

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

Psalm 30

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Dan Allender and his son were on a mountain lake in Montana fishing. For three consecutive days, they had been going out at 10 in the morning and fishing until about 3 in the afternoon. They had fished for three days. And all three days . . . they had not caught a single fish. As they tied off at the dock on the third afternoon, Dan noticed an old man sitting on a bench watching them. In fact, Dan had noticed this man watching them every day as they left for their fishing adventure. Never said a word. Just nodded his head in greeting. But on the third day, as they moved to go past him, the man spoke.

“Notice you’ve been tryin’ to catch some fish,” he commented.

Dan thought, “Yeah, state the obvious. Rub it in.”

“Wrong time of day to go looking,” said the old man. “No fish at this time of day.”

“When do we need to go?” asked Dan’s son eagerly.

“Five thirty in the morning, son. I’ll direct you to my favorite fishing spot.”

So the next morning, at the crack of dawn, Dan and his son set out again. This time with new determination. Today would be the day. They would hook a fish and reel it in. They rowed out to the spot the old man told them about, cast their lines, and sat down to wait. One hour goes by. No fish. Another hour goes by. No fish.

“By this time,” says Dan. “I’ve given up hope. There were no fish in this darn lake. It was all a hoax. And I’m furious with God. What? You don’t have one stinkin’ fish for my son?” And I wanted to go back. To give up. I told my son to reel in his line, we were going home.

“Wait, dad. Please? Just a little bit longer?”

Dan says, “I looked at my son’s face and I wanted to tell him NO. I honestly wanted to quench the hope in my son, just like mine was quenched. I wanted to teach him that the world wasn’t fair. But I remembered my wife’s words ‘Close your mouth before you sin.’ So I looked at my son and said, “Okay, you can have 5 more casts. But after that, we’re leaving.”

My son cast four more times and came up empty. “I was becoming more and more furious with God.” Then, he cast the last time, the fifth time, and snagged a 30inch bass. “The delight he experienced as he reeled in that fish was incredible,” says Dan. “And in that moment, I felt hope flood my soul again. And I heard myself whisper, ‘God, I’m so sorry.’”

As they were rowing home, Dan’s son said, “Isn’t God good!” “Yes son, yes he is,” Dan agreed. “You know what, dad? I know God’s name.” Taken aback, Dan replied, “Oh really? What is

it?” “My God is the God of the Fifth Cast.” (Story heard by Author Dan Allender at the Living Hope Conference in Greenlake, WI, April 2006)

Last Sunday we talked about hope. And like Dan Allender, many of us have experienced moments in our lives when we’re low on hope. Hope is on empty. We’re cynical, angry, afraid, and full of unresolved grief. And yet, we also realize that to shut down our hearts to hope is to die altogether.

In Proverbs 13:12 we read that *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.* To the Hebrews the heart signified the essence of your entire being: it was the home of your emotions, your thoughts, your dreams, your desires. So if your heart was sick, then all of you was sick. But when we reconnected with hope, it gave us a glimpse of something eternal. To fulfill our God-given longings and desires allowed us to get one step closer to heaven.

So last week I challenged you to ask yourself:
What is the deepest longing of your heart?

To let yourself be hungry. To stay with that question until you found an answer. To dig deep, with Jesus standing at your side, as you explored your deep God-given desires.

We also talked about how to discern if something was from God, or from our own selfish motivations. And we said that if something was from God it would:

1. Be consistent with Scripture.
2. Be consistent with the person God created you to be.
3. Be involved with some aspect of servanthood.

Which brings us today’s sermon: **Holding on to Hope.** Because as you dive deep into your God-given desires, the resistance will be strong. You’ll get discouraged. You’ll want to give up. There are a lot of safe-guards and barriers to break through to reach the truth of who God created you to be. You may have the courage to break down one wall only to be daunted by three more behind it. This is the time when you need to hold onto hope the most. As a lifeline to God.

Let’s turn to Psalm 30 for some guidelines:

Psalm 30

A psalm. A song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.

1 I will exalt you, O LORD,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.

2 O LORD my God, I called to you for help
and you healed me.

3 O LORD, you brought me up from the grave;
you spared me from going down into the pit.

4 Sing to the LORD, you saints of his;
praise his holy name.

5 For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may remain for a night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.

6 When I felt secure, I said,
"I will never be shaken."

7 O LORD, when you favored me,
you made my mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.

8 To you, O LORD, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:

9 "What gain is there in my destruction,
in my going down into the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?"

10 Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me;
O LORD, be my help."

11 You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

12 that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.

This Psalm is about holding on to hope. David, the author of this Psalm, had been in a place of such deep despair that he felt as if he were dead. He was down in the pit, the grave. He felt distance from God. He accused God of hiding his face from him. He raged at God. "What gain is there in my destruction?" he rails.

And juxtaposed against all the despair, the self-pity, the abandonment, the hope-less-ness, David also speaks of God's healing, God's favor, God's mercy, God's joy.

It is a Psalm that captures the real life of a real man on an intimate journey with his real God. It is a Psalm that teaches us three things about holding on to hope.

First, hope is rooted in worship. Now, I'm talking about more than corporate worship on Sunday mornings. I'm talking about your daily worship with God, your one-on-one conversations with God, the time when you pour out your heart before God.

David's Psalm is his honest conversation with God. He's offering praise to God through the lens of pain, suffering, anguish, and death. He has learned to hold on to hope so that he can still rejoice in the morning, still find courage to dance, still clothe himself in God's joy. *My heart sings to you God, and I will not be silent!* David's faith journey has turned him inside out, and yet, he worships. He places his hope in God.

Why? Because his relationship with God goes deep. He has cultivated daily worship in his life. And worship creates intimacy between you and God. It's you saying to God: "You created my heart, you gave me these deep longings, help me to recognize them, to embrace them, to initiate them, to grow with them, to use them in service for your glory." David had reached that kind of implicit trust with his Lord.

Worship is an inbuilt need to connect with God. Something God hard-wired into our very beings. And, if we fail to worship God, we'll always find a substitute, even if it ends up being ourselves. (page 64, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren) A. W. Tozer said, "The reason why many are still troubled, still seeking, still making little forward progress is because they haven't yet come to the end of themselves."

So worship is about getting yourself out of the way long enough to let God in! The heart of worship is surrender. Not surrender to power and control, but to God's love, mercy and grace.

"Surrendering to God is not passive resignation, fatalism, or an excuse for laziness. It is not accepting the status quo. It may mean the exact opposite: sacrificing your life or suffering in order to change what needs to be changed. God often calls surrendered people to do battle on his behalf. Surrendering is not for cowards or doormats. Likewise, it does not mean giving up rational thinking. God would not waste the mind he gave you! God does not want robots to serve him. Surrendering is not repressing your personality. God wants to use your unique personality. Rather than its being diminished, surrendering enhances it." (page 81, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren)

Pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, said, "If God is going to do his deepest work in you, it will begin with surrender. So give it all to God: your past regrets, your present problems, your future ambitions, your fears, dreams, weaknesses, habits, hurts and hang-ups." (page 83, *The Purpose Driven Life*)

Isn't this what we see David doing in this Psalm? Surrendering himself to God. Giving God his regrets, his ambitions, his fears, his dreams, his hurt, his gratitude.

So what are some practical ways to practice daily worship with God? How can one cultivate a deep intimacy with God? Let me suggest a variety of touch-points:

1. **Scripture:** For some of you, diving daily into the Word of God will bring you to worship. Meditating daily on God's Word. You might read a different Psalm each day. You might pick one passage and re-read it every day for one week, asking yourself, "What does this Scripture teach me *today* that I didn't learn yesterday?"
2. **Prayer:** Choose a prayer phrase and meditate on it for at least 5 minutes a day. For example: God, I want to know you. God, I belong to you. God, help me to trust you. God, you are with me. God, you are my God.
3. **Music:** Some of you immediately connect with God through song. Choose a song off a Christian worship CD and let that lead you into worship. And try to stay with just one song for awhile. Listen to the words. Play it over and over. What does God tell you?
4. **Sermons and/or Christian Books:** Many get encouraged and inspired by reading sermons, or excerpts from Christian books. Choose one, read it, think about it, let the Holy Spirit teach you new things.
5. **Journaling:** Write things down! Ask yourself: God, where did I see you today? Where did you meet me? And share that experience on paper.
6. **Silence:** This is perhaps one of the most powerful ways to worship God because many of us have lost touch with being quiet, with sitting still. Try sitting still for 5 minutes of doing nothing but relaxing and saying, "Jesus, here I am. Jesus, here I am. Jesus, here I am. I surrender. I surrender. I surrender."

Holding on to Hope is connected to daily worship with God.

Second, Holding on to Hope is about honestly facing the grief in our lives. When David speaks in this Psalm, he holds nothing back. Raw emotion is all over the page. He doesn't hide from it. Run from it. Keep it from God. He invites God to meet him in his deepest pain. And God does.

How does David do this? How was he able to get this intimate with God?

I believe his surrender through worship led him to restoration through grief.

"What the heck does that mean, Joyce?" you might be asking! How does surrender, and worship, and grief restore me?

Let me share a story with you from my own life.

On Thursday morning I was reading different books, and meditating on ideas for today's sermon. I had just read a story by author John Eldredge where he spoke of going on a trip to the mountains, and found himself crying without really understanding why. So he stayed quiet and tried to listen beneath the tears. And he sensed the presence of Jesus with him, felt Jesus was speaking to some young and frightened place in his heart. (page 138, *Waking the Dead*) And this made me begin to think about pieces of my own childhood.

And almost immediately I was immersed in a memory of when I was 6-years-old. I was in the first grade and it was lunchtime in the cafeteria. And I accidentally spilled my carton of milk. The school had a rule that if you spilled your milk, you couldn't go out and play at recess. And that's what happened.

All the kids went out to play, and I had to sit at my desk, in an empty classroom, all by myself. And the first grade classroom was on the first floor, overlooking the playground, so the whole time I sat there miserable and alone, I heard all the other kids playing. I could hear their laughter, and all the fun they were having. And it was too much for me.

I laid my head down on my desk and began sobbing. The shame of being punished for an accident. The phrase "It just isn't fair!" was repeating over and over inside my head. The isolation of being all alone in my pain. It overwhelmed me.

An older student heard me from the hallway, and came into the classroom. She was very kind. She asked me what was wrong. And she said, "It wasn't fair, was it?" And then she had to go. But after that, it wasn't quite so awful being alone because I knew that at least one person cared.

Now as I'm remembering all of this, I start sobbing. Heart-wrenching sobs. And some small rational piece of me is saying, "Well, isn't this interesting, Joyce. What's this all about?" And so I forced myself to stay with this memory. Why had it hurt so much?

And I thought about the surface emotions of injustice, shame, and abandonment. But then God had me listen to all those kids out on the playground. All those kids having a grand time without me. And Jesus said to me, "Have you ever thought about why it's so hard for you to play, Joyce? To let go and be totally carefree?"

And I said, "Because I have to do all the right things first. I have to make sure all my obligations are taken care of."

"Why?" said Jesus.

"Because if I don't, I feel guilty and ashamed."

Okay, that hit me like a ton of bricks. And if that wasn't enough, Jesus then said, "And do you do the same thing with God?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you try to do everything right in your Christian life? Try to be the perfect, little girl/woman all the time? Try to make sure you don't spill any milk, because you're afraid God might not let you go out and play? That you might end up sitting all alone with no one? Even God might abandon you?"

Now I was stunned. It was like I was standing naked in front of God. "What does your heart tell you, Joyce? Is that truth?"

And that wounded place of my heart where I was still six-years-old, whispered, “Yes, it’s true.” And I prayed:

“Lord Jesus, I keep trying to do the right thing, and it’s never enough. And God, I admit I sometimes I feel that way with you. I keep putting myself out there, and it’s never enough. Please forgive me for relying more on my strength than yours. Come and heal my broken heart.”

So I invited Jesus into that memory. I asked him to come and heal that part of me. I let him show me how he had been there beside me when I spilled the milk. He was there beside me when I was crying my eyes out at my desk. He was speaking through the gentle words of that older student whom he sent into the room to comfort me. And Jesus said to me:

“Joyce, even then, my oldest enemy was trying to rob your heart away from me. In your innocence, Satan came and tried to tell you that you should not have hope. That life will just shut you down. That others will trample you, crush you. That life is not fair; it will never be fair. But it’s not true, Joyce. I created you and you’re beautiful. Every tear you spilled that day I captured in my hands. All the pain you experienced in your young heart, all that pain and brokenness, I took upon myself. That’s why I died for you, Joyce. To break the hold of that brokenness and sin in your life. Give me that piece of your heart and experience life more abundantly.”

If you dare to worship with God, to be intimate with God, to surrender yourself to God, then God will most likely lead you to the moments of intense grief in your life? Why? Because he loves you. He *wants* to see you restored to wholeness. To be all he created you to be.

How can you know God loves you? The Bible tells us this: God says he loves you (Psalm 145:9), you’re never out of his sight (Psalm 139:3), he cares about every detail of your life (Matthew 10:30), he gave you the capacity to enjoy all kinds of pleasure (I Timothy 6:17b), he has good plans for your life (Jeremiah 29:11), he forgives you (Psalm 86:5), and he is lovingly patient with you (Psalm 145:8). And the greatest expression of this love is the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus (John 3:16).

Jesus said, *I am come that they might have **life**, and that they might have it **more abundantly**.* **(John 10:10)**

So holding on to hope requires worship. It requires grief.

And finally, I would add that it requires community.

Before the beginning of verse one, we read: A psalm. A song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.

This was a psalm written by David of his personal journey with God in wailing and dancing, and he turned it over to be used in community for the dedication of the temple. Isn’t that fascinating?

I think David modeled something extremely critical that we need to pay attention to: worship and grief are not something you do in isolation. They are meant to be shared. You were not designed to keep joy and sorrow locked inside, or to keep it just between you and God. **Following God involves not just believing, but also belonging.** What affects me, affects you. When I share how I grow, you can benefit and grow too.

The Bible says that we are put together, joined together, built together, members together, heirs together, fitted together, held together, and will be caught up together. The church—meaning the people of God, not the physical building—the church is God’s agenda for the world. (Scriptures: I Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 2:21-22; 3:6; 4:16; Colossians 2:19; I Thessalonians 4:17) (page 130, *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren)

Community allows us to bring our individual stories of praise and pain together so that we can find restoration as the body of Christ. Authentic community lets us be who we really are. Authentic community loves us no matter what. Like David, it encourages us to hang all our brokenness out the window and yell triumphantly, “This was who I used to be, but look at me now! Look how God changed me!” And the community yells back, “Yes! Your story is my story! To see God at work in you, is to see God at work in me.”

Anne Lamott tells the story of being on a hike with her friend Neshama. Anne was depressed over a romance that had ended badly, the death of a dear friend, and a relative just diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. And her friend had called and suggested they take a hike through a nearby marsh. At one point, the vegetation gave way, and their shoes got swallowed up in mud. So they moved quickly through the bog to drier ground, and attempted to scale a three foot slope.

But they both lost their footing about half way up, and slid back down, landing noisily on their butts in the mud. And they looked at each, both covered in mud, and they started laughing. Eventually they stopped, and just sat there silently for a long time. There were egrets on a telephone wire above them. The air smelled of dried grasses. And Anne let her head drop and she closed her eyes.

And she shares:

Against the sparkly black screen behind my eyes, all these people appeared, like people in a come-as-you-are fashion show, strangers to each other but beloved by me. There were all the sick little kids we know, and all the friends who had died, and the old people in my family and church who had grown so suddenly frail, and the man with whom I used to be in love and who used to be in love with me. And I thought to myself, “Well, no wonder you’re this sad.”

The silence of the marsh was so profound that it could have been the flip side of the singing in my church. Just last Sunday the people of St. Andrew had sung the old spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” a cappella because the pianist was gone, and a bunch of people were crying, singing very loudly with their eyes closed, and the singing of that cry of a song was a wonderful form of communion. How come you can hear a chord, and then another chord, and then your heart breaks open?

When Neshama and I finally got up to go, I was still sad, but better. This is the most profound spiritual truth I know: that even when we're most sure that love can't conquer all, it seems to anyway. Love goes down into the rat hole with us, in the guise of our friends, and there it swells and comforts. It gives us second winds, third winds, hundredth winds

The truth is that your spirits don't rise until you get way down. Maybe it's because this—the mud, the bottom—is where all rises from. Maybe without it, whatever rises would fly off or evaporate before you could even be with it for a moment. But when someone enters that valley with you, that mud, it somehow saves you again. At the marsh, all that mud and one old friend worked like a tenderizing mallet. Where before there had been tough fibers, hardness, and held breath, now there were mud, dirt, water, air, mess—and I felt soft and clean. (pages 264-265, *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott)

Holding on to Hope.
Worship.
Grief.
Community.

May we live them as individuals.
May we live them as a fellowship of Believers.

Let's pray:

God,
We want to be as honest as David was in this Psalm
Gut-wrenching honest
Screaming our pain
Releasing our laughter
Becoming more intimate with you
And with one another.
Falling on our bottoms in the mud
And realizing that even in the mess
You are there: LOVE
Healing, restoring
The broken pieces of our hearts.
We give you our worship
We give you our grief
We give you our community
You are our song
And our hope.
Amen.