

Live Into Hope
A Graduation Reflection
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 40:25-31 (*The Message*)

²⁵⁻²⁶ “So—who is like me? Who holds a candle to me?” says The Holy. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name—so magnificent! so powerful!—and never overlooks a single one?

²⁷⁻³¹ Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying, “GOD has lost track of me. He doesn’t care what happens to me”? Don’t you know anything? Haven’t you been listening? GOD doesn’t come and go. God *lasts*. He’s Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath. And he knows *everything*, inside and out. He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon GOD get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don’t get tired, they walk and don’t lag behind.

Philippians 1:3–5

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

This is the word of the Lord.... thanks be to God.

Peanut's cartoon: Lucy and Linus are sitting in front of the television set when Lucy says to Linus, "Go get me a glass of water." Linus looks surprised, "Why should I do anything for you? You never do anything for me." "On your 75th birthday," Lucy promises, "I'll bake you a cake." Linus gets up, head to the kitchen and says, "Life is more *hopeful* when you have something to look forward to." (Source Unknown - Lou Nicholes, Missionary Author)

Graduates, you have much to look forward to this day. Graduation is a ritual that involves celebrating who you are, where you've been, then saying goodbye to that part of your life and blessing you as you step into the future. The right of passage is an affirmation of hope.

The whole world has endured a lot this pandemic year and graduates, you have really been through it. You have known the sting of isolation, loss of routine, re-worked milestones, schedule disruptions, in school, out of school. Honestly, how did you learn math over a computer? You have experienced upheaval, uncertainty, and yet, here you are, poised to embark on the next step of the journey, to move forward in the next phase of life. New learning, adventures, relationships, and challenges await.

It isn't easy to hold on to hope in an anxious and hurting world. The pandemic has exposed long-standing structural and racial inequities in health care, housing, education, and the legal system. We have witnessed injustice on a daily basis, and known deep loss. You applied to college in a year when applications were up by something like 500%

Yet, as followers of Jesus, we are people of hope. Today is the last Sunday in the Easter Season, each and every Sunday we can claim that resurrection is the ultimate hope for humankind. We worship a God who, by the power of love, can make a way when there's no way, and

offers possibility when times seems most bleak. Our hope rests in a God who promises a future of justice and love.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to God's people during one of the most sad and un-hopeful times in the history of the Hebrew people. After warning the people that their lack of attention to God's laws of love and justice would put them in exile, the prophet seeks to comfort them, to give them hope. The Israelites were going to be in Babylon for a long time, far from familiar land and worship, far from everything they ever know. Isaiah speaks to the ancient Israelites, but his words comfort us today as well. The prophet knows that becoming discouraged, getting tired, tempted toward despair... it's all part of the human condition whether you are 19 or 99. Hang on, he tells them, God has not forgotten you. You may feel like giving up, but God...well, God never does. God is always faithful, ever present, ever energized and ready and by your side. God provides strength from a place deep inside that you may not even know you had. God knows, though.

Hope is different than bright optimism or seeing things through rose-colored glasses or keeping your fingers crossed that everything's going to be okay.

Hope begins as we look unflinchingly at what is real, both in front of us and within us, and we tell the truth. Hope ignites as faithful imagination envisions the change that needs to happen. And hope rests in the trust that God's love is powerful enough to work within, around, and through us and others to do what we simply cannot do alone.

It takes courage to have hope.

The theologian Frederick Buechner says that hope is a driving power and the outermost edge of faith. "Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eye on the future. There has never been a time past when

God wasn't with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom, as whatever it is in our hearts that keeps us human enough at least to get by despite everything in our heart that tends to wither the heart and make us less than human.”*

*(Buechner's sermon 'A Room Called Remember' first published in *A Room Called Remember* and then later in *Secrets in the Dark*.)

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul reminds us that the God who created us continues to work within us so that we might grow into the fulfillment of God's Yes in the world. Graduates, parents, friends... God is for you, don't give up hope.

Hope flexes its muscles when things seem most bleak, and allows us to rise like eagles, as Isaiah says, to keep on going.

Hope keeps us human, open to the world and to giving and receiving love.

So on this graduation Sunday, as we all learn to live in a new and emergent post-pandemic world, I want to share a few thoughts for holding on to hope in difficult times. Sure, this year has been a devastating in multiple ways, but it's no spoiler alert that life can be hard. Being human means facing heartache and loss, rejection and sadness, even as it also provides beauty and wonder, joy, and peace.

First, keep it real - stay honest. Accept your humanity and the humanity of others. Seeds of hope are planted when we can face the truth about ourselves and our world and not run away. As you face hard truths about our country and its systems, or make a misstep with a friend or family member, you have a choice. You can look the other way, pretend everything is rosy, or believe Jesus when he says that the truth will set us free. And it does and it will, but honestly, first it's going to make us

uncomfortable. Make the choice to sit in the discomfort, trusting that you will grow and learn.

Second, dream on. Look at life as it is and then imagine a world that you would like to inhabit. What does it look like? What does it sound like? How does it feel? Did you catch the part in Isaiah when the prophet says that God is the creator of all we see or imagine! The world needs your imagination, your dreams. The Dalai Lama is quoted as saying, “The world desperately needs more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of all kinds.” Cast a vision, with words, or art, or music, or food, or stories, or dance, protest, make-up or poetry. Remember the vision of hope that the prophet paints Isaiah gives us, God lining up the stars, an eagle soaring above the earth, and a human form waling into a sunset without growing weary.

Third, rely on community. Jesus shows us what it looks like to love one another, lay down our life for your friends, do unto another as you would like them to do unto you. Hope is a team sport. As hope is shared, others can catch the spirit and real change can happen. When we share sorrow and discouragements, and tell the truth in faith-filled community, we lift one another, can have faith for one another and walk one another into hope. Oak Grove is your community, committed to showing what hope looks like in the day-to-day lives of us ordinary disciples. We love you and are here for you. Good times and bad. Some of you may be going far away, Utah, Georgia, Chicago, to be specific. But this last year has shown us that we can be community, be there for one another even when we are apart. Count on that.

Finally, don't give up, keep on showing up! God created you uniquely, with gifts and talents to share with the world and God isn't finished with you yet. (And, by the way, God isn't finished with any of us, yet!) God is faithful to you faithfulness to God involves showing up in your own

lives and paying attention. God is at work all around us, the lively spirit moving in, around and through our lives. God will meet you where you are. Trust in God to see you through, to live into the dream that you can imagine.

Dr. Ibram X Kendi says, “What give me hope is a simple truism. Once we lose hope, we are guaranteed to lose. But if we ignore the odds and fight to create an anti-racist world, then we give humanity a chance to one day survive, a chance to live in communion, a chance to be forever free.” (Instagram post, May 14, 2021)

Know that God is steady and sure, and believe that there can be a better tomorrow for this beautiful and brutal world. May we all recommit to the hope that God has placed inside each one of us.

Graduates – you are loved and called to be God’s unique person in this world! We rejoice in you and all that is to come.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN