

“Where is my hope?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant 12/2/18

It was about a year ago that I shared a bit of my own personal story, talking about how as a nineteen year old college student, I felt a call to leave my native Oklahoma and travel to the country to our south, without knowing the language or culture; but having just come out of a bad breakup, I was distraught and felt desperate for any sliver of meaning in life –like most teenagers in similar situations. However, in my case, a Mexican friend of mine was kind enough to take me; he made arrangements for me to stay with someone, took me there and then ultimately left me in the small town La Colonia Esperanza, El Valle de Juarez, Distrito Bravo, Chihuahua, Mexico. The small village of only a couple hundred people at most was known commonly as Colonia (Colony) but its full title was “Colonia Esperanza” (Colony of Hope). I didn’t even know what this word meant when I first arrived. I couldn’t even pronounce it. However, as time went on, I would learn its meaning, and on such a deep level. “Esperanza” comes from the word “esperar” which can mean “to wait”, “to wait for”, or “to hope for”. Can you imagine a concept of “waiting” and “hoping” so interconnected in a culture—because in English we like to distinguish them. In fact many would define in English the concept of “hope” as “to desire” or even “to dream”. But no, in Spanish, and other Latin languages, the word carries a bit of a different connotation. Within its etymology is firmly planted the idea of desire, yes, but also anticipation and better yet, expectation, all intertwined with one another. So in Spanish when we say, “I am waiting for you here,” we say “te espero aqui,” which could also mean “I hope for you here.” When we say “I expect it,” in Spanish we can say “lo espero.” To say “I hope so” in Spanish, we say “espero que si.” In each case, we use the word “esperar”. It is from this word that we get the word “hope” –“esperanza”. It is clear from the word itself, that patience is required. Even in the Hebrew concept of hope, “waiting” is understood to be a part of it. In Lamentations 3, the author outlines the beauty of “hope”, and God’s faithfulness, but its result is self-assurance in the personal resolve that “The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.” Waiting is simply part of the recipe, and hope is not impatient. In fact, it is born out of suffering **through** something, and somehow finding endurance in the ordeal.

Ruth and I were watching the Netflix series “The Evolution of Us” recently, that shares research about our human anatomy. It talked about how most often we think of our dexterity of the hand and its digits as our greatest evolutionary gift to help us hunt, but in actuality it was the fact that our bodies are designed to run long distances that made us top predators. Our two legs and ability to sweat, keeping us cool for hours, gave us the advantage. Though we are not the fastest mammals, we can run the longest distances. In fact, we can out run anything on earth, which means any prey we hunt we will eventually overtake; they will run out of steam long before we do. I turned to my wife and said, that explains why so many people like to run in this area—they are just doing what their body is telling them to do: Run. Ruth rolled her eyes, sighed, and looked at me with that look that told me I was definitely in the dog-house, and asked, “So, what are you trying to say?” –thinking I was criticizing her for not running more, especially when the series highlighted the Tauramara Indians from Chihuahua, Mexico-- the genetic cousins to my wife’s people. Needless to say, after a long night of “discussion”, we are both committing to do more running this year.

The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5 that “we know that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” There most definitely seems to be a chain reaction when it comes to arriving to any semblance of hope. There most definitely seems to be a journey before

arriving to the destination; though, I believe many of us would prefer it to simply be instantaneous. But even as our biology tells us, we must be patient and methodical in order to endure the race—and experience tells us, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. Even the Chinese philosopher Laozi illuminated the struggle for patience more than 2500 years ago when he said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

It was, again, about a year ago that I shared how living in Mexico changed the course of my life, crafted for me a new lens through which to see the world, and in many ways transformed my very essence. Suffering alongside people who had no indoor plumbing, no easy means of employment, who had to pay for their kids' schooling but no money with which to pay, and working with them in the cotton fields, seeing little pay for such hard work, and then suffering "real" hunger pains alongside them, not knowing where our next meal would come from. Being handed the last bowl of beans in a home, while they themselves refused to eat, simply because I was their guest. I was seeing systemic suffering on a level I had never experienced before—an entire community cycling through periods of undernourishment and desperation. However, they seemed to always remain hopeful. They would fight to survive by not giving up—by persevering.

This would not be the only time I would see such "hopefulness" up close. While living in Kuwait, we became close friends with several groups of people who were working with NGO's, non government humanitarian organizations, focused on helping those suffering in war-torn Iraq, which was only 20 miles down the road from our apartment door. A person who became like a brother to me, who even had a permanent room of his own in our home, was a Sudanese Nubian by the name of Eisa. Eisa, a proud African, who was fluent in Arabic had worked for several organizations providing humanitarian relief to mainly the most marginalized people of Southern Iraq—in the poorest areas. He had been working in Iraq already for nearly two years when he was kidnapped in a village where he had been working to build a well to provide fresh drinking water. At the time, it was not uncommon in the absence of a centralized government to see rogue robbers and thieves taking advantage of foreigners, and even some go to the extreme of kidnapping them for a ransom. However, when it happened to our close friend, it was almost unbearable. We were devastated at the news and grabbed as many people as we could to pray for Eisa's safe return to us. We knew the organization he worked for most likely did not have the funds to pay any ransom. What were we going to do? Two days passed and we were sick to our stomachs, fearing the worst, but trying to keep hope alive.

That's what hope is, right? Paul said in our suffering we find perseverance, and from perseverance comes character. In those moments, we were vacillating between our characters, I would say. One part of our character rested in God's help, God's grace, God's intervention. On the other side, our character would occasionally, in those most private of moments, succumb to fear. Isn't that how we all are? We struggle to stay centered, to stay balanced, to stay the course—and find ourselves dipping into doubt, depression, impatience. However, despite the clouds of fear, I was reminded by Eisa's very name. It is the Arabic version of the same name as Isaiah, which is also Asa, which can also be pronounced Esh-iah, or Yeshua, or better yet "Jesus". It's meaning, a simple one: God saves. I kept repeating it to myself when doubt would come: "God saves. God saves." Fortunately, Eisa was released after the second day. His captors had grown to love him. They finally realized after chaining him to a tree for two days, and hearing his incessantly loving discourse on why we need to love one another and help one another in this world, they grew fond of him, and ultimately let him go without ransom. God saved Eisa. And I think God saved his captors that day. Eisa continued to work, still, in that very community until fresh water

was accessible to everyone. Now that is perseverance shaping character, and providing hope. Hope is believing that things will resolve themselves. That there is a greater, higher purpose to all that we do. So, don't give up. No matter the suffering, persevere in hope. Be filled with hope. Don't be impatient, instead, be hopeful and bide your time with love and expectation. "Te lo espero" or "I expect it of you" or "I wait for it in you" or better yet, "I hope it for you".

Peace. Shalom.