

## *Holy Possibilities*

Isaiah 40:1-11

Sunday, December 8, 2024

Pastor Vern Christopherson

Toward the end of the movie, *Star Trek II*, the starship Enterprise finds itself in grave danger. Their archvillain, Khan, is up to his old tricks again. The future looks dark. Suddenly Commander Spock steps forward. Spock, in case you didn't know, is half-human and half-Vulcan. He possesses a superior intellect. Rather than getting caught up in excitable emotions, he solves problems with calm reasoning. But now, with their backs to the wall, Spock isn't sure what to do. He nobly volunteers to sacrifice himself in order to save the Enterprise. And as he does, he speaks words that sound less like calm reasoning and more like hope. He says, "There are always possibilities."

Israel had been stuck in exile in Babylon for close to 50 years. They'd been forced to pick up the pieces of their broken lives and start all over again in a strange land. They'd endured the chiding of prophets who told them time and again that the exile was their fault – they'd been unfaithful to Yahweh, their God. As a result, their future was anything but promising.

One day a new prophet comes on the scene, a prophet in the line of Isaiah of old. I'm sure his words cause quite a stir: "Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. You've suffered long enough. The penalty is paid. Prepare the way of the Lord." In so many words, this prophet is saying, "It's time to go home. And whether you believe it or not, *there are always possibilities!*"

Friends, what do you think – are there always possibilities? In a world in which the future often looks dark and foreboding, that seems like a tall order. Maybe it depends on how we define *hope*. Sometimes we equate hope with optimism—*the clouds will lift, the pain will heal, the economy is bound to get better*. At other times, hope is the confident expectation that our longings will be fulfilled. *The surgery will get it all. The interview will lead to a job. The apology will clear the air and mend fences.*

There are still other times, though, when an optimistic outlook and a confident expectation can ring hollow. At such times, we feel like we're stuck in Babylon, and there's a thousand miles of desert between us and home.

In the last century, in the middle of two world wars, T. S. Elliot explored this idea further. He suggested that the desert was not necessarily found in some faraway and exotic place, but rather in the human heart. Like those on a journey, said Elliot, we move on sand. There are dreams and visions we have about our careers, our relationships, our children, our world. But so often these dreams dissolve like a mirage in the simmering heat of not enough time, not enough money, not enough courage, not enough of God-knows-what.

Friends, if that's the case for us, what do we do? What do we do when it feels like our dreams are dissolving? Maybe we need to spend more time reading our Bibles. On page after page of Scripture, God's people regularly find themselves in seemingly hopeless predicaments. After leaving Egypt, Israel wanders in the wilderness for 40 years. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get thrown into a fiery furnace because they refuse to bow down to the gods of King Nebuchadnezzar. Isaiah preaches to world-weary exiles about the possibility of going home, but it probably sounds like the craziest idea in the world.

Listen, cries the prophet, sometimes God is up to something so amazing that you can't begin to fathom it. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. Truly God will do this!"

Friends, what I'm saying is this: if you want to get to the bottom of hope in the Bible, you'll need to go beyond a sunny optimism that everything will work out just fine. And you'll need to go beyond a confident expectation that your longings will someday be fulfilled. No, sometimes you'll need a hang-on-for-dear-life-because-you-don't-know-what-else-to-do kind of trust. And the only place to put that trust is in a God who specializes in rescue operations. Indeed, God sometimes seems to operate best when our backs are to the wall and there is no way out!

Advent is a season of waiting for this God of rescue operations. And if we listen closely, we may hear a voice as sure and strong as the Ancient of Days. Maybe that voice will cry out: "Here is your God. Indeed, God will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms." Isaiah promises that God will move toward us with the unflagging step of one passionately in love with us. He promises that, in one way or another, God will hear and respond to our cries for help.

*There are always possibilities.* Is it true? I'd like to think so, but not necessarily according to *our* timetable and *our* plans. Remember, Israel had been waiting 50 years for God to come. We sometimes have a hard time waiting 50 minutes or 50 hours. If we're going to be about the business of biblical hope, we'll need to cultivate our waiting skills. We'll need to be reminded over and over that God is passionately in love with us; and sometime, somewhere, someday, God will come and save us.

*There are always possibilities.* How far can we take this? Several years ago, during the break-up of the Soviet Union, Vaclav Havel was the leader of the Czech Republic. He spoke words of hope as he challenged his beleaguered people to dare to dream dreams of a new future. He encouraged them, rather than simply looking for hope in the most positive scenarios, to spend time looking inside. "Hope is a state of mind," said Havel, "not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. It's a dimension of the soul." Havel went on to make a salient point: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but rather the certainty that something will make sense to us, regardless of how it turns out."

That's a powerful statement. It goes beyond sunny optimism. It goes beyond confident expectation. It hints of a biblical dimension, that hope is about Someone who will come to help us make sense of things, even when we're at our lowest.

Back in August, I heard from Chase Roessler of Good Shepherd about a particularly low point in his life. Chase had had a kidney transplant 9 years before. Exciting as it was, the kidney only functioned for about a year and a half. Then Chase was back on dialysis. He spent the next five years with at-home dialysis, with a port in his stomach every night and a machine circulating his blood for 12 hours at a time. Over the last couple years, Chase had been back at Albert Lea for in-person dialysis, three times a week and four hours at a time. Needless to say, as the months wore on, Chase became more and more discouraged.

Then one fateful day in August, Chase got an unexpected phone call from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. They had located a kidney and it appeared to be a match. Chase had been on the transplant list long enough that he was near the top of the list. A tentative date was set for the transplant. A couple days before the surgery, Chase learned the story behind this new kidney. A forty-year-old man in Los Angeles had made a decision to voluntarily donate one of

his kidneys to someone in need. Blood tests were taken. It was a good match.

The surgery went well. After some time in the hospital, Chase spent additional time at the Gift of Life Transplant House. Finally he was able to return home to Wells.

To this day, Chase has never met the donor behind the gift, nor does he know his name. All he's aware of is that the anonymous donor knows his name and has his contact information. And if the donor wants to make a connection, that's up to him.

Slowly and steadily, Chase has been recovering from the surgery. He's been living with his aunt and uncle, Brian and Bobbie Schultze. He eats a meal with them in the evening. Chase always goes first and then moves to the side for an extra measure of protection. Over Thanksgiving he went deer hunting with another aunt and uncle in Wisconsin. A little at a time, Chase is regaining some normalcy. His new kidney is operating at 64% capacity. Anything over 60% is considered ideal.

Tomorrow Chase will return to Mayo for his 4-month check-up. He's incredibly grateful to have received this kidney. While the kidney doesn't come with a guarantee, Chase is hoping and praying that it will keep working for a long, long time. In many ways this feels like a holy possibility for Chase, an unexpected, unbelievable gift from God.

Friends, *there are always possibilities*. That's what Mr. Spock and the prophet Isaiah and Chase Roessler are asking us to believe. It's often not easy to believe it. It's often not easy to be hopeful, especially when our backs are to the wall.

In the end, I think, hope is as much a choice as anything. We choose to trust that God passionately loves us, and that somehow, somewhere, someday, God will come and save us. And even if that rescue isn't exactly what we are expecting, we trust that God will help us make sense of it, and eventually God will help us find the way home. Amen.