

WHAT DO YOU NO?

Sermon, April 30, 2023

Good Shepherd Sunday

Texts: Luke 24:13-35 (from last week) and Selected Readings

This week's sermon was mainly compiled by a third point I had hoped to include in LAST week's sermon, but got edited out when I realized it was going to be much too long. If you were here last week, we were taking a look at that story in Luke 24 of two discouraged disciples walking on the road to Emmaus following Jesus' arrest, trial, torture, execution, and burial. *"We had hoped He was the one who was going to redeem Israel."* I pointed out how there isn't a person here who can't identify with the feelings expressed by those two who were saying what might be the three saddest words in the Bible, "**We. Had. Hoped.**" What do we do when hope is gone? Again, I originally had three things, but cut it down to two.

First, tell Jesus about it, and **second**, with His aid read and review and engage the Scriptures! In short, *pray and read your Bible!* Even though that couple on the road to Emmaus did not realize they were doing it, they talked to Jesus about their disappointment. And as a result, Jesus helped them to understand how the Scriptures really do relate to what they thought were their dashed hopes. And we are told their *"hearts burned within them"* as their hope was re-kindled. Now, it is likely these two knew their Scriptures, but Jesus revealed these familiar words in a whole, new, hope-full way. The sad words, *"We had hoped,"* were transformed to, *"We now hope again."* Where before they had *no* hope, now they *know* hope. It sounds like almost a trite point to make, but the principle is nevertheless true: We also need to take our disappointment to Jesus, and then go to the Scriptures and ask Him to teach us the truth about our perceived disappointment. Again, where before they had *no* hope, now they *know* hope.

That was last week's sermon (*copies are in the narthex*), now I'll get to that edited out third point.

The third thing to do when there is no hope is to remember the words of Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves, who wrote, "The first word in the emergence of hope is the word 'No!' " (*I won't pretend I spend my spare time reading Portuguese; in 2010 our then-Executive Presbyter cited this quote at a Presbytery meeting and it captured my attention; I got the reference from him later*). In other words, when hope seems gone, exercise your hope-full faith and say "No" to how it is, say "No" to those actions and ideas and people and attitudes that would take away your hope, say "No" to those forces who would deny you the possibility of hope. I've always believed "No" to be such a positive word. Why? Because it takes character and fortitude and faith and resolve to say "No." People who know how to "No" usually know *why* they say no; because they have convictions. And it's OK to have convictions; it's not bigoted to have a backbone! In fact, I would say most people crave convictions; people of faith and integrity crave to know what is right and good and they want to feed and encourage what is good and right; they want the freedom to say "No," a freedom that comes when one stands firm on one's convictions. Genuine faith provides firm ground on which we can stand tall and unswayed and say "NO!" to influences and passions and people and pressures that would do us harm and rob us of the hope that things can really change for the better!

The freedom to say NO, to make choices, is at the core of our identity as human beings. It is a vital part of what it means to be made in the image of God. You may remember the word "intelligence" comes from two root words. *Inter*, meaning "between," and *legere*, meaning "to choose." The very word "intelligence" implies an ability to make choices; a truly intelligent person in the literal sense of the word is one who uses his/her God-given head to make good choices ... between good and bad, truth and falsehood, gentleness and cruelty, humility and arrogance, between what is constructive and destructive, and ultimately, between life and death. I believe one of the devil's favorite temptations is to try and convince us we don't have a choice. That we can't help ourselves, that *"that's just the way we are."* No, *animals* are ruled by their instincts and environment. *Human beings* made in the image of God have the capacity to rise above their animal nature and choose what they will do, and it begins with practicing and exercising our God-given ability and duty to say "No." *"The first word in the emergence of hope is the word 'No!'"*

Some of you will remember a cuckoo analogy I've used twice before (*last times were in 2015 and 2010; I like to pull it out every five or eight years or so*). All of you know the cuckoo in the clock is a model of a very real bird, the European cuckoo. I'm told the first sign of spring in England is the cuckoo's call, much like the first sign of spring for us is sighting a robin redbreast. One strange quirk of the European cuckoo is that a mother

cuckoo is a parasitic parent. She never builds a nest. When a female European cuckoo feels an egg coming on, she finds another nest with eggs and no parent bird in attendance. She lands, hurriedly lays her egg, and just takes off again ... a process that takes the mama cuckoo bird about twenty seconds. That's *all* the cuckoo does in terms of parenting! Sometimes papa cuckoo gets in on the act; male cuckoos have been known to distract and/or draw mama birds from their nests so the female cuckoo can sneak in and lay her egg; when she's done, Mama and Papa Cuckoo then fly off to Cuckoo Vegas. The mama thrush, whose nest has now been invaded, returns from wherever she's been. Not being very good at arithmetic, the mama thrush can't imagine why the nest seems fuller. She thought she lay four, but now there are five; oh well. She just gets to work hatching all the eggs in her nest; that's her instinctive duty and drive. She's a mom; there are eggs in her nest, so she's going to take care of them.

Eventually, four little thrushes and one large cuckoo hatch. The baby cuckoo is larger than the others, about twice the size of the baby thrushes; within just a few days the cuckoo grows to be three times the size of its nest mates. Mrs. Thrush, having hatched these five baby birds, goes off early in the morning to get the worm, as early birds are prone to do. She comes back, circles the nest and sees four petite thrush mouths and one cavernous cuckoo mouth. Guess who gets the worm? That's right; the biggest mouth gets all the attention. You can guess what eventually happens. The cuckoo gets bigger and bigger; the little thrushes get smaller and smaller. I'm told the best way to find a baby cuckoo in a nest in England is to walk along a hedge row until you find little dead baby thrushes on the ground. The well-nourished cuckoo throws them out one at a time; they are too weak from malnourishment to resist.

Eventually, in the end, you have left in the nest one exhausted adult mama thrush working overtime continuing to feed just one bully bird, a "baby" cuckoo that has now, by the way, become approximately twice as big as the mama thrush herself! You can picture this harried little mama working overtime to feed this huge Baby Huey, and it makes you want to go up to her and grab her by the wings ... or send her a Tweet ... and say, "*DON'T YOU SEE WHAT YOU ARE DOING?!*" She may reply, "*But I need to feed this baby. After all, it is in my nest. It belongs here. It is mine. I must feed it.*" And you want to say, "*No, no, no; you may think it's your natural baby but IT DOESN'T BELONG there. It wasn't meant to be there. It's not yours! Can't you see what you are doing?! You're working yourself into a lather feeding this insatiable appetite that always wants more more more, you're hurt and starved your kids, this is just CUCKOO! Say 'NO' to this little beast if you want any hope for you and your children's future!*"

The analogy isn't perfect; analogies never are ... after all, it isn't the baby cuckoo's fault, and the mama thrush instinctively takes care of her nestlings as best she can ... but we have a little beast with a huge appetite within the "nest" of our hearts, as well. We have a nature that wasn't supposed to be there in the beginning, but it's there. It's a nature that is in constant battle for attention with your higher spiritual nature, and it has an insatiable appetite that can adversely affect all our God-given appetites. And what's true for the mama thrush is true for us: the nature you say "yes" to will grow, and the nature you say "no" to will diminish. The nature you feed most will gain the upper hand; one or the other will starve. One of those natures just doesn't belong there, and should not be fed! No matter how much you may think it's supposed to be there, this thing is a destructive cuckoo that should not be fed and nurtured! The Bible tells us how our cuckoo sinful nature fights against the Spirit, and the Spirit fights against the cuckoo nature within us. **Feed the good.** Starve cynicism, say "NO" to despair, say "NO" to anger, say "NO" to lustful thoughts, say "NO" to inordinate desires, and *feed* your higher nature. It matters what you "NO."

The overall theme of our responsive reading (*this was copied from an old hymnal of the church I where I was pastor before coming here, copy attached*) is about focusing on and feeding what is good. Feeding it, encouraging it, to not grow weary in doing good, "*for we are God's workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus to do good works which he has created in advance for us to do.*" As we sang earlier, "*Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need Thy tender care. In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use Thy folds prepare. Early let us seek Thy favor, early let us do Thy will. Blessed Lord and only Savior, with thy love our bosoms fill.*" To mix metaphors with a bad pun, don't feed the cuckoo crook. Allow the Good Shepherd to guide you with His crook to the good pastures where you may safely grace and feed on what is good.

So, to wrap up last week and this week: -- When you lose hope, **first**, tell Jesus about it, and second, with His aid read and review and engage the Scriptures! Then with the help and guidance of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ, learn that it matters what you "no" ... that the first word in the emergence of hope is the word "No," and work hard to feed, encourage, nourish and say "Yes" to what is good ... and watch your hope grow strong.

RESPONSIVE READING SELECTED SCRIPTURES

From Micah 6:8, II Peter 1:3-7, Philippians 4:8, Romans 12:9,
Galatians 6:9-10, Ephesians 2:10 and Hebrews 13:20

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?

TO ACT JUSTLY, TO LOVE MERCY AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD.

His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and true religion, enabling us to know the One who called us by His own splendor and might.

THROUGH THIS MIGHT AND SPLENDOR HE HAS GIVEN US PROMISES, GREAT BEYOND ALL PRICE, AND THROUGH THEM YOU MAY ESCAPE THE CORRUPTION WITH WHICH LUST HAS INFECTED THE WORLD, AND COME TO SHARE IN THE VERY BEING OF GOD

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

FINALLY, BRETHEREN, WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS NOBLE, WHATEVER IS RIGHT, WHATEVER IS PURE, WHATEVER IS LOVELY, WHATEVER IS ADMIRABLE -- IF ANYTHING IS EXCELLENT OR PRAISEWORTHY -- THINK ABOUT SUCH THINGS.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

LET US NOT BECOME WEARY IN DOING GOOD, FOR AT THE PROPER TIME WE WILL REAP A HARVEST IF WE DO NOT GIVE UP.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

FOR WE ARE GOD'S WORKMANSHIP, CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS TO DO GOOD WORKS, WHICH GOD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR US TO DO.

May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in all goodness so that you may do His will,

AND MAY HE MAKE OF US WHAT HE WOULD HAVE US BE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO WHOM BE GLORY FOR EVER AND EVER! AMEN.

The Word of the Lord.

THANKS BE TO GOD.