Sermon: July 17, 2011

CALLED TO BE HOPE
(Romans 8: 12-25)

It was the first day of our vacation. After unpacking the car and settling in a bit, we decided to hunt down some basics like milk, juice, bread, and chocolate bars. As we drove down a nearby country road, we soon discovered that there weren’t any “Price Choppers” nearby, just a little “Mom & Pop” type convenience store we happened to stumble upon. Figuring we better get while the getting was good, I proceeded to pull into their parking lot. As I headed for an open spot, I quickly observed a car to my left pulling out of its spot at a fairly quick pace. Its back end was heading right for my front end and I laid on the horn.

Boom! “Oh my God!” I declared in despair. My heart sank. First day of vacation! I didn’t want to get out of the car to see the damage. The driver of the other car quickly jumped out. It turned out to be a young mother with two small children who had distracted her. (Can’t imagine how that could happen, can you?!) “Oh my God!” She said, putting her hand over her mouth.

In the end, I’m happy to report it all worked out…the young mother was kind and fair, quickly claiming her liability. We exchanged insurance information. My car was still drivable, not as bad as I thought it would be. We continued our vacation and when we returned home we had the car repaired. The one down side was that we had forgotten the chocolate bars.

“Oh my God!” It’s a term that one hears often. An exclamation used to express disbelief, shock, surprise, dismay. Text messages are filled with OMGs which is the texting version of “O My God”. (At least, I think that’s still true even though I discovered last weekend that BFF, for “Best Friends Forever”, is now old school.)

“Oh My God!” Rare is the day when we don’t encounter this phrase in some shape or form. Then there are the more explicit Trinitarian specific variations of this exclamation such as shouting the name of God’s Son in situations of distress and/or anger. I must say that one makes me cringe. When hearing it, I’m often tempted to respond with something like, “Don’t worry…I’m an expert on things like this…in my line of work we call it a conversion experience…Paul had a similar experience on the Road to Damascus.”
In today’s passage from Romans, Paul writes that, “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God…joint heirs with Christ.”

Okay, I’ll be the first to admit that the many religious exclamations I hear in parking lots, stores, and numerous other venues don’t come in the form of “Abba! Father!” and it’s also probably the furthest thing from the minds of those who make such an exclamation but Paul’s observation does make me wonder. Could it be that, even in these moments when my insides cringe, the Spirit is up to something? Could it be that even in these times of deepest frustration, of anger, of surprise, of shock, maybe even delight our tongues, provoked by the Spirit joining with our own, can’t help but to form the words that cry out to our Creator? Of course I am not advocating the use of such explicatives. To be sure they will still make me cringe but, even so, it is a curious thing to consider. Perhaps the Spirit is more active than we sometimes give it credit for even in the lives of those whom we would least expect to find it.

It’s certainly happened before. It occurred in the call of Abraham who, at the age of 75, left all he had to heed God’s call to build a new nation. It occurred in the call of Moses who resisted God’s call with all his might claiming he didn’t have what it would take. It occurred among a group of tough skinned fishermen, who probably had their own salty jargon, whom Jesus called to follow him. It occurred in Mary and Joseph, two no name peasants who were chosen to be the parents of God’s son.

It happens. God’s Spirit shows up in the most unexpected places and among the most unexpected people.

Paul continues: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God…” Creation waits…we might not recognize the groans of the land and sky but it waits with eager longing for something more - for healing, for relief… for the revealing of God’s children who will bring hope.

Things are not right in the world and few of us do not sense it. Creation groans in travail as its resources are mined and its atmosphere is despoiled. We groan as we worry about our children’s future, as violence scorches the ground, and as there doesn’t seem to be enough clean water and food to go around.

Creation groans - in parking lots, in store aisles, on construction sights, on battle fields, in backyards, on fishing boats, in moments of frustration, in the whisper of a breeze, in the sun’s heat, in the mountains reaching for the clouds, in the animal’s howl, from a tree’s parched branches. All creation groans – for relief, for guidance, for miracles, for hope. And could it be that, in these very sounds of
groans and cries, where ever and from whomever they come, God is reminding us that you and I, joint heirs with Christ, have been called to be hope?

“For creation waits,” Paul writes, “For the revealing of the children of God.”

It is a difficult thing for us to fathom. It is a difficult thing for us to embrace. It is a difficult thing for us to envision. Yet, it is inescapably there in almost every venue we wander into. The human spirit combining with God’s Spirit to reveal that we are God’s children still - heirs of the promise, co-workers in the building of a new creation, children equipped for hope unlike anything else in all of the created order. Sons and daughters imbued with a holy imagination and a tool chest full of skills to be agents of hope even against the greatest of odds.

It is our divine calling - to be hope, to live hope even as we know that hope is never easy. It isn’t easy because it’s always out there somewhere – unrealized, unmade, hard to sometimes imagine and even harder to cling to, especially in the midst of trial and travail. Yet, as Paul reminds us, it’s what hope has always been - hard to see but something that we wait for and work towards with patience and stubborn faithfulness.

So, maybe, there’s something more to those explicatives we often hear so casually used in so many venues beyond the church’s walls. In fact, maybe we should pay closer attention to them and maybe the next time we find ourselves within ear shot of those groans, we wouldn’t be so far off base to say, “Don’t worry...I know what this is...my Pastor has trained me for just such a moment as this. This is what we in the church call hope. The name you just cried out to is hope and it is also the name that calls you and me to be hope!”

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.