

Hello everyone! And welcome to our Wednesday Word devotion for today, July 15, 2020! Thank you so much for tuning in today and taking this time to focus on God and focus on your faith.

I am particularly excited to be here with you and providing this devotion today because... today is my official one-year anniversary of serving Mt. Zion!! Ahhh praise the Lord from whom all blessings flow! I'm so grateful to be here and celebrating this milestone with you all. I can hardly believe that it was just last July 15 that I began this wonderful journey of ministry with you.

And it has certainly been... a year, to say the least. I definitely would never have imagined a year ago that I would be spending this anniversary preparing and sharing a devotion, like this, on FB Live, in the midst of a global pandemic, and all the other wild things and unprecedented things we are dealing with these days. Seriously, this is beyond what I thought was in the realm of possibility for ministry. But amidst and above all of this, I am grateful for you all, dear people of Mt. Zion. Thank you for calling me to be your pastor. Thank you for this opportunity to serve God and neighbors with you. And thank you for your continued ability to grow and support one another in faith, in fellowship, and in the freedom of love which comes from God our creator.

So while there are certainly lots of things we could reflect on today in the midst of this anniversary, I want to take a particular focus on a pillar of faith that has sustained me through this year, and, I'm guessing many of you too, through all years of life. That pillar of faith is hope. And I'm so glad to have the opportunity to talk about the powerful hope we find in Christ Jesus, now and always.

So as we begin our exploration of hope, please join me in a word of prayer:

Lord God, creator of the universe, we come to you today with hearts of gratitude. Thank you for the gift of this congregation, Mt. Zion. Thank you for the sure and everlasting hope we find in you, and in your Son, Christ Jesus. May we be nourished by your Word, in prayer, and in the central truths that you give us, that Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life. Help us to be guided by your Holy Spirit, and give us the bravery and courage to follow the callings of the Spirit, no matter where they may lead. As we struggle with heavy hearts, with being weary, tired, overwhelmed, or in grief, guide us in love, comfort us, and ease our pains and burdens. Your yoke is easy and your burden is light O Lord, help us to remember that in all times and places. May the love and hope we find in the death and resurrection new life of your Son Jesus give us hope in all the ways we need it, Lord God. In your Son Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

As we start our time in devotion today, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on your past year of life too. What has happened since last July? Of course there have been happy things, and there have been some certainly heavy things, lots of really hard and often complicated things. Some of these joys and pains are personal, some are felt by the whole community, and even the whole world in some respects. But I am curious too - how are you different from where you were a year ago? What changes have you noticed in yourself, in your life?

Most of us are very weary right now. We are tired. We are overwhelmed. We are anxious and frustrated and fearful and the fatigue of Zoom, email, and the internet is super real. It can be hard to know who to listen to or who to trust or what is and isn't safe, what will or won't be happening tomorrow, a month from now, a year from now. We are waiting, and we are a whole stew of thoughts and feelings in our heads and in our hearts on any given day.

But, I am willing to bet that most of us, in some form or another, feel even stronger and wiser today than you were a year ago. That in some way you have had some challenge to tackle in your life, and you have come out the other end of it (or are still in the midst of it), learning something new and finding a new strength within yourself. You have been gifted this strength by the Holy Spirit, who lives and moves and breathes within you and all of God's creation.

This reflection, dear friends, on our learning, our growing, and our strength, is what brings me to hope today, and most days. That through the gifts of our Lord Jesus Christ we can have hope in all times and in all places, in every space and situation. Hope means that you will not give up on what is yet to come, that you have love for the new life that we are gifted each and every day. Jesus died a most painful and heart and gut-wrenching death to powerfully give us that gift of new life. And death was not the final answer. Death was not the end of the story of Jesus Christ. Life is the story of Jesus Christ. That empty tomb, that risen body, that appearance to Mary and the women outside the tomb against all odds, the miracles of healing and gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed into our world is how we make sense of it. Jesus Christ gives us hope and strength beyond our knowing because new life is always the answer. Death is never the final word. We have life, we have hope. And that is the love of God in action, hope for the new life yet to come.

We know this hope because of the stories of our forebears and siblings in faith - our family, our friends, our church, our history, our Scriptures. And when we need reminders, there is no better place to turn than the Word of God in the Bible. No human experience was left untouched in the course of the Scriptures and it is a blessed gift to have that comfort of God in us and with us in all things. There is no shortage of stories and recollections of hope in the Bible - some favorites include Psalm 23, Psalm 121, Jeremiah 29, Hebrews 11, among so many others.

But today I want to share with you words from one of Paul's letters. Paul was one of the earliest church missionaries, persecuted by the Romans for spreading the Christian faith. He was imprisoned while he wrote most of the letters we now have as part of our New Testament, so he is certainly no stranger to hardship and seemingly impossible situations. And yet, these are the words that came to him in the midst of all of his struggles.

This is from Paul's letter to the Romans 8:18-28; 30-39

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will

obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Oh what comfort and joy and strength and hope we find in these holy words. It's balm for the soul.

But what we need now, is to take that next step in hope and in faith. We cannot hope and wish only for God as God appeared to the people we learn about in the Scriptures. But as a colleague so wisely proclaimed, we have to look for the hope right where we are now. We don't need to yearn for Paul's assured faith in the midst of imprisonment, we are in the midst of unprecedented and life-threatening challenges ourselves these days and God is absolutely at work.

So as I am here today for this one-year anniversary, I'm not thinking or hearkening back to the past, or who I was a year ago. I am filled with a fierce hope for the future. Church looks different, ministry is happening differently, and we are all a bit different from where we were a year ago.

But God is absolutely with us. Church is still absolutely happening and growing and God is filling our cups to pour out and be good news for the rest of the world. We need only to be brave and strong and courageous to follow where the Spirit calls us in these new directions. You have that strength in you by the powerful life given by God our creator and in the Holy Spirit. We need not get caught up or overwhelmed by what we have lost but rather be joyful in the new life that can and will be found. God will never abandon or forsake us and we must give thanks for that pillar of hope and stability in our ever-changing lives. Hope will always be found in the new life we are given by Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

So dear friends, for a spiritual practice this week, I'm going to leave you with one question to ponder. And just one, you can think on it however you like, in prayer, journaling, meditation, just thinking, but consider this question. Where is God at work in the world right now? Where is God at work in the world right now? We proclaim a risen Lord in all things, so let's really think on what things God is in now. The things we cope with these days are not always easy, dear friends, but take comforting hope that God is truly with you in them.

And as we end our time today, please join me in the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen.

Thank you so much again for tuning in today! Have a beautiful rest of your day. Go in peace dear friends, Amen.