

Merry Christmas.

Tonight, I am going to preach about hope, the hope we experience through the birth of Jesus. It is a good time to talk of hope. We are in a moment that feels hopeful, doesn't it? We are like that dove perched on the widow of Noah's ark, poised, ready to flap back to the ground as the flood waters recede...or in our case as that virus recedes. I know you are as hopeful as I am.

We will forever remember this as the COVID Christmas, AND we will not celebrate a COVID Christmas again, because there is a vaccine on the way that will vanquish the virus. And that is good news; a Christmas present promised to be delivered next year!

I love that feeling of waiting for a present. I remember as a little kid, I'd spend hours going through the giant Sears catalogue looking at toys. Eventually, I'd circle the gifts I really wanted...and then live in this wonderful space of anticipation, waiting to see if my hope would become reality; and in the world I grew up in, it mostly did.

Santa's elves would review the Sears catalogues circled suggestions, and low and behold, on Christmas morning my hope would come into being with a gift under the Christmas tree.

So, one year I set my hope upon a ventriloquist dummy. His name was Simon Sez, with a "Z." He had a red shirt, and blue pants, with brown shoes. It was pretty sophisticated one that you put your hand in the back of, and I think his eyes moved, sort of a youthful version of the Charlie McCarthy dummy. I circled him and waited in hope.

Then Christmas morning arrived and there he sat under the tree. Now my greatest hope for a future as a ventriloquist could be lived into. This wasn't something I was going to just dabble in – I mean, you don't just dabble in ventriloquism, because that would be something akin to mumbling. No, you can't be a "sort of good" ventriloquist, otherwise, no one knows you're doing ventriloquism...

So, I was all in. I had big hope...Broadway, or maybe a telethon. So, I snatched up that dummy and practiced a lot, for about two days, maybe three days. Then he found a place on the other bed in my bedroom. But after a while, I got a little freaked out by having to look at him lying there with his eyes open all night, so, thought it best to move him to the closet (facing the wall).

Then one night he disappeared... just kidding. Eventually, however, he did exited stage left in a bag destined for Goodwill. And my hope for a future in ventriloquism exited with him.

That is the thing about hope for some future state of being, it often feels more powerful in the anticipation than in the fulfillment. In other words, I cherished my hope-filled future as a ventriloquist more than ventriloquism itself.

Once that dummy arrived, the hope vanished as the reality turned out to not be quite as compelling as I had hoped for. (*Speaking of hope, I hope this sermon doesn't give anyone nightmares J.*)

So, here is the lesson I am learning as I reflect on this particular experience/trauma...it is a lesson that I suppose applies to our anticipation of the vaccine as well; hope in the Christian vernacular is not a feeling, nor is it an anticipated future state of being. Hope is not synonymous with a particular outcome, nor is it an emotion that slowly surges in anticipation of an expected Christmas gift.

No, hope is a present reality, hope is a known fact, hope is the sure and steadfast anchor of our soul to God (Heb 6:19a). Ours is a hope connected to the foundation of a living, loving, ever present God. Hope isn't the present under the tree, hope is the tree itself, still planted, with roots running deep into the soil. Hope is the present state of a life grounded in God.

Tonight, we celebrate hope articulated through the birth of a child; hope coming into the world; hope that has a name, and that name is Jesus. The Apostle Paul claimed we should: "boast in this hope... And not only that, but we should boast in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us (not like ventriloquism) because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us" (Rom 5:2-5). Like the Holy Spirit landing on dry ground.

Tonight, we celebrate God filling our cup with hope, not for things to come, not things under the tree, for again, as Paul writes: "For who hopes for what is seen? But if we wait for what we do not see, and we wait for it patiently" (Rom 8:24-25); we wait in hope (present tense) nurturing our souls as it grows more deeply rooted in the love of God.

Another apostle, a guy named Timothy reminds us that, "There is no hope in people, or circumstances, or in any other things in the world, only hope set on the living God," (1 Tim 4:9-10 para) who has a name we know- "Jesus is hope articulated" (1 Tim 1:1).

Hope is not out there. Hope is right here. Hope gets us through whatever, wherever, whenever. And while hope is often revealed in the petri dish of suffering, as it has been during this pandemic hope will remain after the pandemic, because the reality is that hope is anchored to God in the moment. It is hope, then, that allows us to be surefooted irrespective of the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Mary is our role model, steady and surefooted; a young mother in a strange city, sitting with animals in a manger, with shepherds bowing down to a baby swaddled in her arms. What grounds Mary is hope...not for the child's future, but for her soul's connection to God in that very moment.

It is this hope that she ponders in her heart. To hope is to bathe in the love of God in the moment, while trusting God with all future outcomes. Mary ponders both, loving God and wondering what God will do. And so too, as we approach a world where the vaccine vanquishes the virus I invite you to bath in the love of God while you ponder what God will do.

What I have experienced and seen in this time of COVID-19, personally, within the church, and throughout this nation is cracks have been revealed. Cracks have appeared as if an air gun swept across a sidewalk, and where there had been no cracks, suddenly, cracks appear; cracks in marriages and in communications patterns with children; cracks in civic conversations and political discourse. And, if we are willing to go there, cracks in our own heart; cracks of loneliness; cracks of compulsion; cracks of distractedness.

And the revelation of these cracks is not that they exist, nor that we can necessarily fix them, but that with them and despite them we are anchored to hope. In fact, we can even boast of these cracks, this suffering, as it gives us cause then to boast of our hope, hope with a name...the name of Jesus.

I don't know what our post-COVID world will look like. Though I am sure of some things, like this sanctuary will be packed with people next Christmas... but, I am not sure how civic discord will improve, I am not sure how tattered relationships will be repaired, or unhelpful habits resolved.

That said, I do believe that reconciliation within ourselves; between our neighbors; throughout this nation is possible and preferable. And I do have energy to work for a more just and connected and healthy world. That is God's hope for us, a world reconciled by the love of God.

Here is something I am completely sure of, however, that no matter what the world is like when the flood waters of COVID-19 recede, hope remains, hope endures, hope anchors our souls to the love of God, and I know the name of that hope... and so do you.

And so tonight, I pray you leave here with a new way to ponder, hope anchored in God through the person of Jesus. Hope is present, not because it is seen, nor realized in

actions, nor provoked by feelings, but because of our ever-present connection to a living, loving, enduring God, God with a name whose birth we celebrate this evening.

Merry Christmas. May you hold fast to the anchor of your soul.