

For Such A Time As This: Investing in Hope **Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 5:14-16**

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Several years ago, now, not long after I came here as the associate pastor, I started holding a longest night worship service each year in December. Sometimes called a Blue Christmas service or a Service of Light in the Darkness, the longest night is a special worship service designed for people who are hurting at Christmastime. They are often held on December 21st, the longest night of the year, which is when ours is this year. My personal interest in the Longest Night service started many years ago when I was in the middle of my divorce. That was an especially hard time in my life and while I wanted to make a merry Christmas for Emmett, my own heart was still so heavy with loss. That year, I got up early in the morning after the longest night so I could watch the sunrise. Though it was a cold and drizzly morning, I could see the light slowly materialize out of the long hours of the night. Just as we read in John 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overtake it".

For me, that sunrise was such a symbol of hope. It was a physical, visible manifestation of God's promise that even in the midst of uncertainty, even in days of great pain, Christ's light shines within us to assure us we are beloved, Christ's light shines around us to support and comfort us, Christ' light goes before us to light the way toward healing and wholeness.

I believe the church - particularly this church - is a similar symbol of hope for those who make it their home, for our community, and for all the people whose lives have been touched by our ministries for almost 200 years.

Goodness knows, or more aptly, God knows, we need hope. Humanity has always needed hope. Hope in the face of war, poverty, illness, trickery, bullying, hate. And our time is no different. We still feel the heaviness of loss and uncertainty from the pandemic. We are heartbroken and outraged by what is happening in the Middle East. Mass shootings are no longer news. Our kids are struggling with depression and anxiety.

In all of this, the church is the light in the darkness. The church exists to be a community of love and care which holds to the belief that one day the goodness of God will overcome all the evils of the world. We who are living on this day, at this moment in history, at this time in the ever-unfolding story of God's people, we are the church for just such a time as this.

This is the last sermon in our series on stewardship as today we offer our pledges and gifts to God for the church's operations in 2024. We've talked about the saints who have gone before us and those who have shaped our faith as we have grown as disciples. Last week, we took the opportunity to count our blessings and recognize that all that we have comes from God. This week, we will look forward to the future in hope.

Throughout scripture we read that God's intent for us is that we be whole and at peace with God, with the planet, with ourselves, and with others. The vision of God's kin-dom is one in which there are no more wars, there is no more hate, those who have been in conflict with each

other will have reconciled, resources will be fairly distributed, we will all flourish in a community of love.

This is the hope and the future God is speaking of in Jeremiah 29:11. It starts with our individual acceptance of God's grace and commitment to live into the best of who God created each of us to be, but it doesn't stop there. It was never God's intent that we live in isolation from each other. Everything that characterizes God's kin-dom speaks to how we live in relationship. We grow in hope through our relationships with God and each other. Hope is born of those moments when we meet each other with God-like love. That happens most often here in this place in the moments when we worship together, we study together, we grow together, we serve together. Those moments when we can see that this community, the church, can be a living foretaste of God's kin-dom.

If you don't believe me, listen to these words from other members of our congregation. Early in the week, I put a post on the church's group Facebook page asking people what in our church gives them hope. These were some of their answers:

- * The relationships formed among our youth that continue into adulthood and last long after they leave Ann Arbor.
- * Amy Kennedy's personal invitation to make origami paper cranes and pray for peace and healing and James Pauer's commitment to Creation Care, encouraging FUMC to meet God's call to care for the earth, our community, and the future for all children.
- * My book group! We talk about our readings of course, and also our lives, concerns, and joys. We pray together, for each other and for our world.
- * I attended a staff care team (subcommittee of SPRC) meeting this morning, and it is lovely to see this group who are so dedicated to the support for our FUMC staff! God is surely working through them so that UMC can touch more people in our broader community.
- * Youth group, family ministries, being in service through missions near and far, partnership with Wesley, caring and supportive community, beauty of our church and the worship experience. God is at work in the ministries of and supported by the church (Alpha House, Habitat, House by the Side of the Road, Love Thy Neighbor, and so much more).
- * My small group. It has met throughout the pandemic and beyond and I am so grateful for their support and friendship.
- * Being able to make music to praise and inspire as part of the bell choirs
- * Children's ministry and the amazing staff we have there. Connections made between the congregation through supporting each through illness and different seasons of life.
- * The great Methodist hymns
- * Our openness to change and to embracing a very different and still evolving post pandemic future.
- * Reading all the heart notes on our bulletin boards at church and the warm feelings folks have for our congregation!
- * The loyal members and the love I experience there.

I made my own list, as well, including just things I've seen at our church this fall that have filled me with hope. The youth serving at Cass Social Services as well as tinkering with toys to adapt them for children with disabilities. The new Children's music program, trunk or treat, and the arrival of Geno into our midst. Tuesdays Together. Sermon chat. Our great staff. Our collaboration with Wesley.

These are all manifestations of God's kin-dom right here, right now. And they happen because of your generosity, the financial gifts you give the church. Henri Nouwen, the great author, priest, and professor, wrote a beautiful book entitled *A Spirituality of Fundraising* in which he said, "Indeed, if we raise funds for the creation of a community of love, we are helping build the kingdom. We are doing exactly what we are supposed to do as Christians." Put another way, our gifts to the church are an investment in hope.

But it's not just hope for today, for such a time as this. It is also investing in hope for the future. We want this church, this community, this manifestation of the kin-dom to continue, to be here for our children and their children and their children. We hope that our church will continue to evolve so it meets the needs of future generations. And as Christ-followers, we hope that the goodness - the beauty and joy and love and justice that exists in this place today - will spread, like a mustard seed grows into a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

That is why we've begun this discussion of how we can best use our resources, so the church is healthy and sustainable long after we all are gone. I know many things feel uncertain right now, and uncertainty breeds anxiety. Yet, know this...God is working through us to create the First United Methodist Church of tomorrow. Soon, you will see some proposals for how we might move forward with our facilities that you can react to. At the same time, a team of Green Wood attendees has formed to begin to envision what our future alternative worship service will look like. The Wesley Foundation Board has just voted to move ahead with their vision for a new building to sit closer to the corner of Huron and State.

Friends, we are the light of the world. Author David Lose writes, Jesus says those words to us as "sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commission." Let us be a beacon of hope. Let us shine our light before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven." Let us shine our light into the darkness with all we have to give of ourselves and our resources for just such a time as this.

May it be so. Amen.