

“Ray of Hope”

By Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA, 12/1/19

I have shared with you all how I came to understand “hope” as a 19 year old, living in a small village in Northern Mexico called Colonia Esperanza. Initially I didn’t know what “esperanza” meant in Spanish. It was a gradual unfolding, first coming in the form of hearing the word “espera” over and over—which simply means “wait.” “Espera aqui” they would tell me, “Wait here.” Or “Esperame,” “wait for me.” And then it progressed to “espero que si,” which took much longer to figure out—but it transliterates into English as “I hope so” while it literally means “I wait that yes.” From there I began to understand the deeper meaning of “Esperanza,” the name of my newly adopted home, which translates as “The waiting” but transliterates as “Hope.” Within the depth of the word I began to understand, hope involves waiting. Waiting for things not yet seen, i.e. faith. The writer of Hebrews knew this well when they wrote to first century Christians, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). Hope is a Germanic word in our English that seems to wrap into it the principles of *waiting* and then ultimately *faith*. This can be seen by its other derivative: *Hop*, meaning to leap with expectation. Hope is an active word in English. In the Koine Greek, from which we extract the spiritual word in the Christian writings we find the word “ἐλπίς” (Elpis), and is interchangeable with our English words for hope, trust, expectation, confidence. Regardless of language, the principle is assured, it is expectant and full of faith that things will conclude positively.

We are a people full of hope. We seem to always hope for the best, and we use the expression of such in an almost instinctive manner at every turn, don’t we? –*I hope so; hope springs eternal; hope for the best, prepare for the worst; glimmer of hope; hope against all hope; hold out hope; dashed hopes; cross my heart and hope to die; don’t get their hopes up.* But my favorite is the imagery projected with the expression, “a ray of hope.” That is today’s sermon title: A Ray of Hope. I am magnetized to it because of how it incorporates the idea of light breaking through clouds and reaching a destination with hopefulness. Faith encapsulated in that beautiful cascading ray of light, shining on its object, creating a sense of destiny, a sense of purpose, a sense of calm, gentle, self-resolve. A feeling of “everything’s going to be okay.” We have discussed in previous sermons the properties of Light, and its significance in our spiritual culture. We have also discussed the purpose of metaphorical Light in our own lives and how we can help others, illuminating hope is a key component. People lose faith. All around us, they find their presuppositions about life shattered by a new reality of obstacles, twists and turns. In their hopelessness, though... in their despair, we must be present with words of encouragement, words of hope. Why? Because we walk in the Light of our Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said nearly 2500 years ago (Isaiah 2:5). Some 500 years later as recorded in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said, “If they ask you, ‘Where did you come from?’ say to them, ‘We came from the Light, the place where the Light came into being of Its own accord and established Itself and became manifest through our image.’” I love this passage because it reminds us again of Jesus as a Jew and not a Christian. Jesus was not a Christian, and as a Jew

schooled in Jewish teachings Jesus knew intimately the idea of *Tikkun Olam*, God repairing the world, drawing the broken shards back to itself, becoming a potter's vase together, whole, united again, like puzzle pieces finding their place to create a picture again—but this picture is of Light itself. For Jesus told the people in the Gospel of Matthew: "*You are the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14-16).

What does it mean to be the children of Light, to walk in the Light, to be the Light itself? In I John, the writer says, "God is Light." And he goes on to say "If we walk in the light, as God is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another" (I John 1:5-7). There is something largely unique about walking in Light and being Light, it requires us to interact with one another in a most intimate and conscious way. We must love one another.

As we read earlier today in John 15, Jesus said, "*Remain in my love... bear much fruit, fruit that will last... This is my command: Love each other.*" The ray of light you can bring to another can be a matter of life and death for some. Many are in personal despair. They need the love we can show them, a true authentic love. Some of you may be in a personal battle for hope at the moment, in the throes of life, hanging on by a thread and maybe you need to feel God's hope deeply in your core, God's Light, God's love. I believe Love and Light are interchangeable as we draw on the metaphor more deeply. We walk together in love because God is Love. We want to see both the human and the Divine in one another, recognize our value—like in the ancient Vedantic understanding of "*tat twam asi*" (in the Sanskrit) or in the English, "*That thou art.*" This is the idea of accepting all of you in absolute unity. Not a demon on your left shoulder and an angel on your right, but simply put, accepting all of who you are—the great, the good, the less good and nothing thinking of them in black-and-white terms (good and bad dichotomies), but instead all inclusive, critical parts of who we are. We must accept ourselves, period.

Can we change our perspective? Sure, but I prefer to use the word, "enhance." Let us enhance our perspectives to incorporate, value and using Genevieve's word "validate" the perspective of others, including that of the Ancients. As many of you know, I love language. As an applied linguist, I have always had a great curiosity and admiration for the meanings found within languages themselves and how language is more than just mere surface communication, but often involves the very essence of culture, its beliefs and formed perspectives throughout its history. When visiting the Community Access Network at 5th Federal two weeks ago, I saw a National Geographic Magazine in the waiting area. I hadn't picked up a National Geographic in years, and call it a moment of nostalgia, but I was elated to hold it in my hands—and I was even more excited about the article featured on the cover, an article about surveying the languages of the world—especially those at risk of becoming extinct and why that was important to the human race. I was immediately drawn to one particular language that was at risk of dying. It is the Tuvan language, spoken by a group of people on the border between Russia and China. It's at risk because the newer generations are choosing more and more to speak both Russian and Mandarin Chinese over their native language of Tuvan. Many might think, why is that important? It is the evolution of human world to prefer communication to the masses than to retain smaller seemingly less

important modes of communication. As the article so well postulated, it is important to retain these native languages—these heart languages—because within them is the very essence of who they are and how they see the world. To lose the language is to perhaps kill their culture. One example was particularly striking. To say “the future” in Tuvan is the word “songgaar” which literally means “to go back.” To say “the past” in Tuvan is the word “burungaar,” which literally means “to go forward.” Some of you may be asking, how does that work? Well it works with the idea of a clear view. You can clearly see what has happened in the past, but you cannot see what has yet to happen. Therefore, you face head-on your past with an unobstructed view, but the future, which you cannot see, is to your back. In this way, you are walking backwards through life. It makes sense, right? While it is logical, many of us have never thought of it before. And if the Tuvan language were extinct, such logic may find itself extinct as well. Our language and within it our philosophy of life, commands us to look forward, and often not backward at all. We are a culture of faith-like expectation, of blind hope. We value it and admire it in others. We use such imagery in our language with one another. “I look forward to it.” But the Tuvan understand hope in a different way. While hope is not seen in the future, much like we believe, they are clearly gazing at their past as they back up into their hopeful future. This resonates well with the concept of accepting ourselves, even our past, as we back up into a hopeful future together. May we “sonnggaar” together, arm in arm as we thank God this Advent season for sending us Jesus, the Christ who taught us to be the Light together. Let us be a Ray of Hope to all we see and all we touch. Let us shine brightly and lovingly!

Shalom