

Love Always Hopes

**1 Corinthians 13:7 and Genesis 22:1-8**

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A young and eligible bachelor decided one day to go on a Caribbean cruise. His intention was just to get away from the stress of his job and have some fun. The day came when he boarded the ship, found his state room and stored his luggage. Then he began to walk the decks just to see everything on board. As he ambled along he passed a striking young woman and for a moment their eyes met. He smiled. She smiled and the wheels began to turn in his mind. He 'decided he needed to try to meet this woman and introduce himself to her but alas for several days he was unable to find her in all the people on board. Finally one evening he spotted her seated in the dining room. He gave a large tip to the hostess to have her seat him right across from her. As he sat down he introduced himself, then she introduced herself. He screwed up his courage and said, "When I passed you on the first day on board, you smiled at me." "Yes," said she, "your face reminded me of my second husband." At this the bachelor felt his balloon pop and he began to look for what politicians call "an exit strategy." "How many times have you been married?" he asked in desperation. She said, "Only once." That is a story of hope being born!

Hope in the general sense of the word is the anticipation of future events and it is based on our human, subjective personal assumptions and judgments. In the Bible this kind of hope is called foolish. "When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing." (Pr 11:7) People base their hopes in a lot of things: the price of real estate; the power of money; technology; fallible human beings. And usually these hopes have a very short horizon and a very narrow application like the next few years of my life.

Hope in the Bible is fundamentally spiritual in nature. It is grounded in God. It is called forth by God and it is guaranteed by God. "You have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth." (Ps 71:5) Biblical hope always stretches us beyond the horizons of this world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom. It is about God redeeming creation itself in making a new heavens and a new earth were sorrow and

suffering and death itself are no more. Hope is the continual looking forward to the eternal kingdom of God.

This brings me to our text today from Genesis 22:1-8. To a beginner just reading the Bible for the first time this story isn't just weird, it's repulsive. It seems to be a story about God asking a man to abuse his own children. But that's a bit like watching the invasion of Normandy in 1944 and concluding that it's a bizarre form of target practice. Genesis 22 demands from us a much deeper reflection. For this is really a story about the complex interaction of faith, hope and love. It is a story that prepares us to hear and understand the message of the cross.

The key verse is 22:8, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." We can take this as an expression of hope. Abraham had no way to understand what God was asking him to do but he had hope that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Romans 8:28) "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed" that the good God who asked him to do this unthinkable thing would somehow bring it all to good success. The Bible says that "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." (Hebrews 11:19) The message here is captured in the song: God will make a way when there seems to be no way. Hope is rooted in God, not in human assessments, wisdom, or power.

The gospel writers had this story in mind as the best way to present the message of the cross. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The phrase that John uses "his only begotten son" is unusual until we realize it is the same phrase that God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 22:2 "Take your *only begotten son, Isaac...*"

Just as Abraham's offering of Isaac was the sign of his faith, hope and love for God, now in the gospel God offers his son on the cross as the great sign of his love for the world. This is our hope: God loves the world! Life will not end in darkness and sin. History will not close with a thermonuclear bang. God will bring all things together in his glorious kingdom of peace, justice and eternal life. God believes your life is worth living and so he has called you from despair to hope in Jesus Christ.

The life and death of Jesus Christ creates an entirely new and different situation for human life. In the risen Christ, the future is present. Some of you love to read those cheap

paperback mystery novels. But when you read them you always begin by reading the ending because you just can't stand the suspense. You can't stand not knowing. And once you know the end the story becomes an enjoyable pleasant experience for you. My point is this: In Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death, God has shown us the end of history. We have seen our destiny. Hope is the virtue that binds us to our destiny in Christ. Hope is fundamental to Christianity like it is in no other religion.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance that can never perish...” (1Pt 1:3-4) People who hope, believe and people who believe, love: faith-hope-love exist in relationship to one another.

I visited our really fine Houghton Lake Library this past week and I picked up a book on running by John Stanton. He has a chapter on how to train for and run a marathon. On race day he advises runners to warm up by going to the finish line and running the last mile before they run the race. This is to provide the vision and inspiration that will carry the runner through the first grueling twenty-five miles. God has not and will not take away the trials of our lives but he has shown us how we will end the race with Christ.

God invites his church to be a community of hope, a community of compassion, a community set in motion by the future God has all ready announced.

The practice of hope looks like a young woman whose life is filled with physical challenges yet she rises above them to be a spokesperson for United Way, to work with college students majoring in speech therapy, and to collect and donate teddy bears for children facing trauma. A community of hope is one that gathers around people with disabilities and gives them an opportunity to lead in service. A community of hope is one that in the face of life-threatening cancer helps the afflicted to work on their dreams. Happy Birthday to Sarah, and may God's richest blessing be upon you and your family for a joyful gathering in Tennessee!

A community of hope never curses the darkness but instead is always lighting candles. God will provide, that is not just something Abraham said, it is something we have seen in Jesus Christ. Love always hopes.