to the Pharisees and Sadducees, who believed that they could earn or purchase their own salvation. In their view, God was not really necessary. They could provide their own salvation. The Messiah was only needed to honor them, to give them the rewards they already earned. They needed no hope, so John gave them none. And they showed no faith, no belief in things that are yet unseen, and John told them just where their faithlessness would lead. But the Pharisees and Sadducees would not hear it. They would not listen to the message from John. The question is, will we?

To some John brought a message of judgment, for even now the ax is ready to cut you down. To others he brought a message of hope, for we have the opportunity to be washed anew; to begin life again; to start over with God. But the question is, "What message would John offer to the church

called St. Paul? What message would John offer to you?” Many in the American Church believe that salvation is ours as a birthright. We believe that we can inherit salvation because of the faith in which our parents and grandparents lived. We trust in our baptism or church membership. Understand that standing in a garage does not make you a car and standing in a church does not make you a Christian. Membership without knowing the Messiah is meaningless. We put our faith in the rituals we perform, and all those things without deeply connecting with God are worthless. And that puts us in the same situation as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And so the real questions stand before us: Are we doing acts worthy of repentance? Are we living as though we have received the transforming grace of God in our life, and that we are ready to share it? Are we, in the name of Christ, reaching out to the hurting, the helpless and the homeless? Or are we honoring only ourselves, trusting more in the riches that we can provide and the building in which we gather? Are we, individually and collectively, reaching out to the naked and the hungry? Or are we only concerned that we are well fed and well dressed, always taking care of our own first, and sometimes times only our own? Are we providing comfort to those who have been attacked and afflicted by a cold and hurting world? Or are we looking down on those same people, feeling warm and secure in our private temples? And are we, the very people called to be the children of God, are we finding ways to share the grace we have been given? Or are we keeping silent when we need to shout? Instead of going to tell the world the good news that the kingdom of God is near, are we locking ourselves within the walls, preventing others from hearing, from receiving the grace that we all so desperately need?

There is no doubt about it. The kingdom of God is near to each and every one of us. It is so close that we can almost reach out and touch it. We can feel it deep in our hearts and souls. For there is One coming who is so powerful that we are not even worthy of carrying his shoes. And yet he comes to us. For some, he comes to fulfill a message of judgment. And those who hear it, who see it, those who feel that judgment are never prepared for it. For they have trusted in themselves, thinking they were good enough to earn honor and respect from the Lord, only to discover the truth of how weak and sinful they really are. But for those who seek him; for those who reach out and speak out in his name; for those whose hearts yearn for his presence; for those producing fruit that is worthy of repentance, He brings the fulfillment of joy, the fulfillment of grace and the fulfillment of peace. It is a message of hope. As you look at your life in the true light of God, for which message must you be prepared.

This day, when we hear the message of John once again, is a day to turn our lives around. Let us turn to God in repentance. Let our hearts be warmed and our voices opened, that in the spirit of John we might begin to prepare the world for the coming of the anointed One, for the coming of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Let us produce fruit worthy of repentance, the fruit of discipleship so in word and deed we can deliver a message of hope to a world that desperately needs to hear it. This day the kingdom of God is here in our hands. This day, may the kingdom go forth from here into all the land. And this day, may God’s kingdom envelope you even now. And in your life may it be so. Amen.