

“A Future-Forward Faith ”

Fifth Sermon in the Stewardship Series “I’m IN!” - “I’m IN-vested”

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermon moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

Hope is a powerful force; it is different than optimism.

Optimism allows us to look on the bright side of things, to see the silver lining on the dark clouds in our life. Hope, on the other hand, sees and acknowledges the dark clouds for as long as they hover and storm, while allowing us to imagine that one day the clouds will part and the sun will shine. Hope invites us dream big...to not settle on little silver linings of light, but to call forth and summon the sun, in all its glorious rays and hues.

Now in many areas in life, optimism is helpful. To be able to see that the glass is half full instead of half empty can be a spiritual practice of gratitude. It's not a bad thing to look for the blessings in our life and count them. 'Tis the Season to do just that. And just acknowledging the things for which we are grateful can put into perspective all the things in

our life that we are struggling with.

And so optimism and gratitude are worthy practices that can soften and deepen our hearts toward a more loving way of seeing and being in the world.

But hope...hope is different. Hope is far less warm and fuzzy, I think. Hope doesn't give us the immediate gratification of the silver lining of optimism or the mindfulness shift of gratitude. Instead, hope invites us to imagine a completely different reality as we know it; and in so doing, it calls us to action to help create that reality. Hope is not passive. It's not like tossing a coin into a wishing well or sitting on Santa's lap and telling him what you want for Christmas. In both cases - all you do is name the desire and then wait for someone else to make it happen or for the

universe to align the stars for you.

Hope is active. Primarily because to have hope is to actively recognize that the world as you are experiencing it now is not how it is supposed to be. And if you acknowledge that reality but then don't do anything about it - it's just resignation. It's only when we acknowledge it and then put our own action into that acknowledgement that it becomes hope. It goes from a wish to a will.

Because really, hope without action is just wishful thinking. It's not even optimism or gratitude. Because at least optimism and gratitude keep us in the present moment. Wishful thinking projects us into the future, but with no agency or impact. Hope calls us to bring the future into our present, with imagination and courage.

So why all this musing on hope?

Because we need to be reminded that faith is not about wishful thinking or optimism or even having a positive attitude or outlook on life; faith is about

life-changing, life-transforming hope.

And Isaiah gives us a powerful vision of hope in the midst of about the worst darkness and despair you can imagine. In chapter 11 he doesn't give a silver lining prophesy; those haven't been working. He gives a cloud-scattering prophecy of the sun breaking through the clouds of darkness and despair, driving the vision of the people upward and outward.

At this point in our Narrative Lectionary series, I probably don't need to remind you of the situation in Israel, but I will anyway. The kingdom is divided. And for generations the Israelite people have been unfaithful, destructive, power-hungry, distracted, disobedient, allured by land and wealth and military might. The covenant is long forgotten by the people; they just cave in to what they crave - again and again. And yet God has remained faithful through it all.

Last week we heard from the 8th century prophet Hosea (who was in the northern kingdom) and this week we hear from 8th century prophet

Isaiah (who is in the southern kingdom). They are speaking in the same general time period - the time when the superpower Assyria was devastating the both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom and people were fleeing into exile, fighting for their lives. And they are not just victims here. They pledged allegiance to Assyria to get military protection/alliances, but then when that didn't happen Assyria just kept taking their money and took control of their lives and of their land and *them* too!

Essentially, Isaiah 5 (our first passage today) is an unrequited love song, set to the downbeats of devastation and loss. Isaiah uses an analogy of a vineyard and the beloved owner of that vineyard who pours every blessing and hope onto its vines.

Isaiah tells us that the caretaker of this vineyard put it on an ideal hill and cleared away the stones and planted the best of the plants in the best of fertile soil, and watched it 24/7 -

meeting its every need. The vineyard was given every chance and every condition to create the best of fruit.

But it didn't. It produced wild grapes - no good for wine. Or anything else, for that matter.

The song speaks in dramatic terms about this caretaker whose desires and expectations are disappointed (v. 2). Pretty soon in Isaiah's song we learn that the caretaker of the vineyard is *God*. And so deep is God's disappointment that God breaks out into a sorrowful cry: *"What else could I do for my vineyard that I haven't already tried?"* As we saw in Hosea last week, like a wounded and exasperated parent, God throws up God's hands in the air, frustrated by the vineyard's lack of response to such attentive care.¹ All the cards are stacked in the vineyard's favor - and it still can't pull out a win.

God is lamenting yet again, fed up with injustice and destruction...and we're led to be sympathetic listeners to this song of Isaiah's wondering

¹ Michael J. Chan, "Commentary on Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5," *Working Preacher* (22 Nov. 2015), accessed on Nov. 17, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2567.

aloud - *who* is disobeying God and disheartening God in this way?

In the final verse of the Isaiah 5 text not only do we learn that the vineyard is the house of Israel and Judah (the chosen people of God), we also learn just how they have specifically defied God's hope this time. As Joseph Blenkinsopp has noted, the word pair "justice and righteousness" conveys a vision of a just social order "in which the rights of all, including the most marginalized—the destitute, orphans, and widows (Isaiah 1:17, 21-23; 11:4-5)—are respected."² Isaiah's wordplay in this line delivers a devastating critique. Where God looked for justice (*mishpat*), there was bloodshed (*mispeh*) and instead of righteousness (*tsedekah*), there was outcry (*tsha'aqah*). The wordplay is impossible to convey in English; suffice it to say that the resulting harvest is not simply poor or inadequate, it is evil.³ It is not overly ripe fruit that's passively falling to the ground to rot. It's large,

juicy fruit that's being used as fuel for violence and warfare and wealth and accumulation and oppression.

The God portrayed in Isaiah 5:1-7 is a God who suffers because of a people who produce bad fruit. And Isaiah paints a bleak picture of the results; it's devastating. The protection God previously gave to the vineyard will be removed, the vineyard will be given over to destruction, God will refuse to work the vineyard and will even command the clouds to cease providing rain (vv. 5-6).⁴

Ultimately, the texts ends with the image of the vineyard being mowed down and trampled down, leaving only stumps.

In chapter five, no promises for the future are given, no explicit hope in a new beginning is offered. God promises only an end. So what happens between chapter 5 and chapter 11? Well, God remembers God's promises. The vineyard belongs to a God whose own history is

² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* (AB 19; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 108.

³ Margaret Odell, "Commentary on Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5," *Working Preacher* (17 Nov. 2019), accessed on Nov. 17, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4217.

⁴ Chan, *ibid*.

inextricably linked to the history of this peculiar people called Israel, a history that contains powerful promises about God's commitment to this people's future (Genesis 12, 15, 17; 2 Samuel 7, etc.).⁵

This brings us to the *hope* we find in Isaiah 11 – the shoot that will spring up from the stump of Jesse (King David's father), the branch which will bear fruit:

“The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD...with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...” (Isaiah 11:2-4a).

Hear all the verb tenses: Shall and Will. It is a future-forward vision that is not just about what humans can do - that proves to fail time and time again with the kings. Rather this is a future-forward vision that is rooted in what *God* can do...what the Spirit of the LORD can do in and through a

leader who listens and actually leads the people toward wholeness and restoration and peace and justice.

The metaphor of the stump producing new life showcases an alternative outcome to divine judgment. It is like the sprig of green in the winter coming up through the snow - or the weed making its way through the concrete sidewalk - defying all odds.

Given these amazing promises in Isaiah 11:1-5, it is difficult for Christians to avoid connecting this text to the ministry of Christ. But a close comparison of Jesus' ministry with the "ministry" of the king in Isaiah 11:1-9 reveals some striking differences. Jesus certainly had a powerful earthly ministry...but evil still flourishes, the poor and meek remain afflicted, predators continue to kill their prey, violence is still done on God's holy mountain (v. 9), and the earth is far from being “full of the knowledge of the Lord” (v. 9). If Isaiah 11:1-9 were the criteria by which Jesus' ministry was judged, then one

⁵ Chan, *ibid.*

would have to conclude that, on the whole, it falls far short.⁶

As scholar Michael Chan writes, “Are we forced to conclude then that Jesus was a failed messiah? No, but we may have to concede that his ministry is fundamentally incomplete. A truly Jewish messiah could not leave the world as it is, with evil still on the throne and the poor still in the dust. Isaiah 11:1-9 reminds us that Christians, who still long for the messianic completion of creation, have a great deal in common with Jews, who have historically struggled to see Jesus' ministry as messianic. At the end of the day, Isaiah 11:1-9 does allow us to celebrate Jesus' ministry, but the text also urges us to the place of intercession and action, where we are all longing for creation's promised destiny, a place where peace, justice, and grace have the final word.”⁷ That's not a place we have known yet, is it?

You see, Jesus' whole ministry was about proclaiming a future-forward faith of “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth

as it is in heaven.” In other words, Jesus may have come and embodied hope for us, but the fulfillment of that hope rests with us today. Indeed Jesus was killed for his vision because it went against the powers of the Roman Empire. And yet we are called to carry on that vision today. (Which is why I said at the beginning of the sermon that hope isn't a warm and fuzzy feeling - it is bold and courageous...and even unsettling at times.)

We hope in Christ not because we want Jesus to come and make it all better, we hope in Christ because Jesus already came to show us how to make it all better and through his spirit which is alive in us post-Resurrection, we have the strength to rise to the challenge. After all, the popular verse in Philippians doesn't say, “*Christ does everything for me to make me strong,*” it says, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*” (Philippians 4:13). We have first person agency in hope. It's not passive.

⁶ Chan, *ibid.*

⁷ Chan, *ibid.*

Even still, the prophets have a vision that is so wonderful and sounds amazing, but as humans it's hard to see this some days. We are prone to cynicism. We turn on the news and see that we live in an "Isaiah 5 world" and it's hard to believe the "Isaiah 11" reality.⁸ So then, how does this "promise" in Isaiah 11 function? What does it mean to hope in a future world where the kin-dom of God - a world of peace, love, justice, righteousness, and equity - is on earth as it is in heaven?

Well - Isaiah shows us what he means; he gives us a vision, an image of this shoot from Jesse...a new branch that bears fruit. Isaiah offers hope, by speaking a word from the future into his own time; the vision transcends the experienced reality of the present for the people and calls them to have an imagination about what can be in the future. Isaiah 11 is an alternative vision to how the world is left in Isaiah 5.⁹ It's an alternative vision that captures the imagination and seeks to

ignite the lives and the faith of his hearers. He reminds them to not judge by what they are seeing around them with their eyes, but to see with the vision God has given them....where the poor and the meek have equal value and worth.

For those of us living today, we too, must ask: where is there a compelling vision that captures our imaginations, our loyalty, and emboldens us with confidence that the God who has promised peace, justice, righteousness, and equity is actually about bringing it about? What vision claims our imagination and moves us forward into the future with hope?¹⁰

Well, I would say our vision is the same vision that is in Isaiah 11. When the vineyard is trampled and when we see no way forward, God sees a way and says, "*I will make a way.*"¹¹

And friends, guess what? *We* are that way. As Christians, if we read Isaiah 11 and read it as

⁸ Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, & Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "#381 - Isaiah's Vineyard Song," *I Love to Tell the Story* (9 Nov. 2019), accessed on Nov. 17, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1189.

⁹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

¹¹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

a prophecy describing the coming reign of Jesus, then the truth is, it's also describing us as well. How we are to be "reigning" on the earth ("raining" with grace and love and peace and equity - not "reigning" with power)...because we are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world today. As Therese of Ávila says, "*Christ has no body now but yours.*"

On this Commitment Sunday for us at Calvary, this text invites us to consider: Do we have a compelling vision from our future that calls us forward in hope? What captures our imaginations?

Our vision is to be *Open to All. Closed to None*. This vision is rooted in the witness of Scripture and in lived experience; Calvary believes that all people are beloved children of God:

- God names each person as Beloved.
- Jesus proclaims everyone's belovedness without condition.
- The Spirit equips each of us to claim our beloved identity and uniquely live out its truth in our lives.

In truth, we know we will never truly fulfill our vision to be *Open to All. Closed to None*. We will fail - many times - but we will keep trying again and again. This is what it means to be called forward by a vision. This is what it means to have hope. To acknowledge that the way things are right now are not how we know God wants them to be. And so the vision we have inspires us...but even more, our hope in that vision calls us to act. We act in love to bring about the life that we know God has for us, and for all. We recognize that as a Body of Christ, it's our job, it's our mission, to bring about this vision of hope and make it a reality.

How do we do this?

Well, we visualize the world that we feel God wants for all people and then we make steps to be a part of bringing about that world into existence.

By now you've hopefully had a chance to look at our Narrative Budget that details the hope we believe that God has for the world through the mission and ministry of Calvary in 2020.

Let me share with you some of the highlights.

We have a vision and hope that believes all people should have access to affordable housing and shelter. And so we house families experiencing homelessness or families who are in vulnerable housing situations through Family Promise - literally offering hospitality and comfort at a point of crisis in their lives. Through Bootstraps and Blessings we offer people who potentially do not have housing a chance to take a shower and wash their clothes and belongings...small acts in the grand scheme of things, but acts that seek to show dignity to each person. We offer them bus tokens, gas cards, and food vouchers - and we are boosting this ministry substantially in our budget this year because of our increasing clients. We build houses with Habitat for Humanity to literally put a roof over a family's head. And we financially support advocacy organizations like The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado who work on systemic issues of affordable housing.

We have a vision and a hope that believes that all people are created in the image of God, and are beloved, and therefore we partner with New Hope Baptist Church to build relationships with people who have different life experiences than some of us, because of the color of their skin, and we learn about systemic racism and the ways in which our words and actions perpetuate fear and inequity or alleviate fear and work for justice. We show up to read together at Stedman Elementary to model relationship building across races even as we struggle to have real conversations about race ourselves yet - but the vision is there - calling us upward and onward. We show up at PRIDEfest each year to show the LGBTQ community that we believe they are created and loved by God just as they are. We support missionary Luran Bethell who works with young women who have been trafficked - showing them their belovedness and helping them safely escape the precarious situations they are in. We support with missionaries Joyce and David Reed who offer spiritual support and care for other global servants, ensuring

that someone is caring for the ones who are offering care to others. We support missionaries Dwight & Barb Bolick, who work on issues of empowerment with girls and young women and help cultivate economic sustainability in Chile with the Mapuche people.

At Calvary we have a vision and a hope that believes that in order to care for people and to work for justice that we too, have to remember that we are beloved, and we too, need to rejuvenate and be restored and energized and filled with hope for the ministries of Christ. And so we worship. We worship each week at 10:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m., offering two different opportunities to connect with one another and with God in the ways that are most meaningful for folks - which is different for everyone. We offer monthly prayer and communion at Common Table, Common Life - so that people can have a more personal connection with God and one another. Six times a year we offer Healing and Wholeness Services, recognizing that often we are in places of grief and transition and stress and need a

different worship experience than what Sunday worship provides. We bless our animals and pet friends, we journey with Jesus in daily worship opportunities through Holy Week and Easter, and we celebrate his birth with beautiful music and candlelight throughout Advent and on Christmas Eve. Music and worship are the heart of our connection with one another each week, and with God, and as our children and adults lead us in song, our handbells and youth and young people often lead us in musical offerings as well - through the gifts of percussion and trombone, trumpet and violin, voice and guitar. We hope to begin a concert series in 2020 that will reach even more people through the music ministry - allowing others to experience the divine through the sacred experience of a wide variety of styles of music.

We have a vision and a hope that believes that faith is a life-long journey. And so we've created this new overarching area of Faith Formation, which focuses on the developmental stages of children, youth, and adults - across the spectrum of

life and experience - recognizing that we each need something different at any given time in our faith development, and yet there are benchmarks and rituals that we can all share in that help us know we are on the same trajectory together. Whether we're learning the stories of the Bible as children, or diving into ethical questions and ways to put our faith into action as youth, or exploring spiritual practices and studies that deepen our faith as adults - we know that to be a Christ-follower is to be a life-long learner and practitioner. And so we learn and study and pray and practice together.

We have a vision and a hope that believes that we are called to care for one another. And so we care for each other through Stephen Ministry and our Very Inspiring Persons/Lifeline ministry and through our prayer list and regular check ups on one another...and hospital visits too. We are there for one another in the difficult times, and we are there in the fun times as well - celebrating life through community events like Trunk or Treat, Gathering Sunday, and through fellowship

opportunities like the Men's Group and Women's Group. We have a vision and hope that believes in Jesus' desire for us to have an abundant life and so we have fun together and cherish those fun times together because we know that having fun together can teach us something about faith and community at Bible Study and worship cannot.

And we have a vision and a hope that believes that it's not just our actions that can show love and hospitality, our building can too. And so we care for our building well - with some of the most committed lay folks around. We support staff positions that help us manage our building and our money well - enabling us to be good stewards of what we have. We seek to be forward thinking with technology and how we utilize our space and offer it to the community for use as well. We support a pastoral and ministerial staff that works really hard for us each and every day. We are dedicated to this church and to you; we wouldn't be here if we weren't. Our staff gifts are a wonderful combination that bring this community to life on a day to

day basis. But the heart of this community is you, Calvary...you the people. The ones who show up each day because you believe in the future to which God is calling us. You are here - so I know you must have hope!

And the best part of all?! We have a hope and a vision that believes that God will continually call us to more than we can ever ask or imagine...so that our vision is never defined by what's in a narrative budget but that there is room for the Spirit to invite us into new visions and ministries all year long.

We have an ambitious financial goal for our budget for 2020 because we believe God is calling us to live into the promise of a world that is *Open to All, Closed to None*...not just a church that is - but a world that is. To do our part as a church, we need you to be "*All IN!*" - with your presence, your time, your financial gifts, and your invitation too...helping to invite others to join us so that we can grow this community and welcome even more people into an atmosphere of love and hope.

God's kin-dom *Open to All. Closed to None*. That is the vision of God's kin-dom, and so it is the vision of our church too.

This is the vision that calls us forward Calvary. We may be living in an Isaiah 5 reality, but Isaiah 11 is our hope. Isaiah 11 is the reality in which God calls us to live. In fact, God depends upon us to create!

As Chip Gaines from Fixer Upper on HGTV says, "*What ends up fulfilling us isn't found in the outcome of the things we wish for, but in the hope that we discover along the way.*"

We may never see the outcome of Isaiah 11 in our lifetime, but in living like we will, we live with a future-forward faith, and we discover the power of hope to transform, to heal, and to bridge divides.

Hope is not lost somewhere between Isaiah 5 and Isaiah 11. Hope is here...in you, in me, in Calvary...all because hope is found in Christ, who calls us forward in faith and into our future, where by the grace of God, we will be part of the

vision coming to life, where
“thy kingdom” will finally
come and “thy will” will finally
and forever be done - “on earth
as it is in heaven.”

Amen.