

Addiction & Hope

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Sermon

About twenty-five years ago, the band Widespread Panic released a song called *Hope in a Hopeless World*. The song is about how much we need hope if we're going to carry on when things seem hopeless. And too many things seem hopeless.

Addiction seems hopeless. When you're drowning at the bottom of a glass, the last thing you have is hope. Poverty seems hopeless. When you can't keep a roof over your family's head, the last thing you have is hope. Politics seems hopeless. When you can't find a way to speak truth to power, the last thing you have is hope.

But I have some news for you. In Jesus Christ, the first thing we have is hope. And it's a hope that will not disappoint us. Here's what I mean.

WHEN WE SAY THE LORD'S PRAYER, we pray, "Your name be hallowed." And that's not just a pious wish. No; it's a solid hope and a sure thing. Because every knee shall bow at the name of Jesus. And our knees already bow before him.

We pray, "Your kingdom come." And that's not just a pious wish. No; it's a solid hope and a sure thing. Because Jesus defeated the kingdoms of this world on the cross. And already he is our true and only King.

And we also pray, "Your will be done." And that's not a pious wish either. No; it, too, is a solid hope and a sure thing. Because "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" And already the Holy Spirit is making us new.

IN HIS *DIVINE COMEDY*, Dante places an inscription over the gates of hell. It says, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." But many people abandon all hope long before they reach the gates of hell. I'm sure many of those people are convinced that hope itself has abandoned them.

No doubt some of you inside members lost all hope before you entered prison. And if you were clinging to any scraps of hope, prison itself probably managed to tear those from your grip.

But I have some news for you. Jesus Christ knows your pain firsthand. On the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!" It was a cry of despair, a cry wrenched from our gentle Savior as he experienced the torments of hell, as he experienced the abandonment of hope.

WHERE IS THE GOOD NEWS IN THAT? It's right there, right there on the cross. This is how the Apostle Paul puts it: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

It's a complicated sentence. But notice how the Apostle places sin and righteousness at opposite poles. And let me say that there's a whole lot more to this than bad behavior on this side and good behavior on the other. There is more to sin than bad behavior. And there is more to righteousness than good behavior.

Sin is a desperate power. Sin is bent on destroying God's good work. Sin wants to reduce creation to chaos. We see that in politics; we see that in history. Sin wants to replace freedom with slavery. We see that in the deadly sins; we see that in addiction. And in its most audacious plot, sin wants to shackle the Lord of life and make him the prisoner of death. We see that on the cross.

WHEN WE SAY, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," we mean he gave him to be sin's prey. He gave him to be sin's victim. He gave him to be sin's victory.

But that victory was short-lived. That victory, sin's victory, it became sin's crushing defeat. Because God raised Jesus from death! So Jesus is the Lord of life now and forever. Everyone who is in Christ has died with him: the old has gone! And everyone who is in Christ has been raised with him: the new is here!

It's all about being with Jesus. With Jesus we die. With Jesus we live. And with Jesus we have become the righteousness of God. That's what the Apostle says.

AND LET ME REPEAT MYSELF. Righteousness is not about good behavior, not mostly. That's especially so when we're talking about God's righteousness. God's righteousness is God's saving work in the world. God's righteousness is:

- God calling Abraham and being loyal to him.
- God rescuing Israel again and again from its own foolishness.
- God preserving Daniel in the lions' den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire.

- God warning Joseph to take Mary and the baby Jesus to Egypt.
- God fulfilling the Law and the Prophets through Jesus.
- God not abandoning Jesus to the grave.
- God pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the church.
- God appointing apostles to a ministry of reconciliation.
- God gathering, protecting, and preserving for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.
- God continuing to shine the light of the Gospel into the darkest places.

AND THE APOSTLE SAYS we are the righteousness of God. That's because God's light has shined on us, shined on us and made everything new, shined on us to bring a new creation.

I've heard testimonies from inside members. You've told the rest of us about how God has been shining a light here in this church, here in the darkness of prison. You've told us how you came here without hope, maybe even without God. But you felt the music. And you heard the praise. And you welcomed the good news. And by amazing grace, you were reconciled to God!

That's why you're here as part of Celebration Fellowship. That's why all of us are here. We are living, breathing testimonies to the righteousness of God, to God's never-ending faithfulness to his plan and promises of love, love that saves the world by dying for the world and by living for the world.

And the light that shined on you, here in the darkness—that same light now shines from you, into the same darkness. It's the light of hope. It's the light of Gospel hope. And Gospel hope does not disappoint us!

FOR TOO MANY PEOPLE, people walking out on the prison yard, people cutting their grass in the suburbs, people trying to find a bed in homeless shelter—for too many people, addiction is a dead end; poverty is a dead end; politics is a dead end.

But Jesus is not a dead end. Because death was not the end of him! Jesus is not a dead end. Because he is the Lord of life!

Jesus is hope. Jesus is the hope that will never disappoint us. Jesus is the hope that will never leave us, never forsake us, even when all other hope is gone.

SOME YEARS AGO, A FRIEND, a brother in Christ, drank himself to death while he was on vacation. His alcohol addiction defeated him. It smothered any lingering hope he had. It covered him in darkness. It filled him with poison. And it made an end of him.

But even in his hopelessness, there still was hope, the hope that never fails us. And when he died, that brother was received into the light of the presence of Christ. Because Jesus lives. And because saving sinners, saving the broken, saving the lost, saving the poor, saving the homeless, saving the imprisoned, saving the abused, saving the addicted, saving the hopeless: that is the righteousness of God. And it gives us every reason to have hope, even in a hopeless world.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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