

Offerings, A Web and Cords of Hope

I Chronicles 29:13-15, Psalm 39:7

November 7, 2021 Stewardship sermon

Sermon preached by Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

“But now, God, for what do I wait? My hope is in you.” Psalm 39:7

Churches invite the congregation to bring an offering during worship services. We used to pass the offering plates. Not anymore. Basket at the back of the sanctuary. Or you can give online, or use the QR code. Or give by check or cash. There are different ways of giving. Let's ask the why do we give? Why have people brought offerings in the past? Look to a story from book of I Chronicles.

In the book of I Chronicles 29, David calls the people together to lift up his son Solomon to be the next King, and he calls people to give so Solomon can finally build a house for God.

Here, in response to a huge free will offering of bulls, lambs, and rams, David says,

“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill-offering? For all things come from you, God, and of your own have we given you. For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. O Sovereign our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.” I Chronicles 29:13-15

One of my favorite preachers, Rev. Marci Glass, preached on this story recently. (1) God is the source of all power, as well as the source of all wealth. David makes clear that we are entirely dependent upon God. They recently returned from exile. By rebuilding the Temple, they weren't doing God any favor, as though God needed their worship or their labor. Though God doesn't need anything from us, we give and we labor to show our love to God. All of our lives are gifts to God in thanks and in response to the gifts from God.

David is reminding the people that their hope cannot be in just themselves. He says “there is not hope.” He is reminding them that their hope has to be in God. Human schemes fail and come to an end. God's work endures and brings life.

The huge offering of bulls, lambs, and rams is extravagant, sacrificial, and costly, but is also joyful, and not a day of deprivation. It is a reminder that since everything they have is from God in the first place, it is joyful and hopeful to give back to God. God has provided in the past. God is providing even now, as they return from exile, and God will provide in the future they haven't seen yet.

“Our days are like a shadow and there is no hope.” That line of David haunts me, a little.

I think we're in a bit of a hope crisis in our culture right now. I've heard people say they are giving up hope, or that they can't see anything that makes them hopeful. I hear it when people say the problems of the world are too big and nothing ever changes, so why would I get involved and do anything? Have you noticed it?

It makes sense, in some ways. We're exhausted after 20 months of a global pandemic, tacked on to a longer period of political gerrymandering which has led to division, and makes us feel our voice isn't being heard by elected leaders (because it often is not being heard by our elected leaders). And we still haven't addressed chronic issues of gun violence, access to health care, and racism. Then add to that human effects on our planet and our climate, leading to changes in weather patterns, health patterns, etc.

When I say it all at once, it makes me want to take a nap! The problems of the world feel overwhelming. The Hebrew people, our ancestors in faith, knew despair too.

I like that David is the leader we're given, even with his many faults. Because we're reminded we can't wait for a perfect person to show up and fix things. There are no flawless people. There's just us.

God isn't waiting for us to be perfect before we get to it. God knows who we are, loves us through it, and puts us to work rebuilding the world, rebuilding temples – places and opportunities to draw close to the Holy One.

Friends, despair makes sense. It is easy to be buried under the pain of the world, and our worries about an unknown future. But as people of faith, people who follow the ways of Jesus, we aren't in the despair business. We're in the hope business.

I'm not talking about pollyanna, pie in the sky, false optimism that pretends things are fine when they aren't. To be people of faith is to be our imperfect human selves, and to join with other imperfect humans to practice what we'd like the world to be like. That's the hope business. To recognize that human schemes fail and will come to an end. God's work endures and gives life.

Why are we here? I mean that both in terms of today—why are you worshiping in the building or online? There are other things we could be doing today, like brunch, or sleeping in—two things I love to do. Why are you here, now, this morning? And I also mean it in the bigger sense—why did our ancestors in faith build a church on this corner – old stone church and this newer sanctuary? Why did they choose to be a church here in downtown San Rafael?

Why are we here? We're here for community, to recognize our human experience in the lives of others, and to find support for our lives through the love of others. We're here to worship, to offer praise and prayer and thanks to God in spoken liturgy, in sublime music, in

majestic beauty, and in silence. We're here to see and love and serve our neighbors. We're here to see if we can find hope because we're exhausted by the despair of the world.

Each of us can do little things and can make a difference in the world. And we should do that. I've seen you do that. We're called to keep doing that.

And there are things that all of us, together, can do to amplify hope to a world lost in despair. This is Stewardship season and we are asked to reflect and pray about our financial commitment, our pledges for the upcoming budget year, and like the people who brought their gifts to build the temple, the gifts we give are joyful claims of hope—reminders to the world that God is still active and working in our world for good.

Jeffrey and I are increasing our pledge this year, as a joyful act of faith, a reminder that together we can use this beautiful building we've inherited to worship and be renewed so we can go out into the world and amplify hope.

The church is like a web of hope. Remember that sermon I preached last month on science and faith? Quantum Physics. I learned about how this new model says reality is like a web, we are all interconnected in a luminous web. Yes, let's be a church of the luminous web of hope with Divine Mystery weaving us together.

The church is like a rope of hope. Why would I say that? Because of Hebrew words for hope. *Qahvah* קוּוָה – It is the root word in both Psalm 39 and I Chronicles. A word that means “to bind together by twisting threads into a cord or rope, to expect, to gather together, to wait for, expectantly.” We are a people who take our ordinary threads and twist them together into a strong cord, a strong rope, of hope.

The church is a place of hope and unity in the midst of diversity. Paul calls the church in Rome to live in unity, despite their differences and their challenges. Whether Jew or Gentile, Republican or Democrat, Giants or Dodgers fans—whatever might separate us, taking us away from community, taking us away from worshipping God together—we are called to join together to hope. Paul's words in Romans 15: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Hope is our common language that transcends our divides.

I along with the Session and Stewardship team all pray you can give joyfully and generously, abounding in hope for our future, even if we can't quite see it yet. I feel so fortunate to have been called here to work alongside you. I look forward to what we can do, to what God is even now dreaming for us. Amen. And now, invite you to enjoy a special video.

1) Rev. Marci Glass, “Abounding in Hope,” 10/31/21

<https://marciglass.com/2021/11/01/abounding-in-hope/>