

A sermon delivered by
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The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, August 12, 2007
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

[Genesis 15:1-6](#)

[Hebrews 11:1-3\(4-7\)8-16](#)

[Luke 12:32-40](#)

[Psalm 33 or 33:12-15, 18-22](#)

The text of this sermon is only partially presented here as some of the sermon was delivered extemporaneously.

Pandora's Box

Pandora was the first mortal woman created by Zeus, according to Greek mythology. She was given gifts from all the gods. The gift she received from Zeus – the most significant one – was a jar containing all human blessings and curses. She was warned not to open the jar, but curiosity got the best of her. Before she knew it, all the blessings and curses had escaped into the world except one: hope. Without hope, mortals could not endure.

Hope Defined

Jerome Groupman in [The Anatomy of Hope](#) defines hope as:

“...the elevating feeling we experience when we see, in the mind's eye, a path to a better future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion. Clear eyed, hope gives us courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them.”

Simply put, hope is the vision of a new reality. I like Groupman's definition of hope because it sounds precisely like the quality Abram (Abraham's name before God renamed him) exhibited through out his journey with God.

Abraham was a nomad, meaning he had no land of his own; and he had a barren wife, meaning he had no offspring and no possibility for any (other than with a slave). Then he received a word from God that he would have a new reality: he would possess a land and he would be the father of many nations. His first response, of course, was to not believe it. But God made some persuasive arguments and Abraham finally put his trust in God's promise.

Abraham now has hope; he now has a vision of a new reality. He doesn't have evidence that it exists, but he has an assurance in his heart. And he is not just being optimistic.

There is a difference between optimism and hope. Optimism, again according to Groupman, is "a prevailing attitude that things will turn out for the best." Abraham has something more firm. He has hope, which as Groupman defined earlier, "gives us courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them" because we know life can be better than this.

It is commonly understood that hope is an important part of the physical healing process. Hope – or a vision of a new reality – has the ability to alter one's neurochemistry. "Belief and expectation, the key elements of hope, can block pain by releasing the brain's endorphins and enkephalins mimicking the effects of morphine."¹ This has a domino effect that relieves pain and anxiety, and aids the body in its natural healing processes.

There are at least two types of hope: intermediate and ultimate.² Intermediate hope is a potentially attainable goal that is vulnerable to any number of things. In my work as a chaplain with cancer patients it is common for a patient to set a short-term goal in order to keep hoping. For example, a woman may say she is holding on to see her first grandchild born before she dies. That is intermediate hope. Ultimate hope is overarching and independent of whatever happens in the moment. An example is the person suffering from a terminal illness that says, "Even if I die from this, I will go to heaven." Ultimate hope points beyond the here-and-now.

This is not an either/or situation. We may vacillate between intermediate and ultimate hope throughout the course of our particular circumstances. We see this in Abraham's life. He did have intermediate hope to see his offspring born of Sarah, i.e., Isaac, before he died. When God called him to sacrifice Isaac he retained his ultimate hope that God would keep his promise to make him the father of many nations, although he believed he was about to offer Isaac's life to God on the altar. Fortunately, God provided another sacrifice and he did not have to follow through, and Isaac lived.

NEW REALITY

Hope is a vision of a new reality. What new reality are you looking towards? Central to our faith is Abraham's vision. We know it came to pass. Each of us baptized Christians is the spiritual offspring of Abraham. One could say that each of us represents one of those numerous stars that God had Abraham look to when he made the promise.

Also central to our faith is the new reality of God's kingdom. Here the words that Christ our Savior taught us to pray:

¹ Cf. Jerome Groupman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness*. New York: Random House, 2005. The material I drew from came from the introduction of the book. Since I listened to the audio version of the book, however, I am unable to provide page numbers.

² Larry VandeCreek and Art Lucas. [*The Discipline for Pastoral Care Giving: Foundations for Outcome Oriented Chaplaincy*](#). Binghamton: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001.

“...thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.”

The new reality of the kingdom of God is that earth will look like heaven. It is a vision of God’s reign of peace, compassion, mercy, justice, and love right here on earth.

In the Gospel lesson we heard Jesus reassure his disciples that it is God’s good pleasure to give us the kingdom. We are exhorted to change our priorities in order to make this world look more like heaven. The location of our treasure – or our priorities – is brought under scrutiny. Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The call of God for us today is to examine our treasure, to look deeply at what motivates and drives our lives; to evaluate our priorities.

Let us work to make our central priority God’s new reality for the poor, the uninsured, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, and the broken-hearted. What can we as a church do to bring about a new reality? What can you as an individual do to see God’s kingdom on earth?

As one philosopher advised, "...remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for."³

³ Epicurus (341 BC - 270 BC)