

Today we recite 4 small pieces of Scripture that remind us that God is always with us:

- Psalm 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”
- Deuteronomy 31:8 “It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”
- Romans 5:3-5 (NIV) ³ Not only that, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance produces character; character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.
- John 16:33 I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. ”

Psalm 27:1, Deuteronomy 31:8, Romans 5:3-5, John 16:33

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“Keep Hope Alive!”

John Nestell, Guest Precher

On March 12th of this year my wife Jayne, our friend Cindy, and myself decided to go to Johannes. It’s a restaurant featuring modern European Cuisine from Austrian born Chef/Owner Johannes Bacher in Downtown Palm Springs . It’s 50 miles east of where we were staying in Redlands, California.

We parked on the downtown main street at 4:00pm. We walked around shopping in some of the stores along the way to the restaurant. We arrived at Johannes just before 5 o'clock for our dinner reservation. We had a marvelous dinner and left the restaurant about 6:15. As we headed towards our car which was 3 blocks away on a parallel street, a street fair was taking place. Our waiter mentioned it but we didn’t know much about it. As we walked up Main Street, we could not find our car. So I found a police officer and asked him about our car. He said “did you have the red Jeep Compass?” I replied: “Oh Yeah”

Go ahead Kermit, I know you're dying to tell them!

“Hi ho! You got Toad, didn’t ya!”

You bet I did!

When the officer responded to me he said: “ We had to tow it, to clear the street. You’ll have to take an Uber about 4 miles away to pick it up at Mohica towing.”

So we got an Uber and arrived at Mohica Towing as the sunset. Once we got there, they could not find our car. So, the attendant called his supervisor. The supervisor advised us since I was not the owner of the rental car, it could not be released to me. So there we were, 4 miles out of town... in the desert... 50 miles from home... waiting for another Uber. As we waited there looking west at the setting sun, the song gloom, despair, and agony on me, was playing inside my head.

The next day after numerous calls, talking to several agents, the car company replaced our car. However, we had to get a ride 25 miles away to the Ontario airport to pick it up. It took several weeks dealing with the company over the towing bill. The end result of having our rental car impounded was as follows:

Uber to Impound lot - \$20.94

Uber back home to Redlands - \$121.18

Car rental charge to pick up the car from the impound lot - \$971.10

Experience of our trip to Johannes in Palm Springs... Priceless!

When the Hee Haw guys sang about tall girls in the opening video, it brought up another memory. In eighth grade, the teachers in gym class decided to join the girls' and boys' gym classes together and teach us how to square dance. As the boys and girls lined up, we paired off. At first, I was not feeling very excited about this idea but as the line progressed, I began to see that I was going to be paired with Paula. A beautiful girl whom I had a crush on since 7th grade. As I paired up with Paula, I was ready to do-si-do and promenade. However, as we took 2 steps forward together, Coach Borsma stepped in and yelled: "this isn't going to happen. " So he grabbed me by the arm and hauled me over to Mary, who was about 2" taller than me. I was about 6' tall at the time and there I was looking up at Mary with her pointy glasses. How could this happen? He's ruining my dream; my romantic fate has been altered. God Giveth and God taketh away. It just wasn't fair!

I'm able to laugh about all this stuff now, but the truth is that living in this physical world isn't always easy or fair. Life throws all kinds of obstacles at us, forcing us to deal with adversity. I believe it's either God's way or nature's way of keeping us busy and giving us challenging things to do.

Anything in this physical world like our cars, our homes, our appliances, and even our bodies, at some point, are going to break down and wear out. Now that I'm retired, I swear that I'm kept busy by all the medical visits I have to attend to keep my body running. If my body was a car I would have traded it in a long time ago. Then there are accidents or storms that cause damage or physical hurt, leaving us to pick up the pieces. But worse of all is when we lose loved ones to sickness, accidents, or other unforeseen events. The greatest pain in my life as well as my wife Jayne's life was losing our son. All this gloom, despair, and agony, suffering, deep dark depression, excessive misery! It's been around since the beginning of time as mentioned in today's scripture. Jesus said: "Here on earth you'll have many trials and sorrows."

Let's briefly look at the stories of two men.

The first is from the book of Job. Job suddenly and devastatingly lost all of his children, his wealth, his servants, his health, and his support from his wife and friends. His entire world collapsed. While sitting in ashes and scraping his wounds, everyone thought he was being punished for doing something wrong. But Job knew in his heart he had lived with integrity. Even though he could not understand why this was happening, he refused to curse God. He questioned, he wrestled, he cried out – but he held on. At last, God responded—not with simple answers, but with a reminder of the vastness of creation and the limits of human understanding. Job realized that some things are beyond explanation, and that trust does not always require answers. In the end, Job's life was restored. He found healing, and his blessings were restored.

Then there's Louis Zamperini who earned a spot in the 1936 Olympics. He didn't win a medal, but he caught the attention of the world by his determination and fearless spirit. But then came World War II. As a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Forces, he was shot down over the Pacific Ocean. He was one of the three out of eleven that survived the crash. He spent 47 days on a life raft, battling starvation, thirst, sharks, and strafing runs by enemy aircraft. When land finally appeared, it was not a rescue, but a capture. He then spent two years in Japanese POW camps, enduring extreme brutality.

After the war he returned home, but the battle inside him continued. Haunted by nightmares and anger, his life began to unravel. Then one day he attended a sermon by Billy Graham. That night changed everything. Louis chose forgiveness over hatred. He let go of the bitterness that had held him captive long after the war ended. Years later, he returned to Japan – not for revenge, but to offer forgiveness to his former captors.

Both of these stories don't promise a life free of suffering. Instead it shows that faith can endure even the deepest pain. Sometimes the greatest strength is simply holding on.

Today's message is about keeping hope alive! Hope is more than a wish. Remember the Scottish proverb: if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. Hope and optimism are not the same thing. Optimism is a belief system. It is the general expectation that things will turn out well. An optimist looks at the future and assumes the "weather" will be sunny. Hope is an action-oriented motivation. It is the belief that a positive outcome is possible and that you have the agency to help make it happen. Hope doesn't require a sunny forecast; it requires action, and it just requires a path.

So, what is the path I think we all should be on? It is the path of Jesus. By following what Jesus taught us. Here are 5 principals I've learned from Jesus, which I have tried to live by.

1) Love God and love others. Jesus emphasized that the greatest commandment is to love God wholeheartedly and to love your neighbor as yourself. This includes kindness even toward those who are difficult to love. Robin Williams lived by his statement: "Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind always" . Kindness is shown by taking the time to help others and by what you say.

2) Forgive others. Jesus taught that forgiveness is essential—not just once, but repeatedly. Letting go of resentment frees both the one who forgives and the one forgiven.

3) Practice humility. Jesus often lifted up the humble and challenged pride. He taught that true greatness comes from serving others, not from status or power.

4) Show compassion and mercy. Jesus consistently cared for the poor, sick, and outcast, urging others to do the same. Compassion wasn't optional—it was central to how we treat people.

5) Trust in God and live by faith. Jesus encouraged people not to be consumed by worry, but to trust in God's care and guidance, focusing on what truly matters rather than material concerns.

These five things aren't just rules to follow; they are the actions that turn a simple wish into a living hope. They are the path that keeps us moving forward, even when the 'weather' isn't sunny. " And my Hope is that all people find this Hope in Jesus. Especially with our youth, In this church, across our country, and around the world.

In closing I wrote a small devotional In October 2017. At that time The Hancock First United Methodist Church was starting to undergo a Vital Church Initiative to renew and rebuild the declining attendance. I wrote this nine years ago. I'm going to read it unchanged from the original because much of it is still pertinent today:

The world is full of bad news these days, there are tensions in the Middle East, tensions with North Korea. Political unrest that constantly divides us across this great nation. Nature is constantly adding to the chaos with one disaster after another. This year alone we've had hurricanes Harvey in Texas, Irma in the Florida Keys, Maria that devastated Puerto Rico. An Earthquake in Mexico. Monsoon flooding in Colombia and Sierra Leone. Wildfires in Santa Rosa. And the year is not over. It's a time of trouble all right, and for us believers, it may sometimes be hard to believe – but it never is as bad as it seems. Let me illustrate with a story.

Way out west a cowboy is driving down a road, his dog riding in the back of his pickup truck, his faithful horse in the trailer behind. As he takes a curve on the highway, he suddenly loses control of the vehicle and has a terrible accident. Sometime later, a State Police officer comes on the scene. A great lover of animals, the officer's attention is first drawn to the horse. Realizing the serious nature of its injuries, he draws his service revolver and puts the animal out of its misery. Then walking around the accident he finds the dog, also critically wounded, and whining miserably in pain. This grips his heart, and he quickly ends the dog's suffering as well. Finally, the police officer locates the cowboy, who has suffered multiple fractures and can barely breathe. "Hey, are you okay?" , he says. The cowboy takes one look at the smoking gun in the trooper's hand and quickly replies, with unexpected energy, **"Never felt better!"**

The problems of life have not stopped arriving since I last wrote this devotional. However, I want to be clear: I do not believe we are dying alongside the road. Quite the contrary. I believe our greatest strength is our open doors and our warm welcomeness to everyone. Yet, we must face the reality that Christianity is experiencing a declining population. My deepest concern is that so many people are facing life's heavier seasons entirely alone, without the help and grace that Jesus brings. Hardships have been part of the human experience since the beginning of time, and they will continue until the end. But those burdens become so much easier to bear when we have the love and community support that Jesus taught us to provide for one another. My friends, our Church, our community, our country, and our world need a path of hope. It is my prayer that we continue to lead—focusing especially on guiding our youth—so we can help everyone find the path Jesus offers. Together, we will KEEP HOPE ALIVE! Amen.