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Hope At The End

Things change. Nothing stays the same. We know this, and yet, we cling so tightly to what has been. The past sometimes casts a spell over us. For whatever reason, I am one of those people who can easily get romantic about the past. I catch myself longing for days gone by. The way things used to be seems pretty attractive these days at least for some people.

Next week another Lutheran Seminary will hold their final chapel service in a place they have worshiped for such a long time in the midst of moving locations and downsizing. In light of the ever changing religious landscape in North America this is becoming more and more common and will only continue into the future.

My alma mater did that a year and a half ago. I was at the service of leave-taking in 2023. Even the pipe organ was packed up and shipped off to a church in Seattle. The school continues in a new smaller location, but it was still a loss. Something to be grieved. Tears were shed. The place where I experienced so many life milestones has changed. The way I knew it, is gone. It can be hard to accept and let go.

T Denise Anderson writes in the Christian Century:

“Having just talked about how the religious establishment was devouring the houses of widows and using a widow with two copper coins in a lesson on generosity and exploitation, Jesus’ disciples—as if they haven’t heard a word he’s just said—go on to gush over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus has to tell them the hard truth: nothing you see here is going to last. That throws everything into uncertainty for them. Everything is ephemeral. The things we take comfort in and take for granted can be threatened. Jesus’ disciples spend a lot of energy being impressed by a building—a building that will one day be reduced to rubble.”

Throughout time people have read their own experiences into this text, and how could we not. When have there not been wars and rumors of wars? Earthquakes and other natural disasters have always been prevalent on earth. The Roman Empire destroyed the temple in 70 AD. Stone on stone. The end of so much. And for us, endings abound. We face our own apocalyptic moments. We lose loved ones, some far too soon, dreams are dashed, and hope seems to fall into the rubble of our lives all too often. Things, people, and institutions that look so dependable seem to always buckle under the weight of our sin sick world. The world changes at will and time marches on. Most everything is maddeningly out of our control. The stones pile up in our hearts. What names would you give those stones?

Jesus says, “do not be alarmed.” How could he say that? He is making his way to the cross where the temple of his own body will be thrown down, broken under the boot of tyranny, his life is brought to an end. Darkness will cover the earth and he will cry out in utter forsakenness. Yet, for Jesus that was just the beginning. God persists.

Our high priest is the one who knows us. Sees us. Loves us. Walks with us. Never forsakes us, will never lose us or let us go. Where dead ends stack up and stones pile up, this God is still working. Against all odds- there is still promise. For you and for me.

Hebrews encourages us to not neglect meeting together. We were never meant to do it alone. Sometimes we want to believe that there is something beyond whatever we are living through and that resurrection gets the last word, but we just can't. The evidence isn't very convincing. We want to say with confidence that God is faithful, but our faith is faltering, we are tired, and confused.

One Lutheran pastor talks about how sometimes we can't find it within ourselves to pray, or to confess or trust in the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and the everlasting life. words fail like the sturdiest of strictures. That's why we say living *together* in trust and hope we confess *our* faith. We speak it together. Our neighbors pray and believe for us and eventually the roles will be reversed. We've got each other. We hold each other. We bear one another up. Look around. We are church.

We keep gathering. Gathering as resistance. Gathering as an antidote to despair. An answer to our world-- siloed, tucked away, hidden from one another. Gathering as a protest against rugged individualism and the weight of our own hearts. Gathering as a protest against a world that insists we retreat to our own dark corners and just keep everything to ourselves.

As we sit with one another, recite words together, sing, pray, and eat together, hope just might begin to emerge unbidden as a gift out of nowhere. We might discover the beginning of something new taking shape out of all of our broken pieces. Room to trust in this God of promise grows ever so slightly. Space might be created to imagine something different. After all, Christ is alive.

In August I started serving on the candidacy committee for the metro chicago synod of the ELCA. As a committee we walk with folks discerning calls to ministry. Yes- things change. The church landscape looks different than it has in the past. It's easy to look back and marvel at what was. Yet, I have witnessed person after person, many who have felt shut out by the church in the past, still responding to a call that God has placed on their life. Hope in flesh and blood.

Things change but the God of promise persists from beyond every grave and shut door. We belong to this God. The one always on the move. Ever in motion. Still living. Coming from the future. And calling us from just up the road with arms outstretched, always ready to catch you.