

The Substance of Things Hoped For

Hebrews 11:1

December 1, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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This is the first Sunday of Advent, Hope Sunday. Most of the traditional readings for this week focus on Hebrew Bible scriptures about the hope of the people of Israel for a coming Messiah, or their hope for deliverance from exile. We have read those passages every year I have been here. This morning, I want to go in a different direction and think together about where we find hope when we feel hope-less, and how we embody that hope for others.

I have mentioned in the past that there was a time in a much earlier part of my life (long before I ever met Dave) when my family was poor. We had two little boys to take care of. There was enough to eat, thanks to the kindness of the US Department of Agriculture WIC program. There was a roof over our heads, thanks to the generosity of a friend with a rambling old house. We had an old beater of a car, thanks to a friend who was happy to get it out of his driveway. And I had a job, making the grand total of \$10,868 a year. Now, \$10,000 was way more money back then than it is today, but it still didn't begin to meet our needs. I knew things needed to change – HAD to change – but I was so overwhelmed by our circumstances and the weight on my shoulders of providing for my family that I couldn't even picture what change might look like, or what step I should take first. I didn't know what to hope for. I didn't even know where to look for hope.

Then one day, I was gifted with an image, almost a vision. I saw myself from across the room as I was checking in to a fancy hotel ... polished marble floors, shiny brass fittings everywhere, and a wall of marble behind the registration desk. I couldn't make out the name of the hotel in this image, but I was certain that I had never been there before. My hair appeared to be shoulder length, and I was wearing a tailored red dress with a matching red belt and low-heeled black shoes. Beside me was a black roll-aboard suitcase. Believe me when I tell you that this image of myself in that red dress, with that suitcase, checking into that fancy hotel was so far from anything I had ever experienced that I could not begin to understand it. But the picture was vivid. It stayed with me, and it gave me hope. I didn't know how to get from where I was to that red dress and that hotel, but I knew it was out there waiting for me, so I found that I had the courage simply to move forward.

You know what happened next, right? A few years and two job changes later, I wrote a successful grant application to the federal government, to establish an alcohol abuse prevention program at my campus. One of the requirements of that grant was that I attend several training conferences in Washington DC. I was really nervous about this, and I didn't have anything appropriate to wear. So, I went to JC Penney and I bought three dresses – an outrageous extravagance for me at that time. But it wasn't until I checked into the hotel in Washington that I realized I was wearing the very same tailored red dress I had seen in that vision years earlier, and I wore the same low-heeled black shoes. My hair was no longer hanging down my back but had been cut to shoulder length. And I was checking into this hotel with my roll-aboard suitcase, standing on a polished marble floor. There were brass fittings everywhere, and a wall of marble behind the registration desk.

That image of myself in that dress at that hotel had given me a promise of a future that was better than my past. And I knew that God, the giver of all hope, was the giver of that image, and God had been watching over me and my little family.

The author of Hebrews tells us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. I love that word substance. It is something we can touch, right? Something we can hold onto, when we don't know where else to turn. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

The symbols of our faith embody our hope for us, when we can't come up with hope on our own. The living water of baptism. The bread and cup of communion. These things we can touch and see and smell and taste are here to hold our hope for us, to give us an image of hope, even when our hearts are dry and brittle and hope-less. Ours is literally an em-bodied faith. We can't see God, but we can see the em-body-ment of God's love for us in Jesus. "Go ahead, put your hands into my wounds," Jesus said to Thomas. It's okay to touch.

Hope doesn't form in a vacuum. Hope invites itself into our hearts through our physical senses. Our carillon bells lift the spirits of so many people in our community. Just the sight of our church building, standing here as it has stood for so long, is a mark of hope. Our little free pantry offers not only food but also hope to hungry neighbors. And sometimes, a song – a hymn – lifts the heart when nothing else will.

We can never know which thing we do, which word, which smile, which can of soup, is the lifeline for someone who needs it most. We will never know what image someone receives here that will stay in their heart as a symbol of a future that they must believe in, but cannot quite grasp. Or which morsel of bread will hold that place of hope in the hand, then on the lips. But we do know that this is how God works, providing substance for our hopes and evidence of what we cannot yet see, embodying holy love in a child, and then in an itinerant prophet with no money and nowhere to lay his head. This is what hope looks like. This is how it tastes. This is how God works, giving us hope that we can see or taste or feel, and then telling us all to go out and be that hope for everyone we meet.

God breathed hope into the world 2,000 years ago, and God offers hope today, in word and sacrament, in the love we feel here, and in our very physical presence in this community. And this is our sacred task – to be the living symbol, the substance, of God's hope and love for everyone we meet. May it be so.

Amen