

HOPE – OUR ANCHOR IN STORMY SEAS
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church
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Scripture: Hebrews 6:11-20

Text: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."
Hebrews 6:19

During this month of January we are looking together at the thrilling theme of hope. We have seen that our Heavenly Father is a God of hope and that as disciples of Jesus we are to be people of hope.

We have noticed that this hope is for all seasons. For hope is not just for when things are going well. Hope is especially relevant for times when they are not. Hope is to characterize us when the sky is at its blackest and the winds are their fiercest.

So today we go in search of **HOPE - OUR ANCHOR IN STORMY SEAS.** The letter to the Hebrews tells us, "**We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.**" (Hebrews 6:19)

Now the anchor is both an ancient and modern symbol of hope. It was a common piece of art that adorned the places where the first Christians met as you can see from the pictures on the screen.

If we go into a Christian meeting place today we might see a cross. But in the first century you were just as likely to see an anchor.

Clement of Alexandria was a great teacher in the early church. He suggests the anchor as an appropriate design for a Christian's ring.

Gravestones often had an anchor inscribed on them. They proclaimed the message that Christian hope is an anchor to hang on to. Even in the face of death, the people of Christ can lay their loved ones to rest in sure and certain hope.

The anchor is a powerful symbol because it is easy to understand. For anchors speak of security. As an anchor holds a ship fast in a storm, so hope sustains us in the tempests of life.

The sureness of our hope is symbolized by the anchor cross. This goes back to the days of persecution before Constantine. To the unbelieving authorities, the sign only appeared to be a non-threatening anchor. But to the Christians it spoke of the hope which kept them steadfast and immovable, even as they were being dragged to face the lions in the Roman arena.

Now the thing about an anchor is that you must possess it before you need it. You can't wait until a storm arises in the middle of the ocean before you think of procuring an anchor. It's too late then.

A warship needs that anchor even when it is in a harbor and there is no danger whatsoever. Then when it goes to sea, should the need arise, the anchor is ready.

It is the same with hope. The waters of our life may be calm now, but as we go off to battle there will be choppy seas ahead. If we are going to survive and thrive in those churning waters we need to ensure we have hope on board.

Where I grew up in London there is a pub called "We Anchor In Hope". I am always impressed by the excellent theology of the drinking community, for the truth is we need to anchor in hope.

So the writer of Hebrews urges us **"to take hold of the hope set before us." (v.18)** He invites us **"show this same diligence... so that what you hope for may be fully realized." (v.11)**

Perhaps we are thinking, "I'd love to have my soul firmly anchored in hope. I long to have this sort of hope that will keep me stable and safe in the storms of life. What do I need to do?" The writer of Hebrews gives us three practical answers.

First, we are to anchor our hope by **imitating faithful people**. So we are instructed, **"Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (v.12)**

The writer then gives us the example of Abraham. For God had told Abraham, **"I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." (v.14)** When God made this statement everything seemed impossibly bleak. God kept talking about the thousands of descendants that Abraham would have at a time when he didn't have a single child. Yet Abraham and Sarah persistently believed a faithful God rather than the doubts or their own hearts.

Then the great day came when Isaac was born and the promise started to be fulfilled. Years later, on the day when Abraham almost lost Isaac, the guarantee was renewed when God said, **"I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore." (Genesis 22:17)**

Ultimately Abraham didn't need to believe because the evidence was before his eyes. God had kept his word. **"So after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised." (v.15)**

So a very practical way that we can anchor our souls is to imitate faithful people who hold firm in stormy seas.

On this Martin Luther King weekend we can rejoice that we have Dr. King's example of faithfulness to imitate. How delightful that as a nation we celebrate the life of a black Baptist pastor. How we need his hopeful outlook today.

We have arrived at a somber moment. For 2019 marks the 400th anniversary of African slaves being brought to the shores of Virginia. Jill Lepore has recently written a book entitled *These Truths: A History of the United States*. She is a gifted writer and Harvard scholar. She helps us understand the roots of our racial problems today.

She informs us that from 1500 to 1800, 2.5 million Europeans relocated to the Americas, along with 12 million Africans brought here by force. That wave of newcomers resulted in the deaths of some 50 million Native Americans.

She shows how the enslavement of Africans predates the formation of our nation and served as a shaping influence on our founders. George Washington's very smile was cobbled from teeth pulled from the mouths of his slaves. The legal justification for slavery was etched in our first constitution, which declared that Africans and those of African descent were just two-thirds human.

Tragically, much of this was made possible by the silence of the church. For roughly 350 of those 400 years much of the church was complicit, either by doctrine or by silence, in a system that fostered the enslavement and subsequent discrimination of the descendants of those first slaves.

For even after our nation fought an unprecedented bloody Civil War to end slavery, the stain of racism remained. In the south around 1900 a black American was hanged or burned alive once every four days.

The health of our nation today requires that we come to terms with this history because the past 50 years have not magically erased all the residue of the first 350.

But we need hopeful examples of how to act courageously in these days when our nation is being torn apart. Martin Luther King provides that for us. For bad as things are now, they were worse in his day. What kept him going? His soul was anchored in hope.

During the struggle for Civil Rights in the 1960s many people sat on the sidelines. They knew that taking a stand could cost them their jobs and their friends. In certain parts of the country they risked personal violence.

Those who did take a stand were often unpopular. Some were thrown into jail. Now, 50 years later, we know they were right. They were the heroes. Now they are proud to show black and white photos of themselves marching alongside Martin Luther King.

Those who sat on the sidelines now wish they had shown more courage. They recognize they were wrong. They were cowards. They took the easy way out.

Today Christ still calls us to take a stand for him. Sometimes we are reluctant to do so because of the impact it might have on our profession or our relationships. But one day we are all going to stand before Jesus and none of that will matter.

Even if we lost our job we will be glad we did. For we will be commended for it by the King of kings. And those who didn't take a stand will be desperately ashamed and wish they had.

When it comes to standing up for righteousness we need to take the long view. It is often unpopular in the short term, but ultimately righteousness will be vindicated.

Many people are feeling hopeless about race relations in our country. But hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Christians are to point the way forward by pointing to Christ – the source of our hope. Let's recall the words of Martin Luther King who said, "Anyone can be great because anyone can be a servant."

Let's acknowledge the truth of his sermon in which he said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle." So let us anchor our hope by imitating faithful people.

Second, the writer of Hebrews tells us to anchor our hope by **trusting in God's promises**. But how do we know we can trust God's promises? When we make a serious promise we sometimes confirm its integrity by adding an oath to the promise. We do this in a court of law.

God also does that for his people in order to encourage our fragile faith. He did this with Abraham so we are told, **"When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself." (v.13)**

So God gives us his promise and then confirms it by an oath. He cannot swear by someone greater than himself so he swears by himself. We can trust all God's promises because it is **"impossible for God to lie." (v.18)**

When we learn to depend on God's promises our lives are transformed by hope. That's what happened to Jurgen Moltmann. Jurgen grew up in Hitler's Germany. He was planning a career in quantum physics when he was drafted into the army at the height of the Second World War.

Moltmann was assigned to the anti-aircraft batteries in Hamburg. He witnessed friends incinerated in the fire bombings of that town and the question "Why did I survive?" haunted him.

After surrendering to the British, the young German soldier spent the next three years in prison camps in Belgium, Scotland and England. When Hitler's empire imploded, exposing the moral rot at the center of the Third Reich, Moltmann saw

how other German prisoners "collapsed inwardly, how they gave up all hope, sickening for the lack of it, some of them dying."

As he learned the truth about the Nazis, Moltmann felt an inconsolable grief about life. He was, "weighed down by the somber burden of a guilt which could never be paid off."

Moltmann had brought two books with him into battle. They were Goethe's poems and the works of Nietzsche, neither of which nourished much hope. But an American chaplain gave him an Army-issue New Testament and Psalms, signed by President Roosevelt. Jurgen Moltmann read these words, "If I make my bed in hell, behold you are there."

He wondered, "Could God be present in that dark place?" As he read on, Moltmann found words that perfectly captured his feelings of desolation. He became convinced that God "was present even behind the barbed wire, indeed especially behind the barbed wire."

Moltmann also found something he desperately needed in the Psalms. It was the promise of hope. Walking the perimeter of the barbed wire at night for exercise, he would circle a small hill in the center of the camp on which stood a hut that served as a chapel. That hut became for him a symbol of God's presence in the midst of suffering.

Upon release, Moltmann went to seminary and became one of the leading theologians of the last century, developing a theology of hope. He has had a profound influence on me since my student days. I have consumed his writings. They explain much about my personality and my theology of hope. They are the reason why I chose this theme of hope for my final series.

Jurgen Moltmann lived through the firebombing of Hamburg by the Royal Air Force that was called "Operation Gomorrah." An experience like that could have left him scarred for life. But it didn't because by hanging onto the eternal promises of God he had an anchor of hope that gave him life when he was surrounded by death.

Out of his own experience came two great themes of his theology. They are God's presence with us in our suffering, and God's promise of a perfect future. Moltmann observed, "If Jesus had lived in Europe during the Third Reich, he would have been branded like other Jews and shipped off to the gas chambers. In Jesus we have the definitive proof that God suffers with us."

At the same time Jesus' resurrection gives us a foretaste of a future time when earth will be restored to God's original design. For Easter is the beginning of what Moltmann calls, "The laughter of the redeemed." It is God's protest against death.

In a famous sentence, Jurgen Moltmann expressed the great span from Good Friday to Easter. It is a summary of human history, past, present and future. "God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him." That's the sort of hope we have when we depend on the promises of God. It is a hope that provides an anchor in stormy seas.

The third way we can anchor our hope is by **following our forerunner.**

The writer of Hebrews declares, **"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf." (v.19-20)**

That word "forerunner" was used to describe the task of a small party of soldiers sent to explore the way ahead, prior to the advance of the rest of the army.

So Jesus is our forerunner. He has gone ahead of us into the holy presence of God. By his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus has achieved a momentous victory and this has prepared our way to glory. With such a leader there is no need for hopelessness regarding our future.

Now most anchors go down into the sea. But our anchor goes up into heaven. John Calvin has a lovely comment on this verse when he says, "An anchor is cast down in the sea because there is solid ground at the bottom, but our hope rises and flies aloft because it finds nothing to stand on in this world. It cannot rely on created things but finds rest in God alone."

This verse is referring to the Old Testament practice where once a year the high priest went into the inner sanctuary of the Temple. This was marked off from the rest of the Temple by a curtain. This area is where God lived.

Tradition has it that the high priest tied a rope to his leg before going behind the curtain in case he was struck dead by God's holiness. The rope could then be used to drag out his body.

Because the high priest was a sinful human being he could only stay in God's presence for a brief period of time. But Jesus is our perfect high priest. So he can remain in the inner sanctuary. He is entitled to stay. Because of his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection we can follow him, right into the presence of God.

So we are to **"take hold of the hope set before us."** That means to bank on that hope, to trust in it, to feel secure in it, and to be satisfied with it. When we do that we will be hopeful even when senior pastors leave or governments shut down.

Ministry can be hard. Every year thousands of pastors give up the struggle and drop out. One became a mortician. When asked why he said, "When I was a pastor I would spend nine months working with a couple only to see their marriage fall apart. I worked a year with an addict only to see them go back to their addiction.

I spent hours answering a person's doubts about the Christian faith only to see them abandon it. In my new job as a mortician, once I straighten a person out, they stay that way."

But for those of us who remain in ministry we do so because we know that Jesus is the only hope for the world.

We can see why the first Christians loved this picture of their hope as an anchor. When an anchor is working it is invisible. It sinks down beneath the waters and firmly grips the sea bed beneath. So when the winds howl and the waves lash the ship, it rides steadily because it is held fast by something outside of itself.

And so our anchor Jesus Christ is invisible. We cannot see him. He is in heaven sustaining his people down here in the world, which Isaiah likened to a troubled sea.

As an anchor is attached by a strong chain to a boat, so our hope is tied to our soul by the chains of Christ who has promised to never let us go.

So the most important issue in life is to be certain that we have this hope. Scripture tells us, "**We are saved by hope.**" (**Romans 8:24**) So let us be sure that we have a hope that our sins are pardoned, our heart is renewed, and our soul is at peace with God. Then even when the storms blow in the days to come we will be anchored in hope.

Then with joy and confidence we can say our **Victory Verse** for the week.
We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.
Hebrews 6:19