

Towson Presbyterian Church

December 1, 2019

Rev. Joel Strom

Isaiah 40: 9-11 and Luke 1: 67-79

“We Make the Road By Walking” – Ch. 14

“Desires, Hopes and Dreams”

We started our church-wide study of Brian McLaren’s fantastic book “We Make the Road By Walking” *waaaaaaay* back in September, and Brian breaks his book into four sections. We’ve just read through the first section, which he calls “Alive in the Story of Creation,” and that has taken us through parts of the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible.

The Old Testament is vast, and at times I’ve felt like we were only really dipping our foot into its deep waters, but Brian does a good job of highlighting specific scriptures and stories to read, and trying to lead us through the movement and the trajectory of the Bible. The Bible, for Brian, is moving in a specific direction.

Section Two, “Alive in the Adventure of Jesus,” begins in chapter 14, which we read this week, and Brian begins this chapter by saying the Bible is a book about desires and hopes and dreams. It begins with a story about a God who desires, hopes and longs for a good and beautiful world. But while the Bible is a book about God, he says it’s also a book about humans, and the story of humans, found in the Bible, includes people who desired power to kill, oppress and enslave others. He says the Bible is also a book about a specific tribe, the Israelites, who hope and dream for a land they can call their own, and who desire to be a particular kind of people in the world. And when that tribe finally finds that land, they hope and dream about a time when they will not be torn apart by internal conflict and rivalries and power, and they hope and dream for a time when they will not live in fear of their enemies.

The Bible is a book about desires, hopes and dreams, and to be human is to also have desires, hopes and dreams. We each have our own desires, hopes and dreams. We each have desires, hopes and dreams for our careers, and the work we want to give our time and energy to. We have desires, hopes and dreams for the kind of person we want to become and maybe the kind of person we want to journey with through life. We have desires, hopes and dreams for where we want to live, and maybe a dream to live in a particular kind of home. And we each have desires, hopes and dreams for TPC. We dream of the kind of people we can become and the type of ministry we long to be a part of. And we have desires and hopes and dreams for our world – we all do. I hope and dream of a time when war and violence are no longer the norm. I dream of a time when the earth is no longer abused and stretched and being drained of its resources. I hope for a time when there is no longer a racial divide in our country and the vision that Dr. Martin Luther King advocated for is realized.

To be human is to have desires, hopes and dreams, and Isaiah, who wrote our first scripture, had hopes and dreams, too. McLaren has a unique way of describing the prophets in the Bible, such

as Isaiah. He calls them the “custodians” of the best hopes, desires and dreams of their society. They held out the dreams for people to see, cling to and imagine that they were possible,

and the prophets challenged people to live their lives in ways that were consistent with those hopes, desires and dreams. And when the prophets saw the opposite of those dreams happening and people living in harmful ways, they warned them of where their actions would lead.

The book of Isaiah is written during the time after Israel had broken up into two kingdoms. Politics had gotten the best of them, and Israel became the kingdom of the North and Judah the kingdom of the South. Chapter 40 is written during a time when Judah had been conquered by Babylon, a huge empire at the time, and many Judeans were taken from their homeland and forced to live in Babylon. Chapter 40 is written to those exiled Judeans living in Babylon.

Isaiah’s words are written to a people who were ripped from their homes and forced to live in a far-off land; their culture and way of life - destroyed; the religion that defined them - now subjugated to the gods of Babylon; their temple in Jerusalem where God lived and was housed - demolished. And so Isaiah stands up and speaks to what I can only imagine were a people devoid of any kind of hope and he invites them to dream...

DO NOT fear...Isaiah says...
Here is your God... your God is coming...
And your God is coming with power...

And like the prophet that Isaiah was, he holds out a dream that invites people to hope and imagine that one day it could happen.

After Isaiah, prophets followed in his footsteps who dared to hope, like Ezekiel, who dreamed of a time when people’s hearts of stones would be replaced with hearts of flesh, or Amos, who envisioned a time when justice would roll down like a river throughout the land. The desires and dreams of these hope-filled prophets that led up to Jesus never died. They kept being the “custodians” of the best hopes and best dreams of society.

But it’s helpful to note their dreams were never completely fulfilled either.

The Persian Empire eventually conquered Babylon, and the Persians allowed the Judeans to go back home and start rebuilding. But eventually the Greek empire came in and conquered them, and then the Romans conquered them. The prophets’ hopes and dreams were never fully realized. In our Gospel reading from Luke, with Israel now under Roman captivity, Zechariah looks at his son, who will become John the Baptist, and he keeps that dream alive. Zechariah dares to hope in a future that is not just better for him and his people, but better for everyone.

The Bible is a book about desires, and dreams and hopes, and many of them still haven’t been realized. In the second chapter of Isaiah, he dreams of a time when tools for war and killing will be repurposed and refashioned into tools for agriculture. Tools remade to bring life, not death, and he envisions a time when war will no longer be the norm. We sure are not there yet...

In chapter 14 of “We Make the Road By Walking,” Brian makes a very helpful distinction between a *hope* and a *wish*.

He says desires, hopes and dreams – *they inspire action*. They invite you to live a particular way. They guide and shape our action *today*. If I want to one day run a marathon that desire should begin to shape how I live my life right now. I should start learning about running and training to run a marathon and spending time around people who run marathons. My dream to run a marathon should inspire action in me *right now*.

But a wish, Brian says, a wish is a substitute for action. He says it creates a “passive optimism that can paralyze people in a happy fog of complacency.” What a great phrase – *a happy fog of complacency*. We want it to happen, but we’re not doing anything to move us in that direction.

Now if I were to *wish* to run a marathon, and I was pretty confident I’d be fine when that starter gun went off, you’d find me 10 minutes later, a mile or so down the road, bent over, gasping for air, my heart beating like a rabbit. Wishes don’t shape our lives towards what we long for, but *dreams, hopes and desires*, they inspire action in us, and they shape us into who we are to be today. If I desire to run a marathon, I need to start living differently right now.

As we enter into the season of Advent and we light our first candle, a question to ask ourselves is *What kind of person will we be?* Will we continue the legacy of those that went before us like Isaiah and Ezekiel, Amos and Zechariah, who laid out a vision of the best hopes and desires and dreams of their society, and let that vision guide our actions today? Or will we sit back and wish that, well, one day everything will just get better by itself? Or even worse, just become pessimistic about everything. Because personally, that’s what I’m always battling. Pessimism.

I look at the earth and climate change and rising temperatures and scarce resources and I wonder what can I do? Or what can we do to stop this? I look at the racial tension in our country and how hard it is to just have conversations around race, and I wonder will it ever get better? We still seem so far away from that beloved community that Dr. King envisioned. Making a wish or allowing pessimism to become the norm are so easy to do. But then I’m reminded our world needs people like us who hope and dream the best visions for our world, and then let that dream inspire action in us right now.

Two weeks ago, I walked into the entrance off our parking lot and saw a giant container filled with batteries waiting to be recycled. And I’ll admit, I was a little shocked it filled up so quickly. We offered you the invitation to bring your batteries in to be recycled, not knowing at all if you’d respond, and you did! And then I remember that many of you have switched your gas and electricity at home over to renewable energy, because here at TPC we dream and hope about what it looks like to live sustainably and care for the earth. And that hopes shapes you, it shapes us in how we will act today.

And then I remember that two years ago we dared to read a book about racial inequality called “Waking Up White.” And right now, one of our Small Groups is in the midst of a 21-day challenge to learn and explore and build habits of how they might courageously enter into the

race conversation in our country. They dream about racial equality, and that dream is guiding and shaping them in how they will act and live today.

And then I remember that we, together, are a community of hope. A community that desires and dreams the best hopes for our world. The dream of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Zechariah lives on with us.

Brian ends chapter 14 by saying, “To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to have a desire, a dream and a hope for the future. It is to translate that hope for the future into action in the present, and to keep acting in light of it, no matter the disappointment, no matter the setbacks and delays.”

He then says, “So let us begin this Advent season by lighting a candle for the prophets who proclaimed their hopes, desires and dreams. Let us keep their flame glowing strong in our hearts, even now.”