



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Hope with Bandaged Eyes

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ NOVEMBER 5, 2023

Hope Is an Anchor

Deep under the streets of old Rome, you can still see the catacombs, miles and miles of underground passages used for centuries as tombs, and also as safe places to hide. In the second and third centuries, history tells us that pressured and persecuted Christians met quietly in the catacombs. How do we know? They marked the spots with symbols, among them one incorporating an anchor. You see the shaft of the anchor is a cross. Visitors to the catacombs today can count more than 60 anchor symbols, painted or etched on the walls of the catacombs. The anchor meant for those early Christians what this verse expresses:

Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge
can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us.

This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.

Hebrews 6:18-19

When their world was hard or hostile, they declared to one another that Jesus is our hope. When the world seems rudderless, when storms rage, Jesus is the anchor that hold us fast. We believe this, we trust it; we cling to it. We say it and sing it. It is our conviction.

Hope with Bandaged Eyes

Then there is the painting called [*Hope*](#), which hangs in the Tate Gallery in London. The English artist Georg Frederik Watts painted it in 1886. What is this picture? Hope is personified as a woman, draped over the world, the globe. She holds a small harp, a lyre. Every string but one is

broken. Her head is bowed low as she strains to hear the music of the single unbroken string on the harp. Her eyes are bandaged. Some have suggested that she wears a blindfold, that hope is blind. But the artist himself wrote about this painting. He said this is hope with bandaged eyes. If the anchor is a picture of God's commitment to us, to hold us fast no matter what comes, then this painting of hope with bandaged eyes might be a picture of our lived experience, of what it is like to hold to hope in hard times.

We get it. We are forced to see and know things that are simply too hard to bear. Yes, the anchor is a declaration of our faith in God—it's what we know. But this painting of hope with bandaged eyes expresses how it feels to hold hope in the middle of dark events that can make our knees buckle and our hearts break. They are on the world stage right now. Some of us know them in our own families, among our own friends, and in our own histories. Why must we see? Why must we know? Why must we be faced with what we cannot fix? It seems too much for us to bear. On the weekend that the brutal terrorism hit Israel—that's when I decided to talk about this today.

There Is an Enemy

There really is a darkness out there. The Bible says that. On news shows and commentaries every day, the word "evil" is used. What does it mean? For some it's simply an adjective, a description, a personal opinion applied to what offends or appalls. For some, it's a collective judgment we make; we, human beings, are the judges of what we will label as evil and label as good, and those labels are flexible as culture and times change. But the Bible tells us that evil is more than just an opinion, a description, or a personal judgment. There really is an enemy of God, an enemy of our souls, and unlike our God who is a creator, the enemy is only a destroyer, a distorter.

Jesus said, "The thief [the enemy] comes to steal, to kill, and to destroy" (John 10:10). We see the enemy in the first pages of the Bible, in Genesis, with Eve where he whispers and insinuates and manipulates and tempts and twists. In the New Testament, the disciple Peter

wrote that the enemy stalks like a lion, roaring and fierce with terror. So sometimes the enemy hints and hisses like a snake and sometimes roars like a lion, in undisguised terrorism. Always the enemy is looking to destroy, writes Peter.

Into this real battlefield on our little planet came Jesus, in person. He came to the front lines. He faced the enemy. Remember the beginning of his public life? Just after his baptism, he was led by God to the desert where there was a long and very personal battle with the enemy. Jesus was tempted over and over and he stood firm. Remember the end of his life? Jesus faced this enemy again very directly in the Garden of Gethsemane, in deep mourning and struggle. We hear his anguished prayer. Again he stood firm against the dark powers, and he said “no” to the enemy and “yes” to the great purposes of God.

The enemy, evil, is a real force, a power. From the early chapters in Genesis to the end of Revelation, the Bible makes it clear. Paul instructs us:

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies,
but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world,
against mighty powers in this dark world,
and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

The Curtain Is Parted

How do we understand that? A very few times in the Bible, God parts the curtains for a moment and gives us a glimpse of this reality. One of them occurs in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. This is a unique story of a profound spiritual experience that happened when Daniel was in his late years, probably in his 80s. All his life he has stood faithfully for God. All his life he has loved and prayed and worked for his people. When we meet him in chapter 10, he is deeply concerned about them and he has been praying earnestly for three weeks.

Daniel has prayed with commitment, with sorrow, and with love, laying his concern before God, pleading with God to act. And then an extraordinary thing happens. He is shown a powerful vision that causes him to drop to the ground, stunned and overwhelmed. This is a unique and profound experience, like God speaking to Moses in the burning bush or like Jesus meeting Saul on the road to Damascus. For a moment, God parts the curtain and shows Daniel—and also us—a behind-the-scenes view of spiritual realities. To Daniel, overwhelmed, comes a heavenly visitor, an angel. This is Daniel chapter 10:10-19.

And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹And he said to me, “O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.” And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. ¹²Then he said to me, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.”

The angel’s first message to Daniel is that he is greatly loved. The angel touches him, raising him from the ground to his hands and knees and then to his feet, upright. When he is standing, the angel says: “Fear not.” We would say it like this: “Don’t be afraid.” Then the angel allows Daniel to know the drama behind his weeks of prayer. Continuing (in verse 13), the angel says:

“The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, ¹⁴and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come.”

Daniel is greatly loved, and he has been truly heard. His prayer was heard from the start, when he first began to pray, three weeks earlier. The angel describes a battle, a battle of spiritual forces beyond our seeing. The princes and kings he describes are angelic or

demonic spirits, agents of God or of the enemy, agents of light and truth or darkness and deception.

Daniel has been fighting for his God all his life, fighting for the life and health of his people all his life, and he now finds that he has not been battling alone. He is overcome by this great revelation. He feels the limits of his own humanity and says to the angel (verse 17):

“How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.”

¹⁸Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. ¹⁹And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened.

For three long weeks, Daniel has turned his love and sorrow into earnest prayer. What answer comes? Daniel, you are greatly loved. Daniel, your prayers are heard. Daniel, you do not fight your battle alone. Daniel, do not fear. Daniel, be at peace. Daniel, be strong, take courage. Can you imagine this for yourself? Imagine an angel telling you that you are greatly loved and that your prayers are heard. That you do not fight these hard battles alone. Imagine a heavenly voice telling you not to fear, but to be strong and courageous and to be at peace. These words give Daniel the strength to go forward.

We witness very hard things on the world stage and in our own lives. Don’t we need to know that we do not face them alone? That we are loved and heard by God? Daniel was strengthened, and so are we.

The angel said to Daniel just what God said other times. In Isaiah, God speaks to his people:

Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
Isaiah 41:10

Daniel is reminded of what the Bible says from beginning to end. Evil is darker than you know, and it is beyond human ability to manage. When there is unreasonable and unreasoning and unrelenting hatred, such as the anti-Semitism that is once again on the rise today, it confirms that there is a power at work greater than ordinary human choices can create. The evil is beyond our own control. But there is an ultimate greatness. There is the power and plans and purposes and promises of God. What are we promised?

“Greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world.”

1 John 4:4

“We hold to the hope that lies before us.

This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.”

Hebrews 6:19

You are loved. You are heard. You need help beyond yourself, and you shall be strengthened. Fear will not rule us, but courage and peace belong to us. We are in the fight through our love and faith and our prayers. But we do not fight alone.

Hope with bandaged eyes... we get it. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had many personal losses, had a copy of this painting in his New York home. Martin Luther King, witnessing the sins of segregation, described this painting in a speech in 1962.

Sometimes what we must witness wounds us. Perhaps you feel, like the woman in the painting, that you are bent over, straining to hear a single note of hope from the single string left on the harp. Paul said that we don't fight just with flesh and blood but there are spiritual forces, truly good and evil. So when our hope, our trust, is battered with the sights and sounds and stories of the darkness and destruction, what do we do? We go to Jesus. The Bible tells us to lift our gaze, turn our eyes, to look to Jesus, who is our true and certain anchor.

We fix our eyes on Jesus and what he has done for us. The Bible tells us that “for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross,

despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus said: "The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

The battles rage, but Jesus has won the final victory for us. Even as we wait with bandaged eyes, we have the promise at the end of the Bible. It's the end of the great Story:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
and death shall be no more,
neither shall there be mourning, nor crying,
nor pain anymore, for the former things
have passed away.
Revelation 21:4



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