

## TO HOPE

One afternoon, a man approached a children's league game of softball. He walked up to a young boy on the bench who was watching his teammates out in the field. The man asked the boy what was the score.

The boy replied, "It's 18-0; we're behind."

"My oh my," said the spectator, "I bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" answered the boy, "We haven't even gotten up to bat, yet."

Did the young boy have hope? ..... or just wishful thinking? ..... or .. was he simply "Way out of touch with reality?"

There is more to hope than just expecting or wanting something to happen.

Quite often we confuse wish with hope, and.... sometimes we are just out of touch with reality.

There are many things we would like to see happen, and at times, there are things that we really need to have happen.

Maybe we do have hope..... or perhaps those aspirations are just dreams .... or....illusions.

It could be that our desire is to get into shape and lose weight over the holidays????

Maybe it is to improve our lot in life, to have more money and stuff?

Maybe the longing is for better health or a deeper sense of stability?

Perhaps we envision our nation investing in peaceful alternatives to problems and demonstrating a commitment to gracious justice.

Or, maybe we want all the nations of the world to start doing what is necessary to respond to global warming?

Or the need may be more personal????

A wish, a dream, a hope, a delusion..... what's the difference?

Normally, I don't preach a sermon with "points", but I am this time, so you can have your pencils ready. : )

Before I start I need to tell you the following:

Point 4 is really the first condition, but I want to deal with it last. But, I think it would be confusing if I call it point one, yet present it at the end. So, I'm just calling it point 4.

And, don't worry about what I just said, there won't be a test.

Point 1..... is the obvious aspect of a hope, and this trait applies to most aspirations for those who are mentally stable.

We hope for something better, and this applies to dreams, too.

Point 1 is: we view the aspiration positively. It is something we want.

That's simple, so moving right along.

Point 2

The desire must be realistic; there must be a viable degree of outcome.

In other words, it must be honest; it must contain truth.

Dreams and wishes are often not realistic; they probably won't happen.

Regardless, dreaming can be fun and entertaining. I think that element is the allure to buying into the lottery.

There is NO hope in winning because the odds are so overwhelming against having the "lucky" number, and that is what it is luck, not hope.

When I was a child at Christmas time, I'd keep the "wish book" under my bed, and every night, I'd look at it and I dream of getting those fancy toys. It was all a wish, albeit a fun wish, but there was no chance that Santa would give me that stuff for Christmas.

I used to "wish" that the leafs would win the cup,..... but you know,... that notion may be shifting into the "hope" mode.... This year, there could be a small element of truth to it,.... making it a hope.

Okay,.... okay..... it is still a wish.

Nevertheless, sometimes dreams do happen. Sometimes wishes come true, but more often than not,... they're fairy tale fodder, and not worth investing ourselves into them, or worse. Worse because investing in wishes / living in an illusion can be destructive.

I've talked with kids who planned to drop out of school because they were going to make millions in professional sports, but it was just a wish, no matter their personal investment.

And, personal investment is point number 3.

Hope requires a personal investment.

A person lost in the woods that waits to be rescued is investing in that need because they are working to stay alive, and to be found.

Working hard to save money, and then diligently studying is investing in the hope of graduating from university.

In contrast, a person's desire could be realistic, yet making counterproductive life choices can sabotage the pursuit .... changing a hope into a mere dream.

That behaviour is the prime condition of poverty.

Poverty is much more than being financially deficient. Poverty is living without hope, and we middle class people / we who have hope really struggle to understand the choices made by those in grips of poverty.

Being in poverty is being defeated, and so delayed gratification is not an option,..... because the future never brings anything good.

We understand the need for investment.

We appreciate working hard for a desired outcome.

Yet, our focus could be wrong; sometimes what we are investing ourselves in,.... actually is not leading to our goals and dreams.

For example: some people will work extremely hard to make money, and they may appear to be succeeding, yet..... their desire is really to be safe, loved and respected.

Their spent energy and time is not taking them in that direction, so their need is really a wish, and not a hope.

In the spiritual domain, we call investing in hope: Faith!

In faith we aspire and yearn for the good / for a positive outcome.

Similar to hope, faith is honest; it is realistic, and we know this for a number of reasons.

We learn this truth from personal experience and the experiences of others.

Telling “faith” stories, including Biblical stories, are vitally important for spiritual growth .... for faith.

Through experience we learn that God is trustworthy, that God is loving and God cares for us.

In addition, there is a mystical element to faith, and that is the touch of God’s Spirit.

There are times when we are touched / when our inner eyes sees God, and we know it.

Faith is realistic because God is real.

However, when we expect God to perform irrationally or in ways that are counter to God, then we don’t have faith, but merely an illusion /a dream.

God isn’t our personal genie, and I don’t think God is concerned about who wins a game.

Faith also demands personal investment.

How we live / how we invest our time and resources determines our faith..... and our hope.

Today’s Mark passage was written for those who were struggling and being persecuted.

This section of Mark is sometimes called the “little apocalypse” because it dealt with end of time stuff.

The readers, in the first century, would recognize the Jewish apocalyptic writing style..... which include fanciful images and embellishments.

They would not have focussed on the details, but on the real message.

Mark presents a message of hope / a call to faith for those living beyond the resurrection.

Mark presents encouraging words that God has not forsaken them, that God is near,..... and that believers must continue to “keep awake” and to invest in their beliefs.

In other words, the passage is saying your faith requires personal investment, so keep at it,..... and your hope will be realized.

God can be trusted..... so live what you believe – have faith, real faith.

And yes, just like with hope,..... faith includes doubt.

Hope / Faith is living with questions and mystery.

We don't hope for what is certain. Likewise faith is not having the right answers or the correct doctrines... because that is certainty.

Faith is reaching out into the darkness.... because we have good reason to believe that we will find the light / find God in that pursuit.

Finally, the last point,..... which is really the first point.

We need to realize / to appreciate that we haven't arrive yet, and that our situation is not good or as it needs to be.

Nobody, at this moment is hoping to be here in church,.... because we are here.

However, we may be in a place, situation, lifestyle or a spiritual condition that is not good / that is maybe even destructive and counter to the ways of God / the way of love.

And, if we don't know that, then we don't have hope,.... until we become aware of our need to change.

The people in Isaiah's time came to recognize that there was a reason for their pain and anguish,..... and the reason was they had drifted away from God. They were feeling the consequences of sin,... and sin is whatever separates or hurts our relationship with God.

The people cried out to God, in the Isaiah 64 passage because they are in despair; they feel the pain. They are begging for God's mercy, and to be rescued.

This passage is a pray of confession, and a prayer of hope / of faith.

They realize that God has the answer to their woes / that God is the answer.

They pledge to reform, which is the beginning of repentance.

And, they are so desperate, that they even ask God for a theophany.

A theophany is God's self revelation in person / in human form.  
They want God to come down to rescue them in person,..... and we know that God did,... And God does.

The beginning of hope / the beginning of faith... is seeing the need to change. That sounds simple,..... yet it is much to easier to become complacent, or worse.

All too often,... well meaning people think that they are doing what is right.... and investing in what will get them where they wish to go.

With concrete rules and well defined theology they stand their ground,.. . accepting what is because that is what is known... and thus,..... cease to be on the journey to hope.

To HOPE:

We confess..... because we are not God.

We reach beyond ourselves and our own resources... because we love.

We pour out our lives because we desire the beauty and wonder of God.

And,.....we search for stars in the darkness,..... and follow the songs of angles..... Because we expect God to surprise us, like a baby in a manger.

We reach... believing that a loving God is reaching back..

We live,..... knowing that God is there, already, before us.....

To hope is to live comfortable with the questions that presently surround us, and..... we who knows,..... maybe God did come to earth as a human,.....but I doubt it,..... But,..... I still have faith that it is true / that it happens.