

"The Hope Filled Lampstand"

Scripture Passages: **1) Matthew 5:14-16**
 2) Luke 11:33-36
 2) Revelation 1:12-20

Restoring Hope: John's purpose for writing the book of Revelation was to restore hope within the seven congregations for whom he served as pastor. For the last two weeks we have reflected about how hope gets sucked out of us by our culture, by our circumstances, by our choices, by our business. How does hope get sucked out of you? How does hope get sucked out of us as a church?

And why does it matter? Why does it matter if we are people walking around without hope?

Eeyore, from A.A. Miln's, Winnie the Pooh, represents a powerful image of someone who walks around without hope. Charles Shultz's character, Charlie Brown, provides another image of someone who struggles with hopelessness. We all know downer people, people who suck the energy out of us whenever we are around them. We probably try hard to avoid contact with such people.

Sometimes, however, we are probably just such people ourselves. Hopelessness is not attractive though. Hopelessness is not inviting. Hopelessness is not hospitable. Hopelessness is not endearing. Hopelessness is not lovable. Most profound, hopelessness denies God. A sense of hopelessness is a profound theological statement to make.

We don't have to work too hard to imagine how hopelessness as it crept into the community life of the seven congregations in Western Turkey impacted their witness to the world? The question is can we picture that reality for ourselves? Can we picture how a sense of hopelessness impacts our witness?

Before John spoke specifically to the situation in each congregation he shared a picture, an image, a theological statement about the church. Listen as John draws a hopeful image for the seven congregations to grasp onto in the midst of their struggle.

Read Revelation 1:12-20

A Beautiful Image: John's image for the church is a beautiful image of hope. Each church is a lampstand, but not just any kind of lampstand a golden lampstand. In other words, John's shares a redeemed picture of the church, here. He shares an image of what we are becoming. As churches we are beautiful golden lampstands.

In reality of course, churches are messy places because they are made up of messy people, like you and me. A more appropriate image would be of a tarnished lampstand, or a cracked lampstand, or rotting wooden lampstand. But John portrays the church with the hopeful, redeemed image of golden lampstands because of what else is in the picture.

The seven churches are gathered around Christ, not Jesus in the tomb or on the cross but the resurrected Christ, the all-powerful Christ, the Christ that has been and always will be, the creating Christ. This image fits perfectly with Paul's image of the Church as Christ's Body. Or Jesus' own image of himself as the vine and the church as the branches. Each of these images depicts the church as an extension of Christ. That is a beautiful, hopeful image.

John doesn't stop there, however. John goes on and shares the news that each church has a guardian angel. In other words there is a holy messenger attached to each church. What does that mean? It means that God continues to speak to the church. God continues to be at work in and through the church. We truly have the power and support of God as we live out our lives as the church. We have tremendous reason to live as hope-filled people. We don't need to walk around as Eeyore or Charlie Brown because we are a golden lampstand.

The Golden Lampstands: So in your mind what does a lampstand do?

In this day and age, when we all have electricity and flashlights and the streets are lit, I think it is hard for us to grasp the importance of a lampstand. This week I want to challenge you to pick a day, and don't turn on your lights, use candles, even if just for an hour or so. Spend some time reflecting on the importance of a lampstand, the piece of furniture that holds light, so that it is most effective.

On Christmas Eve, when candles are central to our worship, we get a feel for this imagery where the church is the lampstand. That is why I think it is so important to have the kids bring in the light every week and for them to carry that light to the back of the Sanctuary at the end of our worship. That is critical imagery for us to grabble with as we come together. The church, the lampstand, gathers all the little lights together so that they can be refueled and strengthened for the journey back into the world.

So what else does a lampstand do? Well, a lampstand holds the light, so that people can see. Does that mean that the lampstand is the light? No, the lampstand is not the light. The people of the church become the light as they follow the ways of Jesus, as they love God and love neighbor, as they live as a blessing in the world. The lampstand supports the light, nurtures the light, feeds the light, and gathers the light.

On Christmas Eve we start with one candle lit. This room is really dark with only one candle lit. But as the light gets passed around this room, the room becomes brighter and brighter. The lampstand focuses the light, strengthens the light, and concentrates the light.

Importance of Community: The other important piece to the lampstand imagery is that lampstands are never single lights all by themselves. Lampstands are always groups of light bunched together, like a menorah or candelabra.

One reason this is a difficult time to be a church is because everything our culture does and creates is centered on the individual. Our culture focuses on the "I", while the gospel of Jesus Christ focuses on the "We". The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people. Listening for, then responding to God's Word is an act of the people, not isolated individuals. As Christians the very context of our lives should be within the believing community. Christ is in the midst of us when we are a community.

In relationship to this point, Eugene Peterson writes, "Love cannot exist in isolation: away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately: cut off from others it is perverted into greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude: separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith."

Together we make up a lampstand. This particular lampstand has been holding the light of Christ for 168 years. That is pretty exciting. Together you and I have the privilege of shining the light of Christ out into the world right now. The closer we follow Christ together the stronger our light.

Thus the strength of our light is impacted by how we choose to live both as individuals and as a community. As we have talked about our lives are integrally connected. Also the light is strengthened as we come together with other lampstands, as we work with other churches. As individuals and as a community we want to always consider the health of our light and how we can strengthen our light. We are going to be considering that for the next several weeks.

What Kind of Light Are We? If we are a group of Eeyore's or Charlie Browns our light is going to be rather dim. It doesn't matter how great the lampstand is if it has little light to shine out into the world, then that lampstand will have little impact for the Kingdom of God.

Questions for Consideration: As we enter into John's Revelation we want to consider how we live our lives? How do people experience us? How does the living of our life affect others? How bright is our light? Have we ever asked the people around us those questions? Have we ever had the guts to ask someone else how we could live in ways that would brighten our light?

Similarly, how well do we play in the sandbox with other people? Are we team players? Or are we soloists? Do we strive to strengthen our corporate light or do we live in ways that undermine our life together. These are the kind of critical questions we will be addressing over the next seven weeks.

Conclusion: What kind of light are you? What kind of light am I? What kind of light are we?

Howard Friend has a chapter on Hope in his wonderful book, Gifts of an Uncommon Life, The Practice of Contemplative Activism. At the end of that chapter he shares a story of a Cherokee elder sitting around a campfire with his grandchildren. He begins the story by saying, "There's a terrible fight between two wolves going on inside me." His eyes are filled with intensity as they reflect the light from the fire. He goes on, "One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, and resentment, the other wolf represents joy, peace, love, hope and kindness." Then he paused and looked into the eyes of each of his grandchildren. Eventually one curious grandchild couldn't wait any longer. He asked, "Grandfather, which wolf won?" He again looked into each of their eyes and then he said, "The one I feed."

We choose how we live. We choose how we live with each other. So what attributes will we choose to feed? Will we choose to live filled with hope? Will we choose to feed hope? Will we choose to live our lives in ways that reflect the light of Christ? That is the purpose of the church to be a lampstand that gathers light and shines it out into the world. But is that how the world experiences us? John writes the Revelation with the hope that we will choose to feed the light of Christ that lives in each of us and brightens as we bring our light together. Let us be a church that shines the light of Christ with great intensity. Amen.