

9.11.05

The Breath of Hope

Psalm 143:1-11, Psalm 142:1-7, Ezekiel 37:1-14

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9/11. Can it really be four years since that bright and beautiful Tuesday September morning was shattered by images too horrifying, shocking, or sad to ever be erased from memory? Today we find ourselves on another September 11 facing a new national crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this one directly impacting a far greater area of our nation and disrupting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who have lost loved ones, homes, places to work, and much of their possessions. Unlike four years ago, we are also engaged in war in Iraq and Afghanistan as well. On a smaller scale many in our church are dealing with the death of loved ones, divorce, unemployment, health or financial troubles, family problems or difficulty with a family member who is struggling with addiction. There is a sense of despair, despondency, and disappointment among many people.

The article on the front page of yesterday's Cape Cod Times about the new Camp Edwards residents was titled, "Out of 'Hell', In Need of Hope." Hope is one of life's necessities. There is a saying that *"A person can live for three days without food, three minutes without oxygen, but only three seconds without hope."* One of the worst things you can say to a person is that he or she is "hopeless." No one should ever tell a child he or she is hopeless. To do so is to say that there is no chance of the child changing or growing. Nor should we tell people that their circumstances are hopeless. In Charles Dicken's classic, A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge laments to the final Spirit who visits him and reveals his impending, unmourned death, *"Why show me these things if I am past all hope?"*

There are many circumstances that can cause a person to lose hope. Hope can be squeezed out of us by the impact of catastrophic events such as a hurricane, tsunami, or a war that destroys one's home and possessions, eliminates the opportunity to work at one's job, undermines one's faith and results in the death of family and friends. This is not only the condition of the Katrina survivors; it is the condition of the people of Israel to whom the Prophet Ezekiel is speaking in Ezekiel 37. Their nation had been conquered, almost everything lay in ruins - the capital city Jerusalem, the beautiful temple that Solomon had built which was the center of their faith, and many towns. Thousands were dead. The whole social fabric of the nation was torn to shreds. People had lost all hope.

In the midst of that situation, God gives Ezekiel a vision of restoration, renewal, and rebirth that is only possible by the moving of God's Spirit in and through the people. In Hebrew, the word "ruah" means "spirit, breath, and wind" so there is a constant word play in Ezekiel 37:1-14 that emphasizes God breathing and bringing hope into a situation where all hope seems lost. These words are very appropriate for us today.

READ EZEKIEL 37:1-14.

In midst of all the heartache we've been seeing, one positive and fun thing also begins this week that millions of Americans enjoy – the beginning of the football season, which started on Thursday the same way it ended, with a win by the New England Patriots. Tomorrow night begins the final season of Monday Night Football on ABC, which began back when I was in elementary school. In the early days of MNF, when Howard Cosell, Frank Gifford, and Don Meredith were the announcers, when a game was finally decided, Don Meredith would always sing the same song. *"Turn out the lights, the party's over, they say all good things must end."* Ezekiel says, the people of Israel had sung this song and turned out the lights and given up all hope. Their cry, *"Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely,"* is the plaintive lament of a defeated people. But God promises to bring them back to their own land and to restore to life what was apparently dead and hopeless. How is this possible? The Lord says, *"I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live."* God's promise of renewal through the power of the Holy Spirit is a gift to God's people. If we the wind of the Spirit breathes life into us, we can experience renewal and revival.

There is a world of difference between "No Hope" and "Know Hope."

Proverbs 13:12 says, *"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."* In Jeremiah 14 the people were facing the terrible consequences of drought, famine, and war all at the same time, and the prophet cries out (Jeremiah 14:8-9a),

*"You who are **the hope of Israel, its Savior in times of distress**, why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who stays only a night? Why are you like a warrior powerless to save?"* Sometimes people feel that way, that God who is our Hope and Savior seems at times as distant as a stranger, as transient as an overnight guest, as weak as a warrior who can't fight his way out of a wet paper bag. Circumstances like the attacks of four years ago, the devastation of recent days due to the storm or due to war can cause people to feel forsaken by God and that there is **no hope**. People can lose confidence and trust in God's power or God's goodness.

“Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.” Erik H. Erikson

Terrible events can also be the means by which people’s relationship with God deepens and grows. We can know hope in the midst of our trials. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word that is most frequently translated as “Hope” is also translated as two other words, “Wait” and “Trust.”

Hope is as intermingled with Waiting and Trusting as sugar, salt, and flour are in chocolate chip cookies. You really can’t separate them once the cookies are made. **Hoping, waiting, and trusting are all ingredients of faith.**

“Many things are possible for the person who has hope. Even more is possible for the person who has faith. And still more is possible for the person who knows how to love. But everything is possible for the person who practices all three virtues.” Brother Lawrence

What can we do now? I know people are anxious to know of ways they can help and want to know how the church is planning to respond. One of the most important things we are looking to do is to partner with a church or churches in a community in Mississippi or Louisiana to help them rebuild. I hope to be able to share more about that by next Sunday. We certainly will be having work groups go down south in the not too distant future.

I helped organize a meeting on Thursday that was attended by more than 40 leaders from faith communities across the Cape and on the other side of the bridge to talk about how we can work together to help with the needs at the base and in the Gulf Coast. My hunch is that there are going to be more than enough resources and materials at the base, where supplies, money, and physical on site help is going to be needed is down south.

Our web master Michael Kemp has begun a link on our church web site that will connect people with other organizations and groups so that we can get information out and coordinate efforts. Please use that as a resource for updates.

Tonight I will be attending a meeting at the base with a couple of other pastors and I’m not quite sure who else to talk about and organize the response to the spiritual needs of the Katrina survivors.

In terms of what else individuals can do, according to yesterday’s newspaper, **The Salvation Army** is collecting new - not used – clothes for men, women, and

children including underwear and socks, as well as nonperishable food items and bottled water. Toiletries, diapers, and baby wipes. These can be brought to the to the Salvation Army on North St. in Hyannis. I suspect they may be overwhelmed by the response, but whatever is not needed here I trust will end up where it will be helpful.

The **Housing Assistance Corporation**, which is supervising the daily operation of the Camp Edwards shelter, is looking for volunteers to help on the base and I believe will be looking for people to donate space in their homes. If you have space in your home or a home that someone could use for a number of months, perhaps you could leave your contact information in the church office or call and give it.

www.ShareYourHome.org, the organization I mentioned last week is doing a terrific job. I'd like to share some of what they wrote in an email that people received who had offered to share their home.

Dear Generous Soul,

We here at Share Your Home have been overwhelmed by the response we have received from across the nation. The sheer number of offers is amazing, not to mention what you all are offering. We have received offers of homes, apartments, jobs, cars, cell phones, etc. There are a lot of good opportunities that the Nation has offered the people displaced. Let me briefly describe to the mind set of most of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Most, as you can imagine, are in shock. No lifelong American can understand what has happened to these people and we need to be patient to allow them to catch their breath. Although it has been over a week since the Katrina hit the reality of the situation is just starting to set in. I tell you all of this to ask you to be patient with us as we place a family in your home. We have a the tough job of **convincing many to leave the place where they were born and raised** to start a new life somewhere else. Even if it is temporary it is still long enough to make everyone think long and hard before making the move.

While many victims of Katrina have accepted our offer to travel across country many are still deciding. Let's be clear, there has never been an effort like this on in our Nation's history. **This is unprecedented!**

We have one urgent need! As many of you know, we have two call centers in operation in an attempt to reach more people that do not have internet access. This phone center has processed thousands and thousands of housing requests and housing offers. We

need to keep these phone centers operational to continue helping the hurricane victims. This organization, up until this point, has been funded by the founders of this organization, and our income too has been affected by the hurricane. If you or someone you know can donate to our cause it would be most appreciated.

We know many are suffering in cars, shelters, etc and we want to help them as soon as possible.

Thanks for your generosity!

Sincerely,

Gary Brown, Vice President Share Your Home

Last week, we received \$11,000 to help those in need. I am going to suggest that we send www.shareyourhome.org a check \$500 from those funds to assist their efforts in helping people know hope where they thought there was none. We will be using the funds we receive to assist the churches we partner with and for supplies and other needed items.

Dale Carnegie observed,
“Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all.”

My mentor in seminary liked to say, *“I used to think hope was the icing on the cake, I’ve lived long enough to learn hope is the cake.”*

I want to encourage you to be someone who lets God breathe into you the breath of hope. Take it in deeply, know hope and be the face of hope. Hope is powerful, but it needs a human face, not just for those impacted by a hurricane, but for everybody, because all of us can have our hope eroded by the winds and waves of everyday life.

As we consider how we can act to help others, it is perhaps wise to remember that this isn’t an “us/them” issue. Yes, “they” are the survivors and have gone through something we cannot begin to imagine. Yet, it is also a time to focus more on what unites us as people rather than on what separates or divides us. Almost anyone can tell you their personal stories of feeling hopeless... some have had more severe experiences than others, but that sense of, “It is never going to be okay again,” many of us have felt that. For us, them, or anyone facing circumstances where we think there is **no hope, we can know hope through God**... so that is what we have in common. We have an opportunity to be salt and light for those in the depths of darkness. But it isn’t like we are great or special and “they” are not. We are all human and have a need to be

loved and to love, to have hope when life seems hopeless. As someone wrote (*Allan K. Chalmers*),

“The Grand essentials of happiness are: something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.”

One month ago I preached about how Jesus says we are the salt of the earth. I shared how Jesus says we are to add flavor, zest, and life, preserving and passing on Jesus’ teaching, purifying corruption and decay, and providing traction to people who are slipping and falling in life. Well there is a significant opportunity and responsibility for us to respond both locally to the guests now staying at Camp Edwards and even more to the devastated Gulf Coast region where all these salty functions are needed. As you leave the service, the Welcomers will be giving you a packet of salt for you to carry around for a little while to remind you of what we can do as God’s people to bring and share hope.

What is hope? The great American poet Emily Dickinson wrote,

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

When we feel we have **no hope**, that is the time to **know hope in the Lord**. One of my favorite songs by gospel singer Larnelle Harris and the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir says, *“I’m glad that my hope is in the Lord, for he gives me confidence that the world doesn’t know, he’s the Lord of all creation, and whatever the situation, I’m glad that my hope’s in the Lord.”* It is far better to hope, wait, and trust in the Lord than in anyone or anything else because everything else can disappear or change in a moment.

So it is good to remember what the Sovereign Lord says to people who feel their bones are dried up, their bodies weak and weary, their hope gone, cut off from what anchored them in life, *“**I will put my Spirit** in you and you will live, and **I will settle** you in your own land. Then you will know that **I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.**”*

Prayer: Psalm 33:18-22, *“The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We **wait in hope** for the Lord; he is our help and shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we*

trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you.

Blessing: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

*“In all things it is better to hope than to despair.”
Goethe*

*“If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all. And so today I still have a dream.”
Martin Luther King, JR.*