

Advent 1C (12/2/2018)

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

Hope is not escapism, but inspiration; not denial of, but courageous engagement with, fearful realities. Life in our world gives us plenty of reasons to give up, but the gift of hope, even in trace amounts, sustains us. The permanence of God's promise is our rudder in the stormy sea of changeability. And we cultivate hope in that promise through relationship, through community.

Kyle and Brent Pease aren't like most IRONMAN triathletes. Kyle has cerebral palsy and can't walk, so the brothers compete together. The 2.4-mile swim is their strongest of the three phases of the triathlon, and the 26.2-mile run to conclude the race has never presented a problem. The challenge for the Pease brothers is the 112-mile bike ride in the middle, a phase they have to complete before the designated cutoff time in order to have the chance to finish. They need a bike that accommodates both of them, yet that is built for speed. And for this, they've enlisted the help of engineer Curtis Henry. For Kyle and Brent's first IRONMAN in Wisconsin in 2012, Curtis built them a bike called KPeasey 1. And despite weighing 350 pounds, it did the trick. The Pease brothers made the bike cutoff with five minutes to spare.

Their approach has improved in the years since. For the fortieth anniversary of the IRONMAN World Championship this year in Kona, Hawaii, the team unveiled its third and best custom bike so far, Kona 1. It's over thirty pounds lighter than KPeasey, and much more aerodynamic. The bike is not without its shortcomings, however, especially for Kyle. "It's a very uncomfortable position for me," he says. "But that's what I love about IRONMAN. Sometimes you're going to be uncomfortable, and there are going to be moments of doubt. But that's what makes you stronger. And because Brent

and I are a team, it makes it that much better. We can motivate each other. We can bounce our fears and pains off each other.”¹ On October 13th, Kyle and Brent Pease became the first ever push-assisted team of brothers to finish the IRONMAN World Championship, breaking their personal record in the process.²

Kyle’s attitude toward difficulty, and really the Pease brothers’ overall approach to IRONMAN, is an apt illustration of the way hope works. *Sometimes you’re going to be uncomfortable, and there are going to be moments of doubt. Yet, in the midst of trouble, hope has a way of sustaining you.* But how? **Even in the most trying of circumstances, how is it that we find a way to carry on?**

Jesus speaks to this question in our Gospel from Luke today: “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for [even] the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ...[But] when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. ...Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

We might prefer that the biblical texts for Advent reflect the manufactured sentiment of the holiday season, warm and sparkly. But on the first Sunday of Advent, the season we set aside before Christmas to watch and wait for Jesus to come among us as a helpless child, Jesus speaks to us about his last Advent, the end of time when trial and tribulation will signal his arrival in glory and our final redemption. Violence and persecution and signs in the sky and global distress “confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” – these are common apocalyptic images drawn largely from Hebrew

¹ Brad Culp, “Pease Brother Ready to Fly on Kona 1,” <http://www.ironman.com/triathlon/news/articles/2018/10/pease-brothers.aspx#axzz5YAwYEm7t>.

² <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/brothers-kyle-and-brent-pease-make-history-at-ironman-world-championship-300731306.html>.

tradition. And in this way, **Jesus acknowledges the disorder and suffering the world is certain to experience even as God works out God's good purpose for the world.**

How does faith inform our response? What are we supposed to do when disorder and suffering shake our lives? "Stand up and raise your heads," Jesus insists, "because your redemption is drawing near." *In the face of difficulty*, in other words, *live in hope*.

Some would say that faith provides only false hope, that hope in God's redemptive love is a pipe dream that prevents us from confronting trial and tribulation with a clear head. That perspective, however, is founded on the assumption that hope is a passive, pie-in-the-sky delusion that dulls us to the direness of our circumstances. I think that's misguided. **Hope is not escapism, but inspiration; not denial of, but courageous engagement with, fearful realities.** As theologian Jürgen Moltmann puts it, hope is not so much an "opium of the beyond" as it is "the divine power that makes us alive in this world."³ In other words, **hope looks the worst-case scenario in the face and holds its head high.**

In an essay published after his death, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. describes the motivating influence of hope in his own life:

People are often surprised to learn that I am an optimist. They know how often I have been jailed, how frequently the days and nights have been filled with frustration and sorrow, how bitter and dangerous are my adversaries. They expect these experiences to harden me into a grim and desperate man. They fail, however, to perceive the sense of affirmation generated by the challenge of embracing struggle and surmounting obstacles. They have no comprehension of the strength that comes from faith in God and man [*sic*]. It is possible for me to falter, but I am profoundly secure in my knowledge that God loves us; [and] has not worked out a design for our failure.⁴

³ Cited by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, 24.

⁴ *A Testament of Hope*, 314.

I think the Rev. Dr. King and Kyle Pease would get along. **Strength to meet the struggle; perseverance in spite of doubt – this is the way that hope confronts the present, with an eye to the possibilities for the future. And hope itself is a gift, a seed planted by God that we cultivate only in relationship, only in community.** If it were up to each of us alone, we would have thrown in the towel a long time ago. But think of Kyle Pease, how he and his brother lean on each other in the most difficult moments: “Brent and I are a team.... We can motivate each other. We can bounce our fears and pains off each other.” And, think of the soul force of the Civil Rights movement, the collective striving that continues to move en masse toward a more just society. **If we’re able to stand up and raise our heads, we’re only able to do so together.**

Dear church, life in our world gives us plenty of reasons to give up, but the gift of hope, even in trace amounts, sustains us. Heaven and Earth may pass away, but Jesus’ words will never pass away. That permanence is our rudder in the stormy sea of changeability. And, God’s promise to love us beyond even the worst circumstances gives us hope enough together to love each other through them.