

**Things Hoped For**  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
Rev. John Allen

Let's just begin where we are.

[asking congregation to share emotions]

We are here to hold these things together. With one another. And with God.

It is important for us to feel these feelings. To really sit with them. It is also hard. Because the kind of feelings we have been feeling over the past few days are profoundly uncomfortable.

Please do not rush past your feelings. Please do not push them aside or hide them in some corner of your heart.

If no place else—this is the place where we can pour out our honest hearts before God and one another.

What has happened to our neighbors is a horror. Each and every life that ended this week was precious to God. And we persist in steadfast prayer for those whose hearts have been broken and whose worlds have been shattered.

And any change we want to see in our world, any meaningful response we want to embark on, any hope we want to hold, I am convinced it won't amount to much unless we truly let the magnitude of this grief all the way into our hearts.

This is a sermon about hope. And hope begins with grief. Our ability to genuinely long for another world, begins by sitting still and really facing what it is about this world that we can no longer bear.

True hope begins with grief. So if what you are carrying in your heart today is grief. Let it be the seed of hope.

Now, there is a common way of using that word hope. "I hope it doesn't rain."

That kind of hope is a sort of passive expression of a wish. I hope things get better. I hope it works out. Its powerless hope. Wishful hope.

And when we are talking about the weather, or other things beyond our control, that's one thing. But it seems like that same sort of throw your hands up hope has crept into things that are very much within our collective control.

But wishful hope is a kind of palliative, and I think an often unhelpful one.

It seems like after every high profile mass shooting there are expressions of hope that maybe this one will finally elicit a response commensurate to the crisis we are facing. And it never does.

While it may seem logical or natural to us that the kind of collective grief and anguish that we endure in the face of violence would naturally produce inevitable momentum toward solving this uniquely American form of suffering. It should be clear enough to us by now that it doesn't.

This epidemic of terror and violence is not going to stop on its own. It will require all of us to be agents. It will require us not to just wish that things would change, but to claim our own moral agency and work to change things.

Work to change policies regulating the sale of firearms. Work to change how we teach children, how we connect communities, how we deliver healthcare, how we confront hate.

Hope cannot be a passive posture. Its not a wish. It is us joining with one another and with God to make the world different.

So if what you are carrying in your heart today is a sense of anger, a feeling of righteous lament. Let it be the seed of hope.

Carolyn just read us this passage from the book of Hebrews that is like a Hall of Fame of hope.

I had her read this bit about Abraham, but if you read the longer section round these verses, it lists person, after person, after person from the stories of the Hebrew Bible whose faith exemplified the virtue of hope.

And all of them, all of them have in common that they set out in faith and with hope, not naive about the challenges that lay ahead of them, not numb to the pain of their own lives, but each of them in their own way followed as God called to them in their hearts, and lived with assurance and conviction that the hopes they oriented their lives toward were indeed real, even if just out of sight.

And all of them had something else in common too. They all died, without seeing their hopes realized.

Abraham did indeed become the father of many millions, but in his life he knew 8 children and 2 grandchildren. He died having not seen the fulfillment of that promise.

This is the hope our ancestors in faith exemplify to us.

It is not that throw your hands up hope, each of them *worked in their lives toward the realization of some vision*. And yet, each of them also knew that the future they were working toward lay beyond the horizon of their own lives, and they did it anyway.

The reading says: “they understood that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth.” That is their time on this planet was but one leg of a much longer race. They knew they were not there when it began, they knew they would not be there when it ended, and yet they worked diligently and faithfully in their lives to move their communities and the world in the direction God desired.

And their hope was this: they knew that even if they were not there in the future, God would be.

God will be a part of the future even when we are not. God’s hand will guide the hearts of humanity even when each of our names has been long forgotten.

This kind of hope is not an anesthetic against the pain of living, it is inspiration to live bravely, to do what we can do for the sake of the people God loves, and to find hope—not in the belief that we will see the problems solved and pain pass away—but to have hope in things unseen.

Admiral Jim Stockdale was the highest ranking US Military prisoner held at the Vietnamese prison camp known as the Hanoi Hilton.

Admiral Stockdale was asked years later how he managed to survive, and he said this: “I never lost faith in the end of the story.” He says that he remained confident that he would somehow prevail.”

He was then asked, and what type of person had the most trouble? Who didn’t make it?

His answer: “optimists.”

He described a type of prisoner who would say, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again...

Those were the type of people who didn’t make it through the long ordeal.

His response to these questions has become known as the Stockdale Paradox.

What helped me survive? I never lost faith in the end of the story.”

Who didn’t make it? Optimists.

Of the apparent paradox, Stockdale said.

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

That might not be the kind of message of hope that you would embroider on a throw pillow, or find in a Hallmark card.

But its the kind of honest hope that we all need for the greatest trials of our lives, and our world.

Not the idle hope that things may just work out.

But the active hope, of setting our hearts, and minds, and hands, to the hard task of healing, building, seeking, exploring, and creating along our leg of life’s journey.

In hope. In faith. That God will still be working through people like us, even long after we are gone.

I always notice in the midst of tragedy and anguish, the stories that seem to catch our hearts are the portraits of ordinary human kindness and love. The restaurants giving away food to first responders, the neighbors who open their doors to one another, the spirit of solidarity and kindness that emerges between strangers who have endured a common ordeal.

I think that many of these simple acts are a pure expression of this kind of hope. They are people who are finding their footing, in that moment, in a much larger story of human resilience, compassion, and love. Finding their footing in that story and living it out.

What I think has been missing from our collective life of late is any sort of endurance to that spirit. We are good at compassionate sprints. We need to become distance runners.

As we journey out from the shadow of these past few days, I want us to build an enduring hope.

And it starts by really letting this grief all the way into our hearts. We need feel how truly intolerable this feels. It is uncomfortable and hard.

It starts with remembering that we are all moral agents. The world does not just happen to us. The world we live is shaped profoundly by what we chose, what we tolerate, and what we ignore.

And it starts with finding our footing in a much bigger story, and remembering that the end of that story is held not by us, but by God.