

“The Community of Hope”

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Rev. Bill Eichhorn

Readings

from *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture*

Rubem Alves

It seems to me that this is what faith in God is all about. It is not the knowledge that there is a Being who lives somewhere in or outside of this universe. For the Bible, to believe in God is the same as to believe that, contrary to our realistic assessment of the situation, something new and unexpected will suddenly erupt, thus changing completely the possibilities of human life and fulfillment.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Though the cherry trees don't blossom
and the strawberries don't ripen,
Though the apples are worm-eaten
and the wheat fields stunted,
Though the sheep pens are sheepless
and the cattle barns empty,
I'm singing joyful praise to God.
I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.
Counting on God's Rule to prevail,
I take heart and gain strength.

There's something' coming. Due any day now.
Who knows...I got a feelin' there's a miracle due.
Could it be? Yes, it could...
Somethin's comin', I don't know what it is.
Somethin's comin', don't know when.
Will it be? Yes it will.
Somethin' great is comin'
Who knows? It's only just out of reach
Down the block, on a beach – or in church –
Maybe tonight, Maybe tomorrow.



This amazing expression of hope comes from the Broadway Show “Westside Story,” a musical inspired by William Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet.” Tony, who has become disillusioned by gang warfare and looks forward to a better future, sings “Something’s Coming.” That “something” will be Maria. I believe the song reflects our mood here at CCC during this interim season. While our Search Team works on, we expand our inclusive welcome, energize our worship life with great music, and deepen the bonds that bind us together into a community of hope. We have, I believe, successfully avoided the trap of simply waiting for our new pastor to arrive, expecting her or him to then raise us up. Somthin’s comin’. Don’t know what or when, but somethin’ great is comin’.

As you know by now, I don’t use the church’s lectionary of biblical texts assigned to each Sunday that many use as the basis for the sermon. You also know that the text I select to be the basis of the message often comes not from the Bible at all, but from a contemporary song like the Commodore’s “Nightshift” for Easter, or from a poem by poets such as Mary Oliver, William Stafford, or Denise Levertov. For this message, however, I turned to one of the twelve obscure minor prophets tacked on to the end of the Old Testament, Habakkuk.

I was introduced to this little book by my Old Testament professor at Eden Seminary, professor Walter Brueggemann. During my three years of seminary, I took every course he taught. He was a powerful lecturer and brilliant young scholar. He opened every class with a prayer in which he gathered up the world, the seminary community, and each of us into his profound conversation with God. I had never heard anyone pray with such passion and honesty. Here’s a sample that addresses hope, our theme today.

For How You Hope

God sovereign and generous,
who commands the rise and fall of the nations,
who calls and has chosen many peoples,
who weeps when they harm each other,
who haunts every local culture—including ours—
with your will for well-being,
who draws close to the powerless and
surprises with power via weakness ...

You are the one whom we praise in astonishment,
we adore in gladness,
we thank in gratitude ...
for who you are,
for what you do,
for how you hope.

Look with mercy on us this day...

Look with your mercy, and we will obey you all the day long.

In the name of Jesus who obeyed fully.

Amen.

Usually the courses professor Brueggemann offered were filled and had a wait list, so I was surprised when I walked into class the first day of his course on the Twelve Minor Prophets to find only four of us had signed up. I guess most of the would-be preachers felt there weren't many sermons to be had in any biblical literature called "minor." But they were wrong. Professor Brueggemann changed the format of the course from lecture to seminar, where each week one of the four of us presented a short paper on one of the minor prophets and then lively conversation took over. I loved his lectures, but I loved the way he facilitated and shared in our small group even more.

I chose Habakkuk for one of my presentations. His prophetic work intrigued me as he addressed an impending crisis for the people of Israel between 609 and 598 B.C. The military power of the aggressive Babylonian empire to the north posed a growing threat. The prophet Jeremiah was delivering prophetic thunderbolts at the time, accusing a string of corrupt kings with failing to keep the covenant they had made with the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt. Jeremiah said there would be dire consequences for that failure, and in 587 B.C. the Babylonian army crushed the army of Israel, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and carried off the elite, which they held in captivity for four generations.

Habakkuk couldn't understand why God would let this happen, and he said so; however, in the end he said no matter how bad things got, he wouldn't stop believing that God would keep God's promise to create a world of peace and justice. In Eugene Peterson's colloquial speech, we heard Habakkuk declare that even if the cherry trees don't blossom and the strawberries don't ripen, even if the wheat fields fail to yield and there are no sheep or cattle, nonetheless, he will turn cartwheels of joy, he will take heart and gain strength. Why? Because he had faith in a God who makes promises and watches over them, which is to say Habakkuk had hope.

There are those today who say our time has passed. They claim the time when the liberal Protestant church was a prophetic voice to be reckoned with has come and gone. They say our days of speaking truth to power and being heard are over. They point to our dwindling congregations, declining numbers, our aging demographics, and they predict our demise. From time to time, some of us worry if CCC will be here ten years from now. Here's what I think. Somethin's comin'. I don't know what it is. I don't know when, but I believe somethin' great is comin'. I believe God has a purpose for us, a mission if you will. I believe the Holy Spirit will open a possibility for us to fulfill that purpose. The only questions are: will we recognize that possibility when it happens, and will we say "yes" to embracing that possibility.

Rubem Alves, a Brazilian theologian and Presbyterian minister, wrote about and lived with hope. He is considered to be the grandfather of Liberation Theology, and because he preached that theology and was involved in activities to free the Brazilian people from a military dictatorship, he was called a communist and hunted by the government. From that struggle, Alves understood that

to believe in God is the same as to believe that, contrary to our realistic assessment of the situation, something new and unexpected will suddenly erupt, thus changing the possibilities of human life and fulfillment.

Can you hear in his words those familiar verses from Isaiah 43, verses imbedded in our church profile, “Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?” Alves also said: “Hope is hearing the music of the future. Faith is to dance to it.” In other words, hope knows somethin’ is comin’. It just doesn’t know when or how, but it knows!

People living with hope feel a beat, they hear a rhythm. It’s not the rhythm of consumerism. It’s not a lullaby putting them into a trance of denial. Communities of hope listen to and sing songs of joy and pain because they know the causes of the pain are not sustainable. Communities of hope dare to dance in the dark of these times and they have the courage to keep on dancing when they are told to stop. Stop working for racial justice and affordable housing. Stop providing a safe place for transgender young people. Stop insisting on laws that protect our children from senseless gun violence. Stop protesting against the ways the destructive practices of capitalism ravage the earth. But then there’s Wendel Berry urging us to keep on keeping on. Berry is an environmental activist, novelist, poet, and cranky Kentucky farmer. He wrote a series of poems he called “Mad Farmer” – poem with titles like: “The Mad Farmer Revolution,” “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer,” “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.” In the “Manifesto” he calls us with these words:

So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world ... love someone
who doesn’t deserve it ...
Ask the questions that have no answers ...
Plant sequoias.

In one poem he tells us to “practice resurrection,” and in another he tells us what practicing resurrection looks like: “Come into the dance of the community, joined in a circle, hand in hand.”

In the near future, my friends, we will invite a new pastor to join us in our dance. We will charge that person to help us discern that new thing God wants to do with us, and that will undoubtedly require us to learn some new dance steps and to let go of some old favorites. Practicing resurrection is like that: letting go of some things that don’t serve us anymore, letting them die, so that truly new dimensions of what it means to be church in this time of great change can rise up from us.

I turn again to Rubem Alves to close:

We must live by the love of what we will never see.
This is the secret discipline ... a stubborn commitment
to the future of our grandchildren.



icon of the prophet Habakkuk