

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Tiffani Harris
They Had Hoped
Genesis 18:1-10 and Luke 24:13-35
October 10, 2021

On this Covenant Day, we have recommitted ourselves to our shared ministry together in this place and in this community. It has been a fitting culmination to our weeks of discussion about Creation. We have been remembering our Christian vocation to care for all of God's creation. Today in our Litany, we just reaffirmed our corporate call as the body of Christ to be about God's work of redemption, embodying Christ's love each other and to our neighbors.

I see this taking shape in many ways around here in so many different ways. From the discipleship of our young people to our partnership in the community with Greater Ebenezer Baptist, at the Gospel Café, in our care for creation and even in our deepening and growing ministry with those seeking asylum. This ministerial call is also expressed in our lives individually. God gives us passions and gifts to use and to share in ministry in our jobs, in our schools, and in our homes. This is for all of us. It's not just ministers.

I first began to realize this when I was in 8th grade. I began to sense God calling me to serve. For those of you who our young people here today, I hope you hear that God's guidance isn't just for those who are older, it is for all of us. In middle school, I began to wonder if God was calling me to ministry, and I wondered how God was calling me to serve.

I could not imagine that I, a middle school girl, could one day be a pastor in a church. So, at the time I thought, maybe God wants me to be a missionary instead. There weren't fireworks or audible voices, just a growing sense that I should be ready for whatever God might call me to do. In a very practical way, I began preparing myself to be a missionary as a teenager. I learned Spanish, read my Bible, and attended every youth event I could. One prayer I prayed often during my teen years was: "God break my heart for what breaks yours." Out of that prayer grew a hunger for caring for the outsider. **I hoped** to serve God by serving others.

If I had known what God was up to, I might have taken the words of Annie Dillard to heart and put on a crash helmet. You may know the quote. She writes that we better be ready for this adventure with God by saying: "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should strap us to the pews . . . for the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."

God has continued to refine and guide me in this ministerial calling. While being a missionary in Central America was not where God eventually led me, I did, however, find myself as the youth minister for a Spanish speaking youth group here in Waco. These youth and their families were very new to America, I learned so much from them. I learned about their struggles to make a home and a life in a foreign land. And I learned the many reasons why someone would leave their country and immigrate.

One family shared about their own ministerial calling and how God had told them to come to Texas. Leaving all behind, they came to be missionaries to spread the love of God in a foreign land. There is irony here. My eyes were opened. My eyes were opened to all the people around me who are often unseen and overlooked. My mission field changed. It is not a very dramatic story, but it is how God helped me see.

Living in Texas all my life, it seems like there has been a crisis at our border for a long time. We have probably become somewhat desensitized to it. Most recently you have probably heard about thousands who have come to the border 5 hours away, in Del Rio seeking asylum and refuge. Those who come like at Del Rio, all come in desperation seeking **hope**, and they come in desperation. Some come seeking asylum and protection from violence or religious and political persecution. Others flee the devastating effects of climate change and endless poverty. **They have hoped for so much.** It is with this backdrop that these texts today in Genesis and Luke have something to teach us.

This week, I did a search just this week and found over 100 texts in the Old and New Testaments that speak to the outsiders, the immigrant, and the stranger. I found about 24 texts on welcoming the stranger. I am sure there are more passages too. The Bible has a lot to say about how we treat others. These passages today, instead of telling us, are inviting us in to reconsider our hopes and our interactions and how we meet God.

Luke 24 tells us that Cleopas and his companion, who was most likely Mrs. Cleopas **had hoped**. They had hoped. It is a loaded phrase. It is a heavy phrase. Walking from Emmaus to Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, the two had so much to process. **They had hoped** that Christ would be their leader and transform society. **They had hoped** for change. I imagine they were grieved by Christ's death. They were probably bewildered by an empty tomb. Maybe they were confused by reports from the women that Christ had risen. We can imagine how they must have felt.

On this dusty road, a stranger drew near and accompanied them. Cleopas called this stranger walking with them an outsider and a foreigner and then he explained with a downcast face, and heavy words, "**We had hoped.**" It is as if his heart could not contain the emotions of this weekend. The two poured out their hearts and processed their **dashed hopes**. They shared and journeyed together, and the foreigner explained scripture to them. In walking on the road with a stranger, listening and learning, their transformation was beginning. Yet they were unable to see this miracle that was unfolding before them.

Jesus had taught them that whenever they invite a stranger in, they are inviting in and ministering to Christ himself. It was second nature to them, to extend hospitality by inviting the foreigner into their home. In this simple act of hospitality, Cleopas and his companion finally recognized that this outsider who walked with them was the Christ. It all became clear when Christ blessed, broke, and gave the bread. **What they had longed for**, they could now see. As they ate together, their eyes were opened and the ordinary became sacred.

They had not seen clearly before, as if looking through a glass darkly. As I have often times felt like I have not been able to see what God is doing. But through this surprisingly, seemingly

unimportant encounter they were able to see that what they had **hoped for** was coming to pass.

So often we long for an encounter with Christ and find ourselves **hoping** for more in this spiritual life. Maybe it's more meaning and purpose. More internal peace. More motivation and more belief. We long for justice and for all to be made right.

We search for hope. We long for reconciliation. We desperately long for a word from God. We seek God's presence in our lives. In the dark times on the long and dusty road, **when our hopes are dashed** across the rocks, we search for any shred of evidence that God is there.

Abraham and Sarah had been waiting a long time for a word and action from God. God had promised a son, and still Sarah had no son. **They had hoped** for a son, and what God sent them were hungry strangers. But they welcomed those strangers with abundant hospitality. In doing so, they met God. In both Genesis 18 and Luke 24, God is revealed in an act of hospitality - in the opening of home and heart. In these divine meetings God is seen, and God is made known. Eyes are opened. **Hope is revealed.**

Baptist theologian Elizabeth Newman defines hospitality as the Christian practice in which we also meet God. She states hospitality is **"our participation in what God is doing."**ⁱ I can't help but think about DaySpring's opportunity to follow our budding calling that the Holy Spirit may be leading us to start a hospitality house right here in Waco. **Some of us have hoped** The Naomi House will be a place of hospitality for those seeking asylum.

In opening our hearts and homes in hospitality with the immigrant, we can meet Christ. This is not a sappy, sentimental, dinner party hospitality, but a hospitality that is a part of our worship. It is an outpouring of lives lived in worship with God. This kind of radical, abundant hospitality is how we love and meet God, and it is how God loves and meets the world. We **participate in what God is doing** and lives are changed. Oscar Romero is known for saying "Christ is the best microphone of God; the church is the best microphone of Christ." When the church of God embraces its vocational call and serves in this way, they are the microphone of Christ to the world. We are the microphone of Christ to the world.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the cacophony of needs and the brokenness of the world. I think we all feel this burden in year two of a pandemic. The news is overwhelming and exhausting, and at times, it can be numbing. Thankfully, the saints and mentors of the church have walked similar roads in different generations and left for us hints as to how to be God's microphone in trying times.

During the second world war, a Protestant church in a little French village named Le Chambon, faced the overwhelming humanitarian crisis of war and genocide. A town of 3,000 people, Le Chambon is an afternoon's drive from the German border. It is about the same distance of Waco to the Texas-Mexico border. Led by their pastor and youth from the youth Bible study groups around the parish, this small village, saved the lives of 5,000 Jewish children. They had studied together Deuteronomy 19 and many of the passages in Scripture about caring for the outsider. Then they had an opportunity to put it into action. They saw it as their Christian duty to provide refuge for the refugee and the foreigner.

Their faith in Christ called them to share hospitality with the oppressed and even with their enemy, with the German guards who walked their town. It was costly and hard but they would not have it any other way. They did this for four years.

After the war as the story of their heroic acts became known, they scoffed at being called good, heroic, or exceptional. They did not want to be singled out. They thought they were merely doing what it meant to be a Christian. It was the natural outpouring of their faith. They saw this work was none other than their Christian faith in action. **They had hoped** to participate in God's work of redemption. **They had hoped** to embody a city of refuge as described in Scripture. **They had hoped** to impart to the refugee children their deep worth and value. **They had hoped** to be faithful.

What have you hoped for? I had hoped that God would help me to see with the eyes of Christ. I had hoped to serve others by serving Christ. The disciples **had hoped**. Abraham and Sarah **had hoped**. **What is it you have hoped for?**

My brothers and sisters, will you join me in seeking what we all have hoped for?

The gift of Le Chambon for us today, to a church squarely situated in North American privilege, may just be the courage to step forth into the vocational calling that Christ has for us and to allow that calling to transform us. It may just be time to find our crash helmets and put them on.

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ⁱ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Brazos Press: MI, 2007) p. 60.