

“Hoping Against Hope”
Lent 2b
Mark 8:31-38

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

The 1990 film “Bonfire of the Vanities” was based on Tom Wolfe’s novel of the same title. In the movie Tom Hanks plays the part of Sherman McCoy a Wall Street trader who is called a Master of the Universe for his \$600m deals. Those were 1990 dollars. He has it all: beautiful wife and daughter, a home on Park Ave. with a kitchen the size of the homes we live in. He does not think he needs to be content with what he has. He is, after all, a Master of the Universe. It is what he does to have more that gets him into trouble.

Bruce Willis plays the part of Peter Fallow, a newspaper reporter, awash in alcohol and about to lose his job. Someone tips him off to a scandal brewing around Sherman McCoy. As he gathers the facts and trumps up the story, he quotes Scripture, which is a part of our Gospel reading today, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

By the end of the movie Sherman McCoy has disappeared from the scene. Peter Fallow’s book about the incident has won the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, and more honors yet. He strolls before hundreds of the tuxedoed and evening-gowned moneyed set. They cheer and applaud him. He is clearly a master of the universe. As he approaches the podium he says to himself, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world....” He pauses, looks at the camera and gives us that Bruce Willis smirk and twinkle in the eye to let us know this is good and he is enjoying these vanities. He will worry about that other part of the verse some other time. We can tell by his staggering, liquor-impaired gait that this some other time will come. That some other time always comes.

It may be a cause for whiplash to go from the “Bonfire of the Vanities,” to the Gospel of Mark, from Peter Fallow to St. Peter, but Peter of the Gospel encountered something like a bonfire for his own vanities. Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They answered, “Some say that you are John the Baptist. Others say you are Elijah. Still others identify you as another of the prophets.” Jesus pressed them, “Who do you say I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah.”

What Peter had in mind when he said Messiah was not what we have in mind when we hear the term. Say “Messiah,” and Peter, the other disciples and everyone else in Judea and Galilee thought King David and all the kings who came after him. The word Messiah, like the word Christ, means anointed one. The kings were the anointed ones. It was centuries since a Messiah sat on a throne in Jerusalem. But the prophet Isaiah and others raised hopes that in the future God would lift up a Messiah, who would come and deliver his people. They idealized David and gilded the image of the hoped for Messiah. By this definition it was a stretch for Peter to call Jesus the Messiah. Jesus has driven out demons, healed the sick, and proclaimed, “The kingdom of God has is at hand.” However, he hasn’t done anything that is Messiah-like by their definition. Peter was anticipating, hoping that Jesus will fill this billet for Master of the Universe. The things he wanted were not bad. He wanted good government, compassionate rule and for someone to drive out the Romans and their lackeys. They all knew the history of Judas

Maccabaeus and his family who led a revolt that drove the successors to Alexander the Great out of Jerusalem. It could be done.

This is in the neighborhood of what Peter had in mind when he called Jesus the Messiah. Jesus proceeded to tell them what he has in mind that he is Messiah. He gave them his definition. It means he must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, the chief priest and the scribes, be killed and on the third day rise from the dead.

What sounds more reasonable, driving out the Romans or rising from the dead? Peter takes him aside to straighten him out and talk some sense into him. Jesus rebukes his rebuker with words that would wither any would-be disciple. "Get behind me Satan," he says. He calls Peter Satan. He names him for the one who is hostile to God's rule. Jesus identified him as the one who lures others away from God's way. "For," Jesus said to Peter, "you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things, on earthly things." Peter set his hopes on the same kind of power and authority exercised by Rome. Is this really all he hoped for?

God has something different in mind. Paul coined a phrase for what God was after at the cross. "Hoping against hope" is the phrase. He applied the term to Abraham and Sarah. What hope could Abraham and Sarah have for conceiving and bearing a child? Abraham was so old, Paul says, he was as good as dead. Sarah wasn't much younger and was barren all those years. They have no earthly reason for hope. Nevertheless, with a chuckle at the prospect of it, they staked their hopes on God's promises. That is hoping against hope. And they named the child Laughter. Isaac means laughter.

What hope is there for a person who laments, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Those are the opening words of Psalm 22. The psalmist continues, "I am despised by the people. All who see me mock at me, they make faces at me.... I am poured out like water... my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast." From that kind of despair the psalmist ends his lament as we heard in today's psalmody, "In the midst of the congregation I will praise you; you who fear the Lord, praise him. All you offspring of Jacob glorify him." That is hoping against hope. It is the hope Jesus had when, from the cross, he spoke those first words of Psalm 22. He fastened his hope on God's promise to raise him from the grave.

What reasonable hope can Paul or any of us have of standing before God and being judged righteous? The sad Dane, Soren Kierkegaard, does not sound so sad when he wrote, "God creates out of nothing. Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: he makes saints out of sinners." So he does through Christ who, says Paul, "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised so that we might be judged righteous."

"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world..." Bruce Willis's character says to himself and pauses, smirking at the camera. He will worry about the second half of that verse some other time. That some other time always comes. We know it from what has happened to the Masters of the Universe of the 21st century and the fallout for those ordinary folk who live in their shadow. I think of those who signed on to bad mortgages and the small fry who tried to get in on the party. I read about a woman in Florida with a \$35,000 secretary's income who had a million dollar real estate portfolio. And then it wasn't a million dollars any longer. Folks made money buying property and selling before going to closing. Another 650,000 jobs disappeared in February and Wall Street greeted that as good news. Our homes are worth a fraction of what they were a few short years ago. We have lost wealth we were planning on for our children's education and for our security in retirement.

What is the hope against hope for the person who prays, “I hope we can keep the house”? God promises, “I will always be with you. Abide in me. I will never evict you. I will see you through.”

What is the hope against hope for the one who has lost health insurance and prays, “Please God, give healing for this illness”? God promises “I am your health and your salvation. After sickness and death do their worst, yet you will live in me. The last word on this is Jesus, who is raised from the dead.”

Last Sunday the choir from Concordia University in New York led worship at our 8:30 a.m. service. Last night the choir from Wittenberg University was in concert here. Both choirs sang a piece entitled “Prayer of the Children,” which comes out of the civil war in Bosnia. The director last night, Donald Busarow, dedicated it to suffering children everywhere. Here are a few lines.

Can you hear the voice of the children softly pleading for silence in their shattered world?
 Angry guns preach a gospel full of hate, blood of the innocent on their hands.
 Cryin’, “Jesus, help me to feel the sun again upon my face.
 For when Darkness clears, I know you’re near, bringing peace again.”

Can you hear the prayer of the children, hoping against hope?
 And there is the community of God’s people through which God answers these prayers.
 When all reasonable hope is gone we bear the hope borne from Jesus’ cross. We are crucifers of hope.

One of the ministries we support called this past week. The call was not for more money. The call was to ask for space to meet with deployed staff as they conduct a staff reduction, made necessary by decreased giving. This is one of the ministries through which we, as the body of Christ, answer the prayers of those hoping against hope. The call broke my heart. Can we not, who have jobs and income little affected by the downturn step up to the challenge to tithe this Lent? For the six weeks of Lent give 10% of your income. Try it and see if it is not something you can continue. And if you are already tithing give another percent or two. I speak as one who has tithed since I had lawn-mowing money to give. It is what my parents taught me, my father who was a civil servant and my mother a homemaker. It is a practice we have continued to this day. As you can see, we have enough. God has always provided more than enough. Tithing means sacrifice, to be sure. We will have to give up some things we want. But it is a sacrifice like Jesus’ own, for the sake of others. It is the cross bearing to which God calls us.

Peter ended up at a bonfire of sorts for his vanities, and again when he disavowed Jesus after Jesus’ arrest. But Peter did not disappear from the scene. Jesus may have said he had a devil of an idea and put him in his place. But it is the place for disciples like us, following Jesus, bearing the cross, hoping against hope.