

Hope

Isaiah 35:1-10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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I found this Advent stole at a street fair in Isla Vista about 27 years ago. It was hanging in a booth of Hmong Laotian needlework. It was the last place I expected to find liturgical supplies. I did not yet know the story behind it.

The leader of this Hmong community lived with his family in a small apartment in Isla Vista, near the UC Santa Barbara Campus. I was invited into his home one Friday evening for a prayer service. Through an interpreter he told his story. He had converted to Christianity decades before when missionaries first came to the mountains of Laos in the 1950's. He was the leader of his village, and he had also become their pastor.

The Hmong people have a distinct culture that goes back for centuries in the highlands of Southeast Asia. They hunted, grew crops, and moved their villages with the seasons of the year. Large numbers of them converted to Christianity in the 1950's and 60's. Their language had never been written until the missionaries created a phonetic system and produced a Hmong language Bible.

Most of the missionaries left when war escalated in Laos. The CIA came and recruited more than 80% of the Hmong men as a secret army in Laos to attack North Vietnamese supply shipments going down the Ho Chi Minh trail, and to fight the Pathet Lao communists in Laos. More than 40,000 of them were killed during the war.

In 1975 the war ended. The Pathet Lao took power in Laos.

My host knew that he would be captured and executed if he remained. He made plans to leave with his wife and children. When the village heard of his plans, they said that they would all go with them.

So the entire village left the mountains, traversed the jungle and came to the Mekong River. On this side was death, on the other side hope. The river was wide. They had no boat. They didn't know how to swim.

They crossed the river. As the interpreter repeated his story, it was unclear just how they managed this, but it was clear that they felt God's miraculous hand guiding them, saving them, as children and parents traversed the dangerous waters with Pharaoh's army behind them.

On the other side they walked into a Thailand refugee camp and reported that they had been fighting for the Americans in Laos and now had escaped the communist government. At first the Americans said, "What do you mean Laos? We did not have an army in Laos." The Hmong said, "Yes you did, and here we are." So the United States' government reconsidered its previous denials. The Hmong people were given refugee status. Soon they found themselves living in Fresno, Minneapolis and Isla Vista.

I sat in the small apartment living room of this Hmong elder, tribal leader, battalion commander, CIA operative and Christian pastor. Now he had led his people to Isla Vista. There was no mountainside to cultivate, no game to hunt, and no war to fight. It was not clear how the people would sustain themselves in this strange and confusing environment. But once he had stood on the shores of the Mekong River, not knowing how he and his village would get across. He looked to the future with hope.

"A highway shall be there,

and it shall be called the Holy Way;
... it shall be for God's people; ...
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 35:8-10)

John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was the one hoped for.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (John 11:4-5)

How else might Jesus have answered the question? How else might he have tried to convince them that he was the real Messiah? He could have shown them his pedigree. He had a pretty impressive one, according to Matthew. He was a descendant of David, born in Bethlehem, which was the city of David, and which the prophets had pointed to as the birthplace of the Messiah. He had also been raised in Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, and this too fulfilled prophecy. He could have told them about Magi coming from the east bringing gifts fit for royalty to a mere child born in poverty.

Matthew had made all these points in his telling of the story of Jesus. But when Jesus was asked point blank whether or not he was the Messiah, he made no reference to the prophets or to his family lineage. What he said was, "use your eyes and ears. Judge the authenticity of who I am by what you see happening in my ministry. People are being changed. The broken are becoming whole. God's rule is breaking into reality here and now... Oh, you could go and tell John about what I preach and teach, but I doubt that would convince him. Go and tell him about my actions. Tell him about the results of my ministry. The blind see. The lame are healed. The dead are raised to life!"

"A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out. A subjective person came along and said, 'I feel for you down there.' An objective person came along and said, 'It's logical that someone would fall down there.' A Pharisee said, 'Only bad people fall into a pit.' A mathematician calculated how he fell into the pit. A news reporter wanted an exclusive story on his pit. A fundamentalist said, 'You deserve your pit.' An IRS person asked if he was paying taxes on the pit. A self-pitying person said, 'You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit.' A charismatic said, 'Just confess that you're not in a pit.' An optimist said, 'Things could be worse.' A pessimist said, 'Things will get worse.' Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit!"

We speak of salvation too easily – a theological word having to do with “being right with God” ... we ponder it for awhile, and then other things catch our attention and we decide we will set that word aside and wait until next Sunday to consider it again.

But this salvation we are offered is as if we were standing on the shores of the Mekong River. Death is behind us. Life is waiting on the other side. What is the death that pursues our lives? Depression is a gaping hole of darkness behind us, waiting for us to fall back in. The dawn of a new day is waiting on the other side. Self-hate, guilt, broken promises, stress, dysfunctional families, the threat of financial ruin, these are all surrounding us and pulling us down, while our sisters, our brothers and our children are still experiencing the nightmare of war. But we gather at the edge of the river where we can see new life, acceptance, a fresh beginning. We cross the river. We are saved. But on the other side of the river, more challenges await us. The choices

between life and death confront us daily. Nevertheless, hope is always with us. Because once we experienced salvation, hope goes with us on our continuing journey.

Turn with me to the Letter of James, chapter 5. Here we find a clear statement of the peril around us, the promise of salvation, and the hope that sustains our daily lives. In the fifth chapter of the letter of James, the writer encourages a fragile community of poor Christians to keep hope alive. They have experienced salvation, and now in this time of struggle, he promises a fuller salvation in the future.

The chapter begins, however, with a look back at the death that is pursuing us. James sees this most vividly in the lives of the rich. That is a little disturbing, especially since by James' standards that pretty much includes all of us. "Weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you." We are being pursued by death.

"Riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ... Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." This is the essence of the death that pursues us. Mindful only of our own comfort, we are blind to suffering and we are deaf to the cries of the poor. But God sees and God hears. And as we heed not the suffering of the least, so we heed not the suffering of Jesus. So James' concludes, "You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you."

Then James addresses those who have lived under such oppression and promises a reversal. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." They have watered crops with their tears, but God's harvest will be bountiful.

"The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." (James 5:7-8)

James is writing to a persecuted community that has already received with joy the good news of salvation. Because of what Jesus has done, they know that they are children of God, even though the world may call them orphans. Having experienced salvation, they hear with confidence James message to hope for future salvation.

Then James instructs the community to care for its members as they patiently live with hope.

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (James 5:13-16)

What we see hear is complete reversal of the death James described at the beginning of the chapter. "The wages of laborers ... kept back by fraud," is the way of death. "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed," is the way of life.

Our hope is that we shall not die.

Our hope is that we shall have Life.

We hope for real blessings in the lives of the poor, the sick and the oppressed.

And we hope for the great blessing at the root of all blessings, which is the assurance of God's love that sustains us and puts thanksgiving in our hearts, even as we endure the weight of poverty, infirmity and injustice.

God has saved us, therefore we confidently expect salvation in the future.