

At the Corner of Bitter and Sweet

Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26

The Reverend Jane Willan

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A woman telephoned a friend and asked how she was feeling, "Terrible," came the reply over the phone, "my head's splitting and my back is killing me. The house is a mess, and the kids are simply driving me crazy." Very sympathetically the caller said, "Listen, go and lie down, I'll come over right away and cook lunch for you, clean up the house, and take care of the children while you get some rest."

Suddenly feeling hopeful, the young mother thanked her.

"By the way," the other woman said. "How is Sam?"

"Sam?" the tired mother said. "Who is Sam?"

"My heavens," exclaimed the first woman, "I must have the wrong number."

There was a long pause and then the young woman said, "But you're still coming over, right?"

Sometimes even a stranger can bring us hope.

Hope is the language of Jesus.

There was a mother mouse who decided to teach her children about the world. So she gathered all of her little mice and set out for a walk. They walked down the hall and turned to the right. Then they went down the hall and took another right. And suddenly they found themselves in front of the family cat dozing in the sunlight. The mother mouse was scared. But she didn't want to give in to her fright. So she signaled to the children to be very quiet and to follow as she began to tip toe quietly and slowly past the sleeping cat. Just as she was about to get past the cat, the cat's eyes popped open and raised its paw.

The little mice were petrified. What would their mother do? Well, just as the cat's paw started to come down, that mother mouse looked the cat right in the eye and started barking like a dog. The cat was so startled and frightened that it jumped up and ran away! The mother mouse, wiped her brow, shook a little and then turned to her little mice and said, "Children, I **hope** you learned a valuable lesson. Sometimes it's good to know a second language!"

Hope was the language of Jesus. He offered his followers hope, he offered the downtrodden people of Palestine hope. How does he do that?

Our text today begins with Luke telling us that Jesus came down to a *level place* to talk to the people.

In the first century, the word "level" often referred to places of disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning. Even a place where there were human corpses was referred to as a level place. Jesus comes down to the level place and he talks to the people. He comes down because it is there that there is the most need. He comes to the people and in the midst of their suffering.

We are much more familiar with Matthew's version of these same Kingdom promises. Matthew instead writes the Sermon on the Mount. He has Jesus on a mountaintop. The mountaintop is the place where all important things happened to the people of Israel. For example, the law came from Mount Sinai. Moses views the promised land from Mount Pisgah. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills," says the psalmist. The temple is built on Mount Zion. Jesus goes to a mountain to meet Moses and Elijah.

Why the difference? Matthew writes for a Jewish audience. Luke, on the other hand, writes for a Hellenistic audience. His gospel is a down-to-earth account for the ordinary person. "The Sermon on the Plain."

The people on the level plain are people who have little hope. They are down on the level with the corpses. In the misery, the hunger, the mourning. By moving this discourse geographically, Luke is letting us know that Jesus is talking to people who have little hope. People who are trapped by poverty. They are hungry, hopeless. Blessed are you who are poor; blessed are you who weep.

So how is this discourse for you and me? Many would say that it isn't. That we are the people that come into the story later. We are the "woe to you" people.

We are the mountaintop people, not the level plain people.

But I disagree. I think we are. We can be hopeless also.

It's dangerous to assume that if someone appears to be wealthy or beautiful or to have everything going for them, that they are filled with hope.

Think of the tragic death by suicide by Cheslie Kryst. Here is a quote from *The Guardian*, "Cheslie Kryst had achieved much: as a North Carolina attorney who fought for social justice and criminal justice reform, a long and triple jump competitor, as titleholder of Miss USA, the creator of White Collar Glam, and Emmy-nominated TV correspondent. She embodied grace, intelligence and passion. This is a tragic loss for all."

It is impossible and even wrong to pretend to know why someone dies by suicide. We really never know. But at least we can say that even though someone appears to be a person of the mountaintop, they may be suffering on the level plain as much as anyone. We need the promise of the Kingdom as much as anyone.

We live in a world that can seem hopeless.

I think that if Luke had us in his audience, he would realize that we are on that level plain as well. With the misery and the suffering and the corpses.

Jesus promises the Kingdom. What does the promise of the Kingdom give us? It gives us hope.

Which makes me ask, what exactly is the Kingdom? What is the Kingdom of God? We refer to the Kingdom of God often. We pray every Sunday, may your Kingdom come. But do we have a good understanding of the Kingdom? Maybe you would say that the Kingdom of God is heaven? Or any manifestation of God in the afterlife. Or maybe the Kingdom is God on earth. Or is it all of that?

Although we will see the full expression of the Kingdom in all its magnificence at the end of time, the Kingdom is also now. It breaks through into our world wherever and whenever God reigns. And that presence of the Kingdom is our hope.

John Calvin said it is the task of the church to make the invisible Kingdom visible. We might say "to make the coming Kingdom, the Kingdom of now."

A way to visualize or understand the hope that the Kingdom brings those of us who are needing hope, is the example of today's migrant populations. *Pope Francis* has cited the examples of the world's many migrant populations as the example of hope for God's Kingdom in the present and the future. "The migrants battle huge odds and risk their lives because they believe that a better,

peaceful and just future is possible. They place their hope on the humanity we all share, and take huge risks trusting they will be welcomed."

It is a Kingdom coming and a Kingdom already here. And with the promise of the Kingdom comes the gift of hope. Hope in a seemingly hopeless world.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book, *Gulag Archipelago*, he described life in a Siberian prison. At one point he was so physically weak and discouraged that all he could hope for was death. The hard labor, terrible conditions, and inhumane treatment had taken its toll.

He knew the guards would probably kill him if he stopped working. So, he planned to help them by simply stopping his work and leaning on his shovel. But when he stopped, a fellow prisoner reached over with his shovel and drew a sign of the cross at the feet of Solzhenitsyn then erased it before a guard could see it.

Solzhenitsyn later wrote that his entire being was energized by that reminder of the hope we find in Christ through the cross. It was a turning point. Through the cross and a fellow believer, he found the hope to continue.

How would hope change our world?

How would living in hopefulness change our personal lives?

What would hope mean for First Church, to live as people who have hope?

Not just a feeling of hopefulness, but the deep abiding transforming hope found in knowing that the Kingdom of God is coming?

In the promise of the Kingdom is our hope.

The southernmost point of Africa is a point which for centuries has experienced tremendous storms. For many years no one even knew what lay beyond that cape, for no ship attempting to round that point had ever returned to tell the tale. Among the ancients it was known as the "Cape of Storms," and for good reason. But then a Portuguese explorer in the sixteenth century, Vasco De Gama, successfully sailed around that very point and found beyond the wild raging storms, a great calm sea, and beyond that, the shores of India. The name of that cape was changed from the Cape of Storms to the Cape of Good Hope.

The Kingdom of God is our Cape of Good Hope. God has transformed our emptiness into abundance, our grieving into joy, our exclusion into love. Have hope, for yours is the Kingdom of God.

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!