

**The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2020
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Wilmington, NC
A Sermon by the Rev.'d Raymond J Hanna
Interim Rector**

There have been a few times in my life when I have been called Eeyore, and I admit, rightfully so. You probably remember that Eeyore is the pessimistic donkey in A. A. Milne's book, Winnie the Pooh. If the glass is half full, he sees it as half empty. If it is sunny outside, he predicts the coming rain. It has been said that the difference between a pessimist and an optimist is the fact that when a pessimist goes fishing, he packs a lunch, but when an optimist goes fishing, she packs a jar of tartar sauce. I really try hard not to be an Eeyore. First of all, it is not an attractive personality trait. Negativity only attracts negativity. Secondly, being a pessimist is not a Christian trait. You can't be a pessimist and a Christian. To be a Christian means that the very nature, the heart of our faith, is hope. Hope that the reign of God will grow and thrive in our midst. Hope for new life, hope for forgiveness, hope for health and happiness, hope for security, hope for racial and economic justice, hope for the world to come. Hope even, especially, in the face of set backs, and challenges, which seem insurmountable.

The dictionary defines hope as a "desire accompanied by expectation or belief in fulfillment". In the Book of Genesis, we learn that Abraham hopes that God's promise of a land filled with milk and honey and children as many as the stars in the sky, or the grains of sand on all the beaches in the world, will be fulfilled. Abraham expects God to make good on his promise. But Abraham is old. He is pushing 100. His wife Sarah is old too. She is pushing 90. Abraham's only heir is Ishmael, the son he had with his wife's slave, Hagar. In the opening scene from today's reading in Genesis, we see Abraham sitting outside of his tent in the heat of the day and three strangers pass by. Although Abraham is not from

the South, he is a very hospitable guy and he invites them to stay and sit for a spell. He washes their feet, feeds them (not barbecue because it's not Kosher), but rather a calf. While they are eating, the visitors ask, "where is your wife Sarah?" Abraham tells them she is inside the tent. And then they announce to him, not to her, curiously enough, that the next time they come back this way Sarah shall have borne a son. Sarah is eavesdropping when she hears this prediction, and she bursts out laughing because the idea is so ridiculous. The visitor chides her and says: "is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?" And just as the visitors promised, Sarah gives birth to Isaac 9 months later.

Abraham's hope is being fulfilled, it's a slow process though, now he has two grains of sand, two stars.

One writer says "hope is not the conviction that things will always turn out well, but the certainty that God is present in all circumstances." The apostle Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, "that whatever troubles we have, whatever suffering we are experiencing, these produce endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us." It is easy to recognize that we are in a time of unprecedented suffering, mourning the loss of innocent lives, lamenting the brokenness and the divisions which are tearing apart the fabric of our society. Yet Paul promises that this suffering will ultimately produce hope. Hope fills our hearts with God's love. Hope helps us face any setbacks, delays, or disappointments. Hope keeps us moving forward.

In today's gospel from Matthew, we see Jesus traveling around Galilee teaching, and preaching and healing. Along the way, he sees people who have lost hope. They can't get ahead. The system is working against them. They are in danger. They have health problems. They have financial problems. They have addiction problems. They have relationship problems. They have food insecurity problems. They don't feel safe and they are afraid. They are harassed and

helpless. They can't see a better future for themselves. They are like sheep without a shepherd. They are like Eeyore on steroids.

And here comes J. with some good news. Liberating news. Life saving news. The news that God loves them. The news that they are not alone. The news that God has compassion on them. The news that God wants them to have an abundant life,— a life that is whole and peaceful and good. The good news that God wants to fill them with hope for the future. To assure them that there is no need to be afraid, and no reason to be helpless. Jesus came with a message of hope for people in 1st century Palestine. Now in the 21st century, in this city of Wilmington, in cities and towns across NC and across the country, there are people who have lost hope, who can't get ahead, who have addiction problems, relationship problems, food insecurity problems. They don't feel safe and they are afraid.

In 1st century Palestine, Jesus commissions the twelve apostles and gives them authority to teach and heal and bring hope to the hopeless. He says to them, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, so pray, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Now in the 21st century, we are those laborers; we are called to go out into the world and proclaim the hope and good news of the gospel, to bring love to the lonely, healing to the sick, food to the hungry, justice to wronged, courage to those who are afraid.

Napoleon Bonaparte said “a leader is a dealer in hope.” Jesus is a dealer in hope. The apostles were dealers in hope. We are called to be dealers in hope. There are a lot of folks who need hope... “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” We can be like Eeyore and say, the problems are

overwhelming, or we can remember that we serve a God who does the impossible; a God who raises up a nation of millions from an old man and an old woman; a God who takes a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish and feeds thousands. A God who calms the rough seas, gives sight to the blind, rest to the weary, light to those who sit in darkness, endurance to those who struggle, the hope of the resurrection to those who have died. We can be dealers of hope — through prayer, through protest, through generosity, through supporting the upcoming food drive; by listening with an open mind, by looking more honestly at ourselves, our prejudices and racism, and the role we play in perpetuating injustice. There are so many ways to be a dealer in hope.

Christopher Reeve said: “Once you choose hope, anything is possible.” To be a Christian is to say, I choose hope. In a few minutes, we are going to sing my favorite hymn, “Come labor on.” I think it is the best hymn of all time, both the words and the tune. It is a hymn of hope. As Erik Routley says, “hymns are epigrammatic theology.” They boil down our beliefs into a couple of concise, impactful, easy to remember, sentences. Today we sing, “Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear! No arm so weak, but may do service here, by feeblest agents may our God fulfill his righteous will. Claim the high calling angels cannot share, to young and old the Gospel gladness bear. Come labor on, who dares stand idle on the harvest plain, while all around us waves the golden grain? And to each servant does the Master say, Go work today.” Go work today and be a dealer in hope.