

Muriel Lipp: Circle of Hope

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Muriel Lipp

Circle of Hope

In our II Samuel scripture, David is on his deathbed. Looking back on his life, he affirms that God has spoken through him. That is a great assurance to have. I cannot say, standing up here, that what you are about to hear is God speaking through me, but I have prayed that it is – just as all of us who preach try to search out God's whisperings from our own ego-speak. It is a humbling thing to preach a sermon, as has been said by so many of us so many times.

We are at the end of our liturgical season of Thanksgiving. The theme this week is Hope. The N. T. Scriptures of John and Revelation have much to say about Jesus' death and resurrection. These are not happy readings if you look at them as the world might. Jesus' death hangs over those words in John. In Revelation, written supposedly during the reign of Domitian, Christians are being persecuted because they refuse to call Domitian God. It is a time of death and terror. It is a time of hopelessness in one sense, yet paradoxically, a time of Hope.

Hope is unlike Faith and Love where there is a sense of presence. Hope is about the future. Because of Hope, and the faith that must accompany it, these times of darkness are turned to light. In hopelessness, or lack of faith, there is no light.

The word Hope is used in four Church of the Saviour missions that I know of: Hope and a Home, which Kate Cudlipp and Sallie

Holmes and maybe others are part of; Seeds of Hope, a Seekers mission group composed of Peter Bankson, Richard Lawrence, and Pat Conover; the Academy of Hope, where Jean Adams tutors; and the recently completed Good Hope House of Bethany mission group. The word Hope seems to carry its own meaning in its sound.

During the recent hurricane, we all sat in darkness or in candlelight and hoped for the lights to be turned on. Similarly, during times of suffering, war and death, we also hope for light of a larger kind. Now is such a time for many people in our world—in not only Afghanistan and the Middle East, but in African countries where famine and AIDS kill so many people.

In Revelation there is much said about the destruction of evil and the triumph of good. We are so used to having wars in every generation. In the Scriptures alone there are so many killings, they almost become routine. Later there are the roaming tribes—Huns, Goths, Vandals, Allemands, and others. They rape and pillage their ways through Europe, while Mongol hordes keep Asia in fear and trembling. These times are appropriately called the Dark Ages. Then we have the Crusades and the Inquisition—these done in the name of Jesus, a pacifist. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Protestant Lutherans and Reformeds killed Mennonites and other Anabaptists; Puritans killed people they called witches, many of them Quakers.

This does not even touch Hitler's Holocaust, Stalin's purges or Pol Pot's exterminations. Is there a special sort of End Time we have not seen? Is there a kind of killing that would surprise us? Perhaps it could be worse.

Nevertheless, our theme for today is Hope – hope in the future. When I was a child, some families in my area of Pennsylvania had hope chests for their daughters. They would make doilies and coverlets in hope that these fineries could

be used when the girl grew up and married. The hope was that she would get married.

The Hope we are talking about today is much bigger than a hope chest. The poet Emily Dickinson comes closer:

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—...*

Hope should spring eternal in the human breast, as Alexander Pope says, if one is healthy. Today’s Scriptures are about a healthy sort of Hope, based on Jesus’ willingness to die for it and us, and they are about God’s being the beginning and the end. In John 18, Pilate questions Jesus about his authority: where did it come from? Jesus says, “My realm is not of this world... My task is to bear witness to the truth.” We know He gives His life for this truth. Think of all the Hope contained in the word truth. What kind of Hope must Jesus have had?

We Seekers need to pay attention to our use of words. Many of us are word people: writers, teachers, therapists, lawyers. Our tools are words. Nevertheless, we need always to remind ourselves, as Jesus told Pilate, that we are to bear witness to the truth—and that means a right use of words. Words are only symbols of something larger.

In our Revelation reading for this week, we have, “I am the Lord your God, who was and is and is to come... I am the Alpha and the Omega. How beautiful, but what does it mean? For me that Omega is what lies in glorious wait for us after death. Perhaps we all have different ideas of what that might be. How will God reveal Godself to us after we die? What is our Hope? Moreover, the Alpha, as I see it, is God’s presence with us in this life.

We do not have to wait until death to befriend God. That is what prayer is about, and there are a thousand different ways to pray. We in Seekers say it is important to have a daily set time, and I go along with that. Nevertheless, I think there are other times and methods of prayer throughout any given day. Moreover, I believe that sometimes God initiates them. For me synchronicity is a sign of God's presence – when things happen in a strange set of patterns – in daily life or especially in dreams. Then I am infused with energy. I name such coincidences God. How does God reveal herself to you?

Let me give you an example. The phone rang. It was a person who had asked me several times to read my children's book at her child's school. Coincidentally, she is a friend of Jean Adams, through whom our initial connection was made. She wondered if I would be a reading companion to kindergarteners who needed help. When I went to the initial meeting, above the front door of the school was a sign referring to Communities in Schools, and I thought of Peter, who works there. As I learned what I had to do to help these children, I thought of our youngest grandson who, with learning disabilities, is a reluctant reader. Although I was once a teacher, that was long ago, and I could now learn techniques being used today. All of these connections made me feel a yes-yes. Was it of God, and what could the children and I hope to get out of this? Hope, the thing with feathers. Some would say these are merely coincidences, meaning nothing. What are your ways of discerning God's presence?

Often, I think, we miss the nudging of God in our lives. I was moved by hearing that our peace group had met with the peace group in the Presbyterian Church near our Carroll St. church. Hope for the future. What does this portend? Those of you living near Carroll Street know more about such seeds of outreach than I do. Nevertheless, I sense an excitement among you about these. At first, I was blown away by the suggestion that we could serve coffee on the Metro platform as an

invitation to Takoma neighbors. However, the more I thought of it...Why not? It would be a kind of evangelism. Sometimes the initiative is from God—and sometimes from us. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference.

I like what Simone Weil, a French mystic, wrote in her notebook in 1942, “God establishes a conventional language with His friends. Every event in life is a word of this language... The meaning common to all these words is: I love you... God loves not as I love, but as an emerald is green.”

My favorite devotional book is *The Cloud of Unknowing* by an anonymous author of the 14th century. It a book you can all the way through, but it has choice thoughts in it that stay with you. First of all, the title. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is defined as what lies between God and us. We are advised to beat on that cloud “with darts of longing love.” To me, that beating is prayer. In addition, he or she says, “Intend God altogether.” Intend. Such intention, to me, is also prayer. About prayer, this person advises the use of one word of one syllable. It is from this book, from this advice, that Thomas Keating, in our generation, developed his method of prayer and wrote the book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*. You may have attended a Dayspring retreat with Father Arico on this.

Many of us practice the use of the one-word prayer. My one word is “God,” and I use it in a meditation as I walk by the river. On return, I beat on God’s ears with gratitude, intercessions and petitions. Rainy days, when I must sit still, are more difficult for me, as my legs and breathing cannot coordinate in the usual fashion. I never say Amen, as I hope—that word again—that God will stay with me throughout the day.

Jesus says to Pilate, “My realm is not of this world... My authority comes from elsewhere... My task is to bear witness to the truth.” How do we, who follow Jesus, bear witness to the truth when we are involved in a network of pain, war and

desecration? How can we bear witness when we are rich and powerful and much of the world hates us? Where is the Hope in this? In Revelation the writer (or God who speaks through him), says, "I hold the keys of death's domain." Hope. Sometimes that is all we have, and as Emily Dickinson says, it is a thing with feathers. It is not always solid. Sometimes, hope is just a wispy thing.

Next week we will celebrate Thanksgiving. Though we hope for peace, many in our world are still fighting and dying, and we are complicit. Nevertheless, though we feel diminished by this, I would like to close by repeating our beginning litany, even though we have said it before in this service. This, I think, is the right attitude with which to approach Thanksgiving:

Blessed is the earth from which we grow.

Blessed the life we are lent.

Blessed the ones who teach us.

Blessed the ones we teach.

Blessed is the word that cannot say the glory that shines through us and remains to shine flowing past distant suns on the way to forever. Blessed is light, blessed is darkness. Amen.