

Stanford Memorial Church
May 26, 2013

LIVING IN HOPE
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Psalter Lesson: Psalm 8
Gospel Lesson: John 16.12-15

This weekend, as we all know, our entire country will be observing Memorial Day, and we could hardly ask for a lovelier day to reflect on what it is all about. For many of us there may be a host of associations.

Traditionally, this has been the time when the curtain rises on summer, the season for vacations, enjoying the wonderful weather, planning picnics, cranking up the barbeque, taking trips to the beach as well as the mountains (in California we have it all), family camps along with a host of specialty camps that enable us to focus on athletic, academic or artistic interests. For fashion conscious, it's ok to wear white socks. Camps for children are especially popular, as they often provide a vacation for both the children and their parents. Then, before we know it, the curtain comes down on Labor Day, and what often seems like the shortest three months of the year, come to an end.

Of the many popular events scheduled for Memorial Day, perhaps the one receiving the most publicity is the Indianapolis 500, with a stadium that hold 250,000+ people it is the largest sporting event in the nation. I happened to be attending a conference in Indianapolis last week and I can assure you that preparations for the cardinal event—the highly popular nascar race—are very much alive and well. This was actually my second professional trip to Indianapolis; about 35 years ago I had been invited to the Lilly Foundation to review a research grant on establishing an educational curriculum for hospital chaplaincy. In my free time I walked around the town as much as I could and found myself thinking, “what a dump.” But this assessment may have been tainted by the fact that my grant failed to be funded. What a delightful surprise, then, when I reluctantly returned to Indianapolis last week and discovered a city which appeared to be totally transformed. In the center of town lovely walkways have been constructed along a series of canals that flow into the White river. Three or four interesting museums have been constructed. In the state's history museum, I learned that no one knows what a “hoosier” is or where the word

comes from, though many theories abound. A few blocks away the classical state capital buildings cluster around a circular plaza. A striking monument dominates this plaza, the kind of structure that seems to exist—in a variety of forms and interpretations—in just about every city in our nation. Around the base are arranged several military figures. Out of the middle of the clustered figures, a very tall pillar soars to the sky, and at the top is placed a statue of the goddess of victory overlooking the entire scene. What a vivid reminder that Memorial Day was just a few days away. Like so many of these civic artworks, the monument was initially erected to honor the thousands of soldiers who fought and died in the Civil War. In the first 100 years of the history of America, 683,000 lives were lost in military action. However, 91.2% of those deaths, 623,006, occurred during the Civil War. Small wonder that as Americans began to reflect on the most horrific military tragedy of our history, that Memorial Day-type of observances began to emerge in both the north and the south.

Many believe that the first well-known observance of a Memorial Day-type occurred in Charleston, South Carolina on May 1, 1865. In relation to the “War Between the States,” as it is called in the South, Charleston is well remembered for housing Union soldiers who were prisoner of war at the Charleston Race Course. At least 257 Union prisoners died there and were hastily buried in unmarked graves. The black community, together with teachers and missionaries, organized a May Day celebration. The recently freed men and women cleaned up and landscaped the burial ground, building an enclosure and an arch with the label describing the deceased as “Martyrs of the Race Course.” Approximately ten thousand individuals gathered to affirm and celebrate their recently granted freedom, as they joined together to commemorate the prisoners who had died there.

David Blight, an American History Professor at Yale, described this gathering as “the first Memorial Day. African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the War had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution.”

In 1868, three years after the May Day celebration in Charleston, General John A. Logan, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, which was composed of Union Civil War veterans, issued a proclamation stating that “Decoration Day should be observed nationwide and annually. This first “Decoration Day” celebration was observed on May 30, and several theories

exist as to why this date was selected, including the view that it was chosen because it was NOT the anniversary of any battle, thereby avoiding the connotations of there being either “a winner” or “a loser.” In 2010, president Obama suggested that the May 30 date was chosen as “the optimal date for flowers to be in bloom.”

Over the years, the annual Memorial Day observations, rooted in the horrendous suffering and tragic deaths of the Civil War, cause us to pause and reflect on the astounding number of young men and women who have given their lives for a cause greater than themselves. Moreover, we have created an almost endless number of Charleston-type reminders of the seemingly inevitable procession of war, through generation after generation, whether it be the cemeteries at Verdun created by World War I, the graves in Normandy produced by World War II, or the multiple wars represented by those buried at Arlington cemetery. And even as we currently struggle to remove our troops from Afghanistan, we pray that it will not become necessary to require new invasions to places like Syria or Iran. These observations and reflections also remind us that, in each generation following the Civil War, we have not been terribly successful in figuring out how to eliminate the seemingly unstoppable procession of war after war after war.

Sometimes, however, as we reflect on the pain, scars and devastation of these wars, we may also discern and experience a counter theme, which we might identify as Living in Hope. It usually is not immediately apparent, but in many instances, out of the ashes of tragedy and destruction we may discern a phoenix of redemptive hope arising. Prior to the Civil War, for example, we hardly lived in a model society—if such a thing exists. The rancor and discord in the congress, which sometimes included physical attacks, almost makes our current national leadership resemble something akin to a social club. I was almost going to say a “tea party,” but that has other connotations these days.

But much more to the point, the cruel and inhuman treatment of members of the Black community was a blatant contradiction of the inspiring, opening words of the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” Of course this phrase—in relation to the Black community--was completely ignored by most U. S. citizens. While the Emancipation Proclamation, passed on January 1, 1863, hardly resulted in a totally integrated society overnight, it represented a watershed moment in the dismantling of segregation. And while many would say that its full implementation has yet to be realized, there could be no question about the

nation returning to a society which condoned slavery—regardless of the person’s race.

We might say that there is a certain time table—or process—when we find ourselves, whether as a society or an individual, living in hope. The Civil War provides a good example.

Prior to the war, society as a whole had reached a certain equilibrium, as many lived out the American dream of obtaining a home, expanding frontiers, establishing new communities, and forming its identity as a brand new nation. When the War of 1812 occurred against the British and their Indian allies, the entire nation pulled together. But disaster struck with the Civil War and the national fabric was torn in half. Painful divisions occurred between states, families and individuals. Blood flowed in the streets, and the mortality rate seemed out of control, exceeding all expectations. The Emancipation Proclamation sets the agenda for a more integrated society. The unity of the United States is preserved and, with the expansion of industry and businesses, rural and urban, the nation becomes a rising star in the community of nations—with more and more immigrants from around the world seeking to obtain a piece of the American dream. It could be said that the hope that many held on to found expression in ways that surpassed all expectations.

Another example of Living in Hope occurs some decades later when our country is caught up in the universal horror of World War II. While in the process of trying to emerge from a world-wide depression, our nation feels honor bound to come to the aid of our allies, particularly those in Western Europe. Once again bloodshed and unimaginable pain and death abound. Eventually peace is attained, our country takes giant steps in the reconstruction, and our hopes are realized far beyond our expectations. The Marshall Plan provided extensive funding and support which accelerated the rebuilding of Europe. The G. I. bill enabled thousands of veterans to obtain undergraduate as well as graduate degrees, enabling them to contribute to, as well as derive benefits from, an increasingly wealthy and productive society. Suddenly an incredibly expanded and wealthier middle class comes into existence.

When we turn to our gospel lesson, the theme of Living in Hope comes through loud and clear. It is a very poignant scene, and quite likely occurred in the upper room in which Jesus instituted the sacrament of communion with the bread and wine which remained on the table. For three years they had accompanied Jesus in a ministry that would transform their lives, beyond their wildest dreams. They had witnessed incredible healings and heard teachings that

spoke to the depths of their spirit. At the same time, their sense of excitement was becoming tempered by a feeling of apprehension. While the crowds were growing exponentially with people overwhelmed with excitement, it was also evident that the religious authorities were becoming increasingly indignant and angry at this upstart from Nazareth. Nor were the ruling Roman authorities too happy about the possibility that this charismatic teacher might well stir up a revolution. In the midst of this atmosphere of high expectation, uncertainty and apprehension, Jesus attempts to comfort his disciples with words of hope, assuring them that they will be loved, and even if he is taken from them they will not be abandoned.

The disciples, having gained a new sense of certainty, exclaim to Jesus, “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you come from God” (John 29-30). But of course, once again, the disciples in fact did not know. In just a matter of days, their newfound sense of confidence would be demolished. When they observed the horrible death of their teacher on the cross, they would feel totally defeated and abandoned. But they did not flee to their homes. They stayed around the edges, in fear and despair, hoping against hope. And, with the resurrection of Jesus, their hope was fulfilled far beyond anything they could have imagined. It was not simply a matter of experiencing one more miracle, but rather they found their fulfillment in becoming part of a faith, rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ, that would encompass the entire world.

Once again, the Living in Hope cycle is repeated. In the first act, life is proceeding fairly well. Then comes Act two, when the bottom falls out and plunges us into fear and apprehension. It may seem like the end, but it is not; somehow our fragile faith attempts to persevere. There is a third act, which not infrequently fulfills our hope beyond anything we thought possible.

This is not to say that Living in Hope is easy or a sure thing, for it is not. The problem is that we tend to confuse Living in Hope FOR with Living in Hope. When I Live in Hope for some specific thing, that is not living in hope. When I say I am hoping for a new Mercedes, or I am hoping for a job at Apple computer, or I am hoping that Superbowl #50 will be held in the Bay Area. When we hope for specific thing or action , it is no longer living in hope, but more like substituting our will and cutting ourselves off from God’s unfolding grace—which quite regularly exceeds anything we could hope for on our own. Living in Hope essentially has a positive outlook on life. It is to believe that God’s grace confirms

our faith and can surprise us in unexpected ways—beyond anything we anticipated or expected.

Living in hope occurs daily with almost every center in the medical center world. Nothing is sadder, however, then when a patient has given up hope and feels there is nothing to live for. Not surprisingly they, they often become depressed and fade away. Other patients are very concrete in their hoping: they have a cancer and they want it removed and to experience a return to health; and, if that happens, the patient is overjoyed and grateful. If it does not happen then she or he may feel God has let them down and living by faith may become more of a challenge. Then another patient comes along, who is living in hope, and also wants the cancer to be removed. But that is only one possibility among many in which hope becomes fulfilled. Perhaps it will be a reconciliation that overcomes a broken relationship with a child or other family member; perhaps it is the opportunity, even in the depths of chronic pain, to produce more depth of artistic works than have ever been achieved before; or perhaps it will be the discovery of being a model to inspire others, or the discovery of a new talent or meaningful relationship.

Living in Hope is rooted in our faith that somehow God is there and will sustain us in ways that surpass our understandings or expectations. No one had a better grasp of what this Living in Hope, rooted in faith, means than the writer of Psalm 8 who wrote,(Susan Christiansen)

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

All sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Amen