Second Sunday in Lent February 25, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16 Romans 4:13-25

Psalm 22:22-30 Mark 8:31-38

Create in us, clean hearts, dear Lord.

When Lizzy, my youngest daughter, was about 5 she asked me how old Cahaley, her older sister would be when Lizzy turned six…..

“Cahaley will be ten.”

“OK, so when I turn ten, how old will Cahaley be?”

“Fourteen.”

And when I am fourteen, how old will Cahaley be?

“Eighteen.” There was a pause….

“This isn’t right…. When is it my turn to be the oldest?”

“Honey, I’m sorry to say, that’s never going to happen.”

“Yes it will- it has to- I want a turn at being the oldest. You’re wrong!”

I would say that Lizzy was hoping against hope, a phrase St. Paul coined in his letter to the Romans, to believe at some point in life she would become the older sibling.

It’s a strange phrase, “hoping against hope.” That’s like saying, “seeing against sight,” listening against hearing,” or “feeling against touch.”

Hoping against hope. What does it mean?

Even when there is no logical reason to hope, hope anyway.

If all is beyond hope, maintain your faith in hope.

Yes, all is past hope, but still hope.

When all is against hope, believe in hope.

In other words, when there is utterly no reason to hope, and yet we still do, then, according to Paul, that will be reckoned as faith.

When I was living in South Africa, I worked as a minister side by side with the Rev. Gideon Khabela, who became a mentor and wise sage for me. We went to many funerals. The one I am remembering particularly was a long trek into a village, deep in the mountains of Zulu Natal. We were officiating.

It was very similar to a burial we would have. We were in our black cassock and surplice and tippet. The wind was blowing, our robes billowing. People were dressed in their Sunday best with hats, shawls, and their black and white church uniforms. The coffin was a simple pine box, the ground freshly dug, about six feet down, and as the coffin was lowered into the grave with ropes, the prayers began. Gideon translated.

“Get up, dear one, now.” “Break the bonds of death and crack open the coffin.” “Come back to us; we need you.” “Unseal the seal.”

The members of the village were praying earnestly that this loved one would rise out of the grave. Not metaphorically, not symbolically, not as a “sign” of the resurrection. They were praying for the real deal. “Get up, walk out of the grave, return to the living.”

This went on for about ten to fifteen minutes, with lots of singing, chanting and wailing, with prayer books slapping against hips as the percussion. And then things came to a natural quiet space, and Gideon read the office for the dead, and then we filled the grave with shovels of dirt.

I have to say, I never felt so alive.

On our drive back, Gideon talked about the power of hope, with only hope to support it.

“We live by hope, against hope, clinging always to mere possibilities. We hope always, that something will happen, though there is no evidence that change will happen. We hope that life will be found in the darkest moments of our lives, to hope with little justification, to believe in all possibilities. We hope with only hope to support it…. That we will find food, that it will rain, that the crops will take, that the snakes will hide, that births will be alive, that apartheid will end, that justice will reign, that evil will be destroyed, and that the dead will come back to life.

“We live with hope against hope as ***the*** way to give our lives over to God. It’s what gives us joy, peace, power, and patience. We believe that reversals do happen and any chance we have to ask for reversals, we ask.

“It’s ***the*** way we practice our faith: A bleeding, dying man on a cross becomes our salvation; a barren woman and an old man, as immigrants give birth to a nation, a pregnant unmarried teenager ushers in the Word becoming Flesh. We take up our cross and find our way into Jesus’ loving embrace. We hope even though there is no reason to hope. And in this hope is life, freedom, and power of faith. It is our seat of joy. It’s the way we follow Jesus.”

And then Gideon gave me this look, almost one of sympathy, of my western sensibilities which clings to logic, reason, empirical evidence, and proof, as if I were missing a limb.

In this time of Lent, we are asked to pay attention and to look for signs of hope against hope.

I am so moved by the stories of African slaves which some of us are reading during these 40 days which come to us from the Black Heritage Trails of New Hampshire…. Of those who lived in our land and who persevered, despite the evils of slavery, to be beacons of strength and determination, hope against hope.

Last night, I received a call from Parnian, my Afghan adopted daughter who defied the horrors of the Taliban and got herself educated, despite all the odds against her, and now she is hoping to get pregnant, risking, exposing, trying, not knowing, but willing to live in all the uncertainty.

I am reminded this week, in the midst of so many pastoral calls I’ve made of all the ways so many hopes are being dashed, with slow recoveries, new worrisome diagnoses, of sudden falls, and yet by faith we cling to live with hope against hope, trusting in God’s will for our lives.

And maybe one of the most powerful experiences this week for me was to watch the teenagers of Parkland, Florida and across this land protest under the banner of “Never Again.” Hope against hope, they are crying out for protection against guns, that fear has no place in their schools. They are demanding the need for better laws, safer laws. Hope against hope, they are organizing, marching, getting into buses, speaking to politicians, picketing, holding vigils, challenging, fighting for their lives.

And also, another place we see hope against hope, is when politicians are willing to be present to these families, who are filled with rage and fear and raw feelings. I was moved to see the confrontations; they are so real, the tears, the anger, the stammering, the uncomfortable stances, the waiting, the not knowing if change can be possible. Politicians holding pain. Could there be a reversal?

Under the surface of hoping against hope, there is always the cross and our willingness to take it up and follow the Christ, to let go of the glory of earthly power and to walk the way with Jesus, not knowing where it may take us, yet to believe, to trust in God’s loving presence in our lives, to trust in our future which is always in God’s hands. AMEN