

“THE GOD OF HOPE”

Psalm 147:1-11; Mark 1:29-39

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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The Sacrament of Holy Communion

During the mounting pile of years I am accumulating as a pastor, I have read well over a thousand books. I'm not bragging; that's simply the opportunity that book allowances from churches over thirty-eight years provides. Among all those books, there are a couple of dozen or so that especially stand out. One of them, published exactly fifty years ago this month, is a little volume by Elizabeth O'Connor entitled Journey Inward, Journey Outward.¹

O'Connor was a writer, teacher, and leader of small groups with the famed Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. What I most appreciated about Elizabeth, who died in 1998, was her insistence that the Christian life is a journey consisting of two primary movements: the journey inward and the journey outward. Both movements are equally important. Both are needed for a healthy, sustainable practice of our faith.

O'Connor believed the church cannot truly be the church unless its people are on an inward journey. The journey inward is the way that leads to the heart and soul. The journey inward is the way of prayer and contemplation, of allowing the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly. It is what people do together here at Market Square on Sunday mornings in the *Room for the Inner Way* and in the personal time we take during the week to attend to scripture, prayer, and praise.

The inward journey is the way of introspection and of examining our lives and discipleship, becoming more deeply attuned to our fears and our hopes, our anxieties and our dreams. In our Call to Worship every week, we exclaim, “*Now is the time to worship! Now is the time to give our hearts!*” Our hearts are where our lives get put together and cohere in Jesus Christ.

¹ O'Connor, Elizabeth, Journey Inward, Journey Outward. Harper Collins, 1968 (but also there are subsequent editions).

But O'Connor was just as adamant that the ministry of the church cannot be sustained unless we also are engaged in a journey outward. This outward way of the gospel is not a populist path. It is not a quest for relevance or of fitting nicely into society. It is not the route of going along in order to get along nor of refraining from rocking any boats so as never to offend or affront. It is not saying what people want to hear at the expense of the truth.

The church's journey outward loves neighbors as much as self. It is the holy way that advocates on behalf of wayfarers and strangers, for refugees and immigrants. It is indefatigable in its pursuit of justice in the social intersections of life and in the corridors of power. The journey outward cherishes non-violence and seeks peace at every level. It stands up for those who are beaten down or back by racism or the seamy side of criminal justice or the lack of educational opportunities. It succors the earth and nurtures children and lifts up those who are broke, broken, or broken-hearted.

The gift that comes to the church and its members who embrace both the journey inward and the journey outward is *hope*. When we make only an inward journey, we reap a stagnant and rarified piety that is not much help in everyday life. But, making only the outward journey, we lack the sustaining vision and power that comes to us from our connection to God via the Holy Spirit. Together, collectively, the journey inward and the journey outward combine to imbue us with hope that, St. Paul testifies, "*does not disappoint.*"²

Without the inward journey, the journey outward can seem too immense, too overwhelming, too complicated. There are so many parts of life in the world that seem fractured, unfair and unjust.. Our lists of concerns continue to grow as we try frantically to stay abreast of the latest crises, cries for help, and social obscenities. When we realize that so much of what is wrong in the world is not just circumstantial but systemic, it is very easy to become discouraged. The inward journey undergirds and and raises up our ministry in the world by reminding us of God's power, presence, promise, and premise that with God nothing is impossible.³

Without the outward journey, the journey inward becomes pious, putrefied, and petrified and the Word of God in us becomes stilted, stifled, and stymied. In the Book of James, we read, "*Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only.*"⁴ In a passage of scripture often read on Ash Wednesday, the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah, the Lord asks the people rhetorically through the prophet if fasting, worship, and religious ritual really are the endgame for people of faith and the implied answer is "no." Then, God zeroes in: "*Is not this the fast I choose, the worship I desire:*

² Romans 5:5

³ Luke 1:37

⁴ James 1:22

*to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to make a place for the homeless poor; when you see the naked to cover them and not to hide yourself from those in need?"*⁵

Some of us are more adept at the journey inward and others seem more skilled at the outward journey but we all need both of them. The journey inward, the journey outward is one side of the equation and the other side is hope. If we were to diagram it mathematically, we'd have $JI + JO = HOPE$. Hope derives from coming to know and to trust ever more deeply and completely the character of God that we learn in God's Word - both the written Word of scripture and the Word made flesh in Jesus. Scripture points to Jesus who embodies both the God of hope and the hope of God. He is the one prefigured in our psalm today:

The Lord is gracious.

The Lord builds up Jerusalem and gathers the outcasts.

The Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

The Lord lifts up the downtrodden.

*The Lord prepares rain for the earth and makes grass to grow on the hills.*⁶

When the times are rough and tough as they are these days, when the politics are partisan and polemical, when the ills and ignominies of our society are pervasive and persistent, when racial enmities and bigotry rise to the surface like earthworms after a rainstorm, when the welcome mat is rolled up instead of out for people who historically have found hospitality and home in our country, when good jobs evaporate and poverty eviscerates, when a globalized economy places financial gain over the needs and welfare of people, when gun violence get normalized and gun laws do not even get scrutinized, when #metoo and #timesup shatter a long conspiratorial silence on a war waged against women, when a personal diagnosis devastates or personal circumstances deflate, hope can fade and flicker.

That is, unless we know the God of hope. The journey inward and the journey outward are complementary. They flow back and forth and into and out of each other. Our inward journey of prayer and study, music and preaching, contemplation and reflection, poetry and art reveal to us the heart and character of God who sends us into the world in his name. Conversely, our engagement in the struggles in the world for peace, justice, and well-being for all send us back to God whose nature, track record, and essence strengthen us and give us both courage and stamina.

⁵ Isaiah 58:1-9

⁶ Excerpts from Psalm 147,

While I was working on the sermon this week in my study here at the church, I was drawn to a painting of a cross Lori made for me a couple of years ago that I have hanging on a wall. The trustees have purchased standing desks for the staff and so I already was on my feet when I walked across the room to view the painting more closely. I don't know if it was the lighting or what it was, but I saw something in it I never had seen before. Into the background of the painting next to the cross Lori had secluded seven words that rose up from the canvas: "*Fear not.*" "*I am with you always.*"⁷

It was an almost perfect metaphor for what I am trying to say to you today...that being drawn in by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, making the journey inward, reveals the deep and abiding truth about God that changes us, enables us, and gives us power to minister outwardly in Christ's name. This is the key to longevity, continuity, and creativity in helping to heal and to reconcile the world...that we do it not on our own effort and energy that always tires out or dries up but with the power of God that is ever fresh and eternal.

My favorite line in our psalm today says, "*The Lord's delight is not in the strength of the horse nor the speed of the runner, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who hope in his steadfast love.*" The psalmist is telling us that victory does not always or inevitably go to the strong or to the swift but that those who hope in God's steadfast love find God's favor. In other words, there is something incalculable in life, something we cannot always figure out rationally, something that surprises our surmises, that only can be credited to God. The psalmist testifies to a vision of a world that gets restored, no matter how deep the ruptures and fissures, through the interest and inspiration of God.

Yesterday, a lowly St. John's University basketball team that was winless in its league and losers of its last eleven games defeated Duke University, the fourth ranked team in the country. The lesson: Do not ever presume an outcome, and that is especially so when God gets involved.

Because we know God and what God has done; because we know God and what can do; we do not give up hope. We never give up hope. Our God is the God of hope and "*hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*"⁸ Knowing God's love for God's people and creation steadies and sturdies our hope as it sends us into the world to be the body of Christ in our lives and times.

That hope is sacramentalized today in the receiving of the bread and the cup. We do not believe the bread and the juice turn into the actual physical body of our Lord but we *do* believe, nonetheless, that our Lord is really and spiritually present with us in and through the breaking of

⁷ Isaiah 41:10

⁸ Romans 5:5

the bread and the pouring of the cup. We receive the Lord in the sacrament even as we are received by the Lord. The journey inward. The journey outward. We are freed to go and to live in the world in his name knowing that *“God can do through us exceeding abundantly more than all we can ask or think or imagine.”*⁹

So, we do not lose heart¹⁰ and we do not lose hope. Not ever. No matter what. Do not ever give up hope. Our God is the God of hope and this God, this hope, will never, not ever, disappoint.

Amen.

⁹ Ephesians 3:20

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:16