**TITLE:  *Hope Through the Prophets***

*Prepared by Mary Fox for 6/14/20*

Good morning! As you may recall, last week we embarked on a new sermon series dedicated to the topic of “Looking for Hope”. We probably don’t need a lot of persuasion to realize the need for hope in today’s environment - one laden with pandemic fears, recurring racial discrimination, injustice and division. So it is that this sermon series on **hope** seems very well timed.

 Today’s message about “Looking for Hope” focuses on lessons we can learn from the prophets. Fortunately for us, the prophets have given us a lot of material to draw upon – sixteen prophetic books in total, and we’ll explore just a few. The promise of the Gospel is that fear *never* has the last word, and that faith, love, and **hope** are always our paths forward.

 According to Rev. Adam Hamilton of Kansas City, MO, we might think of life as a recurring cycle of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Orientation is the periods in life when things are going quite well – or, as my cousin Anna describes it, everything is just “peachy”. Disorientation is, of course, what we’re experiencing now in the midst of a pandemic. Disorientation is marked by times of upheaval when we’re thrown for a loop; our lives are out of balance and a bit of a mess. And periods of disorientation can be caused by any number of events – a worldwide pandemic, yes, but also more personal disruptions such as divorce or unemployment, depression, or loss of a loved one.

 Reorientation is that period of readjustment that follows disorientation – perhaps adapting new behaviors and adjusting to a “new normal”. Reorientation allows us to regain our sea legs so that we can once again feel more upright and oriented.

 The prophets were operating in a period of major disorientation, and they delivered messages of hope. Historically speaking, the prophets were writing to a people who had been exiled in Babylonia. Judea was just a tiny little place located between two major powers – Egypt and Babylonia. The Jews sided with Egypt, and when Babylonia won, more than 10,000 Judeans were taken back to Babylonia and held captive. It’s a period of unimaginable despair and desperation. Ezekial has been in exile for a very long time, witness to horrific human suffering, and it’s in the midst of the hopelessness, that he receives his vision of dry bones we heard earlier. Recall what Ezekial says …

The hand of the Lord was on me … in the middle of a valley full of bones that were very dry. … The Lord said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! … So I prophesied as I was commanded. … Tendons and flesh appeared on the bones and skin covered them … breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Then the Lord said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: … I will bring you back to the land of Israel …I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken.’”

Ezekial shares this message of hope – the promise that the future will be brighter, that the situation they currently endure will not last forever. For some of us, the isolation we may be experiencing as a result of the Coronavirus my, indeed, feel a bit like exile. And God promises that better days will come. Not instantly, not without having to live through some hardships, but the promise is certain, hope will prevail.

 Here’s another prophet who offers reassurance from the Lord: Isaiah. Now Isaiah lived 120 years *before* the Babylonian exile, and scholars are uncertain whether he was predicting what would occur or if others wrote under his name – that remains open to debate. Regardless, Isaiah offers these insightful words (40:28-31) …

Do you not know?
    Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
    the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
    and his understanding no one can fathom.
**29**He gives strength to the weary
    and increases the power of the weak.
**30**Even youths grow tired and weary,
    and young men stumble and fall;
**31**but those who hope in the Lord
    will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
    they will run and not grow weary,
    they will walk and not be faint.

I’d like us to read that last verse together – it’s printed on the front of your bulletin – “Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not faint.”

 I love how often images of eagles represent signs of hope. Miraculously enough, right in the midst of writing this sermon on looking for hope, I was driving from my house into Gaylord and not a mile from home I actually had to come to a complete stop because an eagle landed right in the road. I remember it distinctly – on May 24th, an eagle right in the middle of highway M-32; it certainly felt to me like a prophetic message of hope.

 I remembered another occasion when imagery of eagles brought an incredibly meaningful message of hope for me personally. It was shortly after my Mom died – the day of her funeral service, in fact. My Dad had preceded my Mom in death two years prior. It was certainly a period of personal disorientation, and for some reason I decided to take a drive along the lane north of our farm heading toward the lake. Just as a reached the edge of the woods, a pair of eagles – not one, but two majestic eagles – soared in tandem directly overhead, circling right above my car. Talk about a signal – my Mom and Dad reunited in death – a message of hope embodied in two soaring eagles; a message of hope when I needed one most.

 Here’s another message of hope provided by the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 29:10-11, Jeremiah tells us *…* ***10****This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.* ***11****For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

 Jeremiah promises hope. Not of the instant sort, not without trials and tribulations … Jeremiah says after seventy years … but the promise is clear that hope will prevail.

 The Hebrew word for “wait” – Cavat (spelled C-A-V-A-T) – is also translated alternatively as “rope” and “hope”. Interesting, isn’t it? We often refer to “clinging to a rope” and “holding on to hope”. Sometimes we must “wait it out”. In the passage we read together from Isaiah, as printed on the front of our bulletins, we read “Those who *wait* in the Lord … will mount like wings on an Eagle.” In another translation, the words read “Those who *hope* in the Lord …will soar on wings”. Hold onto the rope, wait, hope …. Cavat.

 In preparing for today’s sermon, I grabbed a book off my shelf entitled “Liberating Hope! Daring to Renew the Mainline Church”. I believe this might have been a book recommended by Pastor Susan several years ago; others may have read it as well. It was published in 2011 – nearly a decade ago now – and one thing that struck me was the number of events we’ve experienced in the relatively recent past that rocked our world and left us in search of hope. A 2010 Time magazine article reviewed the prior decade of American history and a multitude of events that – and I quote – “left the world disoriented and shaken”. These disrupting events included the Terrorist Attacks of 9/11, the 2005 occurrence of Hurricane Katrina and failed response that followed, then three years after that, the great recession of 2008. Each of these examples marks a significantly *dis*orienting event, and it was hope that led us from despair to better times that followed. Hope that enabled us to move from disorientation to reorientation, and eventually back to a sense of equilibrium.

 God promises hope, and God gives us hope through other people. It is us – you and me – who represent the hands of hope. In delivering groceries to our neighbors at high risk of Covid-19, we are the hands of hope. In providing a free meal to those in need – distributed on a walk up or drive up basis in these pandemic times – we are the hands of hope. In organizing a loving farewell to a friend who’s health requires her to relocate closer to family, we are the hands of hope. In stocking a trailer with supplies for victims of flooding in Midland, we are the hands of hope.

 As I conclude our this sermon on “looking for hope”, I’d like to share a poem written by Kathleen O’Meara, an Irish Poet who penned this verse after a plague devastated Ireland in the late 1860’s. It’s a reminder of things we might hope for today.

***Something Lovely***

*And people stayed home*

*And read books and listened … and rested and exercised … and made art and played … and learned new ways of being … and were still … and listened more deeply … … someone meditated … someone prayed … someone danced … someone met their own shadow … and people started thinking differently ---*

*And people healed … and in the absence of people who lived in ignorant ways … dangerous, mindless, and heartless … the earth began to heal ---*

*And when the danger ended and people found themselves … They grieved for the dead … and they made new choices … and dreamed of new visions … and created new ways to live … and heal the earth fully, just as they had been healed. - Kathleen O’Meara, 1869, following the Irish plague*

 God, please help us to wait for you, to put our hope in you, to cling to you as one clings to a lifeline. Help us so that we might run and not grow weary, walk and not faint. Help us to be instruments of your hope, extending ourselves to our neighbors, those around us, and those in need. We offer ourselves to you and we give thanks to you. Amen.