

1 Lent C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

The text for the sermon comes from Romans 5 and is the passage that was used at the first meeting of the consolidation work groups on February 3rd:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. and not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.”

As I remember her, Hope O’Connor was a tough kid. Not the kind of girl who did especially well in 7th-grade home economics class. She just wasn’t into making cinnamon toast and hot cocoa. She had other things to do. Like smoke in the girls’ room. And flirt with Billy Turgeon.

This isn’t going to surprise many of you, but I didn’t smoke in the girls’ room. And though I wanted very much to, I didn’t flirt with Billy Turgeon. Or not enough that he noticed, anyway. And I was *good* in home ec class. I could turn out a well-shaped meatloaf with green beans almandine and those little Parker House rolls like nobody’s business.

Now, it wasn’t so much that I didn’t like Hope O’Connor. Actually, as the tough kids went, she was really a pretty nice one. But what it was, see, was that I was afraid of her. She didn’t suffer fools or goody-two shoes gladly. She didn’t take anything from anybody. Not from teachers. Not from boys. She could stand up for herself and she let it be known.

Hope O’Connor was the kind of girl I later have come to call “an upstate girl.” I’ve come to have enormous respect for “upstate girls”—tough, resourceful, smart enough to know that the world didn’t owe her a living. That, in fact, she’d need the know-how and the skills to look after herself.

But there was always one thing about Hope O’Connor and that was her name. “Hope.” I didn’t get it. Who’s Hope was she? Her parents? Surely she was setting her them up for hurt and not hope the way she carried on. Billy Turgeon’s Hope? Who knew what she would bring his way, with her long dark hair and snark-dripping tongue. Heartbreak, I thought maybe, but not hope.

See, I used to think that hope was something dainty and still, like a small flower folded between waxed paper and pressed for posterity between the pages of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the family Bible. I figured that hope, like the poet Emily Dickinson said, “was the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.”

But I was wrong. And Emily Dickinson was wrong. Hope is something different than that. I know that now. I know it the way I know there are bones beneath my skin. Hope is nothing fragile. Hope is not a flower, not a feather. Hope is tough. 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.

You see, years after I thought to remember the tough and resourceful Hope O’Connor, of my childhood, I gave birth to hope and that changed the way I saw things.

Some of you know the circumstances of my daughter, Linnea’s, birth—how she was born almost 11 weeks early. How she came out sounding like a little kitty and looking like the runt of the litter. How the doctors congratulated her father and me that she was a strapping three pounds instead of the two-pound bag of carrots they’d been expecting from such a prematurity.

A friend came to visit me at the hospital the day after Linnea’s birth. *I’ve found a middle name for Linnea*, he said. *I found it in chapel today, in the second lesson, from Romans. It’s hope*, he said. *Name her Hope*.

And we did name her Hope. Linnea Hope, hoping against hope that she would live. Live and be strong, that she would be a tough flower, like those lovely lichens alive among the tundra in the highest altitudes, unwilling to yield their life to the harsh climate, unwilling to die until they had blossomed fully.

Linnea’s birth embodies the quote from Romans that is today’s sermon text. Her birth brought Paul’s words alive for me—brought hope alive for me.

And hope’s no sure thing. It’s not even a polite thing. It’s not a good betting tip or a way of playing the percentages. Hope is chiefly about *not* knowing, not *knowing*, but longing with faith, anyway.

I guess that’s really where my memory of Hope O’Connor comes back in. She knew she was kid and as a kid, she needed her teachers and her parents and all those authority figures against whom she chafed with adolescent fury.

But Hope, as I remember her, never expected a free ride. She was willing to stand and fight, even if she later discovered she was wrong. She knew her parents and her teacher wouldn’t abandon her, despite her spunk. She knew it was perhaps even *because* of her spunk that she could count on them to be on the lookout for her well-being, even when she was too full of fight and hormones to know what were the best choices for her to make.

You see, that’s what I think the whole theological concept of hope is really all about. Hope in God and in God’s abiding love is neither frail like a flower, nor perfect, like a flower. Hope is wiry and tough. Hope can be shaped to fit the

circumstances of our lives. And it is through that fierce, resilient hope that we have access to God and to this grace in which we stand.

Fierce, resilient hope is our access to grace. Hope that resurrects itself again and again from the bed of the grave, the despair of death, the airlessness of the tomb—that's the mystery, isn't it? Hope pulls us out of a mealy-mouthed sense that all is well with the world into the stark acknowledgement that we need hope precisely because the stakes are so high: this is a sinful and dangerous life we live. It is the same kind of life that drove the nails into the hands and feet of God. It is the same kind of life that drained the breath of God from Jesus' lungs until all that was left was a shell of man, parched and dead, his lips still wrapped around the dying words, "It is finished."

Hope does not deny death, but bows before it, perhaps even in reverence of it—and goes on in spite of it.

Hope is wide-eyed, but not naïve. Don't be caught thinking that your faith will let you sleep in peace. Because your faith calls you to the starkest kind of hopefulness: that though our God did the audacious thing and died, yet our God lives. Your faith calls you to the starkest kind of hopefulness: that though we die, too, it is God's promise that we will live.

Push God on those words of promise, just as Hope O'Connor pushed the home ec teachers and those silly classmates of hers, like me, who thought so foolishly that hope should be more obedient and more sedate.

Push God on those words of promise, just as Linnea Hope pushed on lungs that were too weak and small, until her chest could hold and release--over and over again--all the breath and all the spirit that she needed.

Push God on those words of promise that, though we *will* suffer, we will also live. And we boast in our tough and wiry hope of sharing the glory of God, knowing that hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit—that fierce, resilient source of hope--through whom we have access to this grace in which we stand.

Amen.