

**The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
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This week, I was reminiscing about the numerous years I spent on a tennis court as a player, teacher and coach upon exchanging athletic wear for clergy vestments. Perhaps this came in anticipation of having the great delight of playing doubles with a former student (I saw Chris last at 12, he's now a junior in college) one early evening this week, or the fact that Kathy recently hung a collage in our home made by a dear friend during one particular stint of my tennis teaching career.

But this particular memory was a game we'd play on court that my youngest students were especially fond of. It was called "Around The World" and usually constituted a high degree of controlled chaos and running. Each player was given "3 Lives" to remain in the game, and would lose one in an unsuccessful attempt to get the ball over the net. Early on, when a player was down to "1 Life" I would quickly call out that "you can do a lot with one life." After some time, as the students became more and more familiar with this game, each time a player with one life left stepped up to hit it was no longer me but the collective voices of all the students, that without cue, would declare loudly the mantra: YOU CAN DO A LOT WITH ONE LIFE.

Chaos and running notwithstanding, we are not on a tennis court this morning, but certainly agree that life consists of plenty of either looking through the lens of our own experience day to day or observing more broadly, the world around us. Chaos and running also have both internal and external meaning for us I'm convinced.

So I have the formidable but welcome task of concluding my sermon series this morning on *The Search For A Meaningful Life* after I inquired last week: "Aren't we justified in saying to God: We appreciate your concern, but couldn't you help change things? And then asked you to come back this week. Someone went so far on the way out after the service last week to compare their suspense to what they feel when watching the program "24" on television. Right or wrong, I took it as a compliment.

Let me say that this idea of finding light at the end of the tunnel and redemption I want to suggest refers to something here and now, deliverance into this very time and place, not the hereafter. It is not an escape from this life, as we know it, but a continual encounter and engagement with it, even amidst the horrendous events we witness, perhaps personally and knowingly, globally. I do imagine and hope that we, and God, are yet in the midst of changing things.

Many of you are perhaps familiar with the life and legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian who began in 1931 in Berlin an enduring connection to the ecumenical movement and opposed the Nazi regime steadfastly. He was particularly outspoken on the sin of anti-Semitism and had been arrested for being a clerical thorn in the side of the Nazis. When it was learned that he had been associated with the so-called

Officers' Plot, which resulted in the failed attempt to assassinate Adolph Hitler in 1944, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and hanged by the Gestapo in 1945.

While in prison, Bonhoeffer spent much time reading the Holy Scriptures, and particularly in the midst of his own suffering and of the hundreds of thousands of Jews throughout Germany, thought especially about redemption. He realized the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures of God's saving actions in history had been turned on their heads. We have made "redemption" mean something in Bonhoeffer's words, on the far side of the boundary drawn by death...in a better world beyond the grave. He understood the story of the Israelites to be contrary to that (life in the here and now) and presumed that within his own Christian tradition, one follows Christ into the forsakenness of the world rather than away from it. From prison he wrote that: this world must not be prematurely written off and that redemption is not "from cares, fears, and longing, from sin and death, but instead living life on earth in a wholly new way."

The Psalm that Elaine read for us declared that we ought to 'seek God and God's strength, seek that presence continually, remembering the works God has done. Nevertheless, are we still yet justified in wondering how change, how the evidence of God working on our behalf in the here and now is to be seen? Further, the question may also be what part do you and I have in that? If we behold the image of God, have at our disposal the faculties of faith and reason as I've suggested in my previous two sermons is it still yet possible that we can be considered a conduit for change? That we can, in fact, find our way to a meaningful life?

Conversely, the gospel from Matthew today is one of those troubling texts that alludes to the notion that rather than God being eager to give life it is rather to take it away. We want to believe that God wills our survival, rather than our destruction. Doesn't God want us to have a happy, meaningful life? Doesn't God care about our comfort and safety, the absence of suffering? The point of this text is lost if we do not see that what is really being addressed by Jesus is the quality of our life. That is, the depth of it, the scope of it, even amidst the darkness, the fear or the despair we encounter.

This text and a host of others help us to see that they are yet about opportunity itself. That redemption is not an event that happens at the end of our life but is a cumulative process over time. We've heard the expression, redeeming the time? Opportunity was no capricious accident. Opportunity was and still is the means by which God has dealt with humankind in the narratives of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It has been written in our holy texts: "Who knows, maybe you were made for such a time as this."

There is a story told of an elderly woman who upon reaching her 90th birthday was asked, "to what do you owe your many years?" To time, she replied. Time indeed for it is all we have. She observed: The Lord has kept me around for a very long time; I guess there is still something for me to do, so I'll keep on trying to find out what it is."

I still yet believe and want to implore us to see that we are, despite the pervading darkness around us, to redeem the time and affect God's presence around us. We are

here and not in the literal wilderness of the Israelites or in the 20th century of Bonhoeffer. We are here and not in the time of Matthew or Jesus. Every day you and I wake up in the middle of something that is going on, that has been going on for a long time: genealogy and geology, history and culture, the cosmos – God. We are neither accidental nor incidental to the story. We are here, because like women and men down through the arc of history, we have both a place and purpose.

When we consider times in our history such as the civil rights movement, the past and present anti-war movement, the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, the environmental movement, the movement in search of meaning and values - some would suggest that these movements are not accidents of sociology upon our neutral landscape; they are the legitimate movements of our time, movements through which God can and does speak to us of our opportunities for redemption and hope. Idealism has always been out of fashion, but it is the energy of this ideal, which in seeking this redemptive opportunity has made and can still make us – those who behold the image of God, who possess the faculties of faith and reason, who want our lives to have meaning and purpose – more than passive spectators of passing time.

Does such idealism require inner strength? Yes. Does it require resilience and resolve? Yes. Does it require yet still, hope? Yes. In other words, a theology of hope, and I would argue redemption, is not about tomorrow, it is about today.

Poet G.K. Chesterton wrote:

As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is a mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable.

In our search for a meaningful life, I am aware that we are sometimes less and less interested in abstract virtues or qualities, and more and more moved by those who are models worthy of our hope and emulation. We are still in great need of such models today. It is why a person like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who witnessed one of the great periods of hopelessness in modern time in Nazi Germany, has been and still is an extraordinary example of redemption and hope. There are a host of others: Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day.

Recall redemption Bonhoeffer said, is not from cares and fears and longings, nor demands that this present world be written off; but instead living life on earth in a wholly new way. His hope was not based on the notion of humanity's coming to its senses; nor did he necessarily believe in the theory of a great human deliverer, a prophet like figure who would bring justice and recompense. He still yet believed in the sovereignty of God in history that good could still come out of every possible darkness and evil.

I didn't know until this week that from his prison cell he wrote a poem and enclosed it in his mother's birthday letter in 1944, called Powers of Good:

An excerpt:

*With every power for good to stay and guide me, comforted and inspired beyond all fear,
I'll live these days with you in thought beside me,
And pass, with you, into the coming year.*

*While all the powers of good - aid and attend us,
Boldly we'll face the future, come what it may.
At even and at morn God will befriend us,
And, oh, most surely on each new born day.*

While we know the end of the story that brought death to Bonhoeffer in the sound of Allied victory in 1945, it is a stark reminder that hope is indeed as unreasonable as it is indispensable. It is what brought light into the horrible darkness, the tunnel, of Bonhoeffer's day.

And what about us? I think the question here is not only about bearing suffering or enduring the pain; it is also about still seeing and serving God in it. It is about how life may yet be redeemed, good still brought about from reprehensible evil. It is about new life emerging from the old. When I look out among you this morning, I do know some of your pain and suffering – not all of it – but some. And many of you I do not know, and therefore do not know the burdens you carry. However, I know that life is not about fairness or unfairness. Sometimes it is about making certain choices: between one action and another, which sometimes frankly amounts to putting one foot in front of the other on any given day. It is about choices between being generous or holding back; or what we make of the harsh, unlooked for blows that come to us: sickness, pain, grief, identity crisis, a layoff, insufferable academic programs, jobs or lack of, expectations of ourselves and others- you name it. Perhaps redemption, redeeming the time is about how we're able to use all of these things, even our dying itself as a time for growth and a new found trust in the God who holds us in death as in life, the love divine, love excelling that will not let us go. Redemption now and not somewhere in the distance, for this, in some odd sort of way is what I believe is capable of shining that light in the tunnel. It does not mean that you are expected to be a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Nelson Mandela, or even a Cindy Sheehan, (she single handedly is reviving the anti-war movement over the loss of her son in the war in Iraq as she protests in Crawford, Texas. Like many of us, she wants answers, or at least a reasonable explanation.). I'm convinced that there are numerous heroes among us this morning. The point is this: You are who you are where you are, called into whatever ray of light you can shine there. Never think for a moment that it is insignificant, not necessary, or futile despite the circumstances. But be relentless, and shine, whenever you can, however you can.

In the final analysis, I want to speak to you very personally for a moment. When I finish here at Memorial Church and go home to my partner and life, I want you to know that I do think very seriously about the kind of responsibility one feels ascending the steps of a pulpit to preach, and I will say I do not take it lightly for one millisecond. Especially now in these days and times, there is indeed deeper, complex meaning to the words of my

ordination vows – that is, I am *to love and serve the people among whom I work, and in all that I do to nourish God’s people from the riches of God’s grace, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and the life to come.* In other words, how will I aid you, how will we, aid one another, to redeem the time? How will we both realize and discover together that light at the end of the tunnel?

I am grateful for you and for your generosity and your willingness to walk together these past weeks as we’ve considered the complexities of a *search of for meaningful life.* Needless to say, there are many ways to describe the “lot in one life” for all of us. While I do not have the privilege of knowing about the rest of the wonderful students that endured “Around the World,” I at least have one, and the gift of standing on a court with him this week was a reminder that there is always good, always hope, always redemption in both small and great things. Chris is a theology/history major at Boston College, who I am certain, is and will continue to find that which will enable him to do “a lot with one life”, whatever and wherever that may be. What a blessing and a hope he is to me, and my prayer is that he discover the “lot in life” to be about transparency, about human interaction, about the value of difference, of courage, and inevitably, of the ability to affect change .

My dear friends, what will be, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living life wholly in a new way for you, for me?

*Come Forth O love Divine to sing our great redeemer’s name;
To sing beyond ourselves, extravagantly, with abandonment, beyond all our possibilities, and all our fears, and all our hopes.
To our redeemer dear, the antidote to our death, the salve to our wounds, the resolve of our destructiveness.
A thousand, a million, a trillion tongues, more than our own, more than our tradition, more than our theology, more than our understanding, tongues around us, among us, from our silenced parts.*

Tongues from us to you in freedom and in courage, finally ceding our lives and our loves to your good care.

Amen.

(Walter Bruggemann, Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, adapted)