

## Hope on a Rope

Hebrews 6: 13-20

Tandy Gilliland Taylor  
January 31, 2021  
Triune Mercy Center

Well, the long slog continues. We're still worshipping online only, in an empty sanctuary, with no quick end in sight. We're still not getting haircuts or meeting friends for lunch or planning gatherings.

We are weary, weary of the isolation and weary of the heaviness of pandemic losses. We are tired of pandemic protocols – we're tired of wearing masks, not hugging people, not gathering for hot meals in the dining hall or holding in-person AA meetings, or enjoying the Art Room.

We're tired of feeling discouraged about the economy and the job market and the lack of affordable housing; we're weary of the deep political divide in our country that causes tension in our personal relationships and that causes gridlock in Congress.

There are starting to be a few glimmers of hope on the horizon: people in phase 1a are now getting a vaccine! Case counts are going down a bit! But now here come these variants...

It's really hard these days to muster the energy to navigate all these challenges.

Centuries ago, a community of early Christians also felt weary and discouraged. As biblical scholar Tom Long wrote, "They were tired of serving the world, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going; they were even tired of Jesus. They were worn down and worn out. The Bible even says that 'their hands droop and their knees are weak.' (Hebrews 12:12) Tired of walking the walk, they are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith." (Hebrews, in *Interpretation* series, Louisville: John Knox Press, p. 3)

We know all this because somebody noticed it at the time, and wrote to this community, to try to encourage them. This writing has been preserved for us in what we know as the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament. We think of it as being a letter, like so many other New Testament books that were letters, but Hebrews is really more of a sermon. And so, scholars often refer to the writer of this book not as the "author" but as "the Preacher." The Preacher knows and loves the people in this community, and so the Preacher writes this sermon to encourage them to hold on to hope, to persevere in their faith, and to renew their trust in God.

Our text for this morning is Hebrews 6: 13-20. This is going to sound confusing at first, but it will make sense, so hang in there with me.

*<sup>13</sup>When God made a promise to Abraham, because God had no one greater by whom to swear, God swore by himself, <sup>14</sup>saying, "I will surely bless you and multiply you." <sup>15</sup>And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. <sup>16</sup>Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of God's purpose, God guaranteed it by an oath, <sup>18</sup>so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. <sup>19</sup>We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup>where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*

The Preacher here is talking about Christian hope, and connects Christian hope to the promises of God. For the Preacher, it's clear that Christian hope is not just optimism; it's not just a vague sense that things will probably turn out all right; it's not just "looking on the bright side of things." Don't get me wrong, having a good attitude is a good thing, but it's not Christian hope.

Let's start with the second half of this text first, where the Preacher describes Christian hope as a great cable attached to an anchor. He says that Jesus has taken this anchor to the "inner shrine behind the curtain"; this is a reference to the room at the center of the Hebrew temple, the "holiest of holies", where God was thought to dwell. So, a way for us to understand this is that Jesus has taken this anchor up to heaven itself, and has attached that anchor securely to the throne of God. This cable of hope then extends back down to earth, where faithful people can "*seize the hope set before us,*" as the text says. So, the image here is that hope is like a lifeline thrown out to us by God. It sounds backwards to have the anchor wedged above us, because we typically think about a ship dropping an anchor to the bottom of the sea; but rock climbers sometimes set an anchor at the top of a rock face, to secure them as they climb up.

The Preacher tells us that this lifeline of Christian hope is "*sure and steadfast*" because it is anchored in the very trustworthiness of God. So now let's circle back around to the first section of this text. It says, basically, that when God made promises to Abraham, God didn't have any higher authority to swear by, like we would put a hand on a Bible, and swear in court to "*tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God.*" Since God didn't have a higher authority to call on, God guaranteed these promises were good by swearing by God's own name. It all sounds very strange to us today, but the point of this first half of the text is to focus on God's trustworthiness; because God is faithful to keep those promises God has made, we can have hope, true Christian hope. So the sense of the overall text is this: There is a great cable of hope extending to us from heaven, and it is trustworthy to hold us in the midst of the

storms and dangers of life, because it is anchored in the trustworthiness of God, who makes promises, and who keeps all those amazing promises.

So, what exactly is it that God promises? Well, there sure are a lot of things we'd like for God to promise that are not on the list! We'd like for God to promise us safety, good health, wealth, happiness, rewards for "being good." It sure would be nice for God to promise national security, national harmony, and a thriving economy. But God does not promise any of those things. So, if God doesn't promise those things, what does God promise? The Bible is chock-full of God's promises: rich, wonderful, gracious promises of love, presence, mercy, and forgiveness.

One central promise that is repeated again and again in Scripture is *"Fear not, for I am with you."* The angels say it to Mary and the shepherds in the Christmas story. But it's not only there; it's in the Old Testament too, when God says this to Joshua as he becomes the new leader of the Hebrew people after Moses, *"Be strong and of good courage, be not frightened, neither dismayed; for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."* Jesus himself gives us this promise, in his last recorded words in Matthew, *"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* This promise of God's presence with us, to comfort us and to guide us, is huge; we are not alone as we face challenges and difficulties of life. *"Fear not, for I am with you."*

A second promise that we hear throughout scripture is:

*"I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Jeremiah 24:7 says it this way:

*"I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord;  
I will be their God, and they will be my people,  
for they shall return to me with their whole heart."*

Leviticus 26:11-12 says it in slightly different words:

*"I will make my home among you;  
I will walk among you.  
I will be your God, and you shall be my people."*

This second promise is that we belong to God; we are connected to God in a relationship of belonging, trust, and care.

Hebrews 8:10-12 starts out with this second promise of belonging to God, but goes on to add another promise, the promise of forgiveness:

*"I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."*

God will have mercy on us, even on those parts of ourselves we like the least and we're most ashamed of. God will remember our sins no more...

And, then, of course there's the promise that's central to the Gospel, the promise of resurrection, new life after death. God promises to transform death into life; God promises to transform dead ends into new beginnings, whether those dead ends are addiction, divorce, bankruptcy, heartbreak, even death itself.

This promise is repeated at the end of the Bible, in the ringing words found in Revelation 21:

*"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with people;*

*God will dwell with them,*

*and they shall be God's people,*

*and God Himself will be with them.*

*God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;*

*and death shall be no more,*

*neither shall there be mourning,*

*nor crying, nor pain any more,*

*for the former things have passed away."*

What an incredible promise: God, who made all of creation, will redeem all of creation. The storms of life, as violent as they may be, do not have the final word; God does!

Across the centuries, the Preacher says to us today: hold on to hope! Persevere in the faith! Renew your trust in God. Because Christian hope is like a mighty cable extended from heaven, a lifeline for us to grab hold of, to keep us from sinking in stormy seas and falling into the abyss. This cable is "*sure and steadfast*," because it is anchored in the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God, who keeps all of these many promises. We can trust this cable of hope, just as a rock climber trusts a cable of steel.

So, friends, in these tough days, know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God's many wonderful, gracious, magnificent promises are true and sure.

Know in your heart that God is with us.

Know in your bones that God dwells among us.

Know in the depth of your soul that God remembers our sins no more.

Believe this good news: God brings new beginnings from what look like dead ends.

God is at work in the world, redeeming all of creation, bringing life from death. Thanks be to God! Amen.

## **Benediction**

May the God of hope  
fill you with all joy and peace in believing  
so that you may abound in hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)