

2020-10-18 Emotions in Exile, Part Two: Hope

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So I want to start out with a question for you and you can put your answers in the Zoom comments. I always love to hear what's happening in your world and how you're responding to things that are going on. And so I want to know, what is something that you hope for? You can drop an answer to this in the Zoom chat. It could be something huge, it could be something that's maybe seemingly very small, but what has made you say in the past week or two, "I really hope ____." And you can type your answers in and I'll read them out as they come in. If you have a more private one you'd want to just direct message me, I will not use your name when I read out the response. So Melody says, "I really hope for a wise leadership." Scott says, "I really hope for a new political direction for our country." Yeah, we have a song that we sometimes use [and] I think we're using it today actually, that has a lyric, "Take our nation back." And a lot of us cringe at that lyric because it [laughs] maybe evokes something else, but some of us may also be happy to sing it.

Okay, "Hope for a safe vaccine for COVID." "Hope my kids can go back to school." "Hopeful for better leadership for our country." "Hope for my daughter to grow up in a better world than I have." That's a big one. "I hope for more lovingkindness in our communities and nation to overcome mean-spiritedness." Steven hopes that the leaves are still colorful when his new drone is delivered. That is a great hope. I hope that for you too, Steven, and when you do, can you share some photos or videos with us, if that's the case? Jackie says, "I really hope that we find the right foster care agency for us and can start soon." Kerry says, "I really hope when this is over that people still want to hug one another." We have a lot of huggers at Artisan who are feeling very un-hugged lately [laughs]. "Relief of my father's suffering." "To hug everyone even though I've never been much of a hugger." [Laughs] So I guess that goes for everybody, yeah. "I hope for racial justice." "I hope that I can celebrate the holidays with my family without worrying we'll spread COVID." Wow. So there are probably more hopes that will come in.

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Please keep sharing and hoping along with each other. I have to take my eyes off the chat now to keep moving, but thank all of you who shared something there.

We, for several weeks now, have been in a series called “Community X,” which gives us an opportunity to think about our foundational value of community. That's one of our five foundational values. And how we can try to experience it during this season of disconnection and displacement. We're using the biblical seasons of exile and exodus, when the people of God felt disconnected and distant from one another, distant from the places that they wanted to be. We're using those seasons as a kind of framework to think about how to experience spiritual community in this time. Hence, “Community X,” exile and exodus. And two weeks ago we talked about some of the powerful emotions that we feel during times of crisis like this. Specifically, we talked about feeling angry and maybe even feeling something as powerful as hatred. And we used the book of Psalms, especially Psalm 137, to receive some validation that our worst reactions while not necessarily Christlike, are still very human and they're very biblical, whatever that may mean.

Well, that was two weeks ago and today I want to return to the idea of the emotions that we feel in this time again so that we can process them and validate them as human and biblical. And specifically today, I want to explore the idea of hope. Because just as recognizing biblical examples of negative feelings is an important way to validate our human-ness, so too recognizing examples of hope in the Bible is an important way for us to be drawn out into God's good intent for humanity.

I've heard several people say that during this season we're feeling all the feels. This is the way that the parlance of our day describes just being very emotional; “feeling all the feels.” Today what I want us to think about, maybe we could include the good feelings in that as well as the bad. I don't know about you (I bet it's similar) but I know that for me it is a lot easier to indulge negative emotions during this particular time, which usually looks like a wallowing in despair or, at a minimum, being especially grumpy. And I wonder what it would look like and feel like and what effect it would have on us to be intentional about indulging the good feelings—to wallow in hope. Maybe to get all mucky in our most trust-filled moments.

So today's reading right before I started was from the Book of Joel. Joel was a prophet of Israel, which doesn't mean that he foretold the future so much as that he spoke God's truth to God's people when they needed to hear it. That's what the prophets of Israel do. They speak God's truth to God's people when the people need to hear it. And as you can imagine, because it's true for us just as it was true for them, sometimes the people needed to hear correction and

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sometimes they needed to hear encouragement. Now, we don't actually know for sure what time in Israel's history Joel was a prophet, so those words that we heard were not necessarily written during the time of exile, but they sure seem to apply. And I think that it's fair for us to use them in our "Community X" series even if they weren't necessarily written during the exile. Joel Chapter 2 is a beautiful picture of restoration after desolation. And we only heard a few verses from that chapter but the whole chapter is worth your time if you're looking for something to read this week for your own kind of devotional reading. Joel Chapter 2 is a pretty good option for you, and I would encourage you to read all of it.

I imagine that if a few of us were sitting around a table together looking at this chapter from the Book of Joel and each shared the most impactful verse for us personally, we'd get a lot of different answers. Usually when I ask that kind of question we get as many different answers as there are people in the room. But let me tell you mine, the one that's most impactful for me because for me, it really is the best picture of hopefulness after desolation in the whole chapter. It's the first half of verse 25 when God says, "Through the prophet Joel I will repay you for the years the swarming locust has eaten." The imagery of that statement is so powerful to me. God doesn't say, "I will repay you for all the crops that the locust has eaten." God says, "I will repay you for the *years* that the locust has eaten."

I almost can't allow myself to think about that for very long because it really does affect me when I think about the consequences of COVID. Obviously, loss of life is the biggest consequence and there's been so much of that, but even for those of us who haven't directly experienced that, the years have been eaten up. The toddler years have been eaten. The senior years have been eaten. The prime of my life years. The final living years. All these different years. All these different seasons that have just been devoured like crops under a plague of locusts. And I wonder what year you lost this year. I won't ask to ask you to type it in there, but I know that every single one of you has lost some type of year this year. And Joel speaks the word of God and says that God will repay the people for those lost years.

Can we imagine that? Can we even begin to imagine what that would look like? Or is that more hope that we can muster? Allow yourself to indulge that hopefulness even if you don't know what it means. Then I would make this observation, that hope for a better future can be a feeling, and you can't necessarily do all that much to change how you feel. There are certain things you might try but at the end of the day you feel the way you feel, and you don't feel the way you don't feel. But it occurs to me that the people of Israel having heard these hopeful words from the prophet Joel might not have felt hopeful for the future. But their future was still reason for hope. God was going to do what God was going to do, whether the people felt good

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about it or not. I believe that that is true in some way for us now. You might not feel hopeful, but that doesn't change the fact that God is doing something right now that is cause for hope.

God says to hungry people, "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied" and "My people shall never again be put to shame." God says that twice in that passage, "My people shall never again be put to shame." Can you allow yourself to indulge that hope, to wallow in the possibility as the Psalmist hinted, that, "Those who sow in tears could reap with shouts of joy." May it be true for you and for us.

And let me give you one little bonus observation this morning. Because as you know, I always like to look at the parts of the Bible that come right before or right after the part that we're looking at. This is one of my very simple tricks for understanding the Bible more. Read more of it [laughs], but specifically read the before and the after parts. I want to read the after part because what comes right after this passage that was read in service today in Joel chapter 2 is the passage that the Apostle Peter quotes in his Pentecost sermon as having been fulfilled in the giving of the Spirit.

And it starts with two words that even on their own are very hopeful for us right now because we're in the present. It starts, "Then afterward." Oh Lord, can we please get to "Then afterward" more quickly! "Then afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my Spirit." Centuries later, those words would be fulfilled in the giving of the Holy Spirit to the early Christian church.

And so, the people had reason to hope in the short term even though they all probably didn't feel very hopeful. And the people had reason to hope in the long term, in the scale of time that they would never even experience on their own, because God was going to do something even bigger than they could ever imagine. So my friends, let us be hopeful today. Let us indulge that positive feeling. Let us get down into the muck and the mud of hopefulness, even if just for a little bit of time. May God be with you, and for you, and in you, and through you as you hope for God's best in our world.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.