

“Benediction”
Proverbs 3:5-8 and Romans 15:4-13

Some of you may be familiar with the writings of Kathleen Norris, a bestselling contemporary poet and essayist who has become known for her writings about Christian spirituality. She also happens to be a Presbyterian.

In her marvelous book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Norris writes about life on the plains: life in a harsh and unforgiving climate; life under constant economic pressure; life within a small town that is getting smaller by the year. And in this life, Norris says there is something people do to help them persevere: they remember and hold on to and tell the stories of the past, stories of survival, and from them they take hope.

And this isn't just an activity for the oldest members of the community. Everyone gets in on the act. Even a high school student will choose to write about how his North Dakotan family has always been there and will always remain. The assurance, the promise, the hope for the future comes from those descriptions of survival in the past. In whatever hard times they find themselves, they can rely on these people and places and events from their history to provide hope.

In like fashion, in our second scripture reading for this morning from Romans 15, the Apostle Paul suggests that, as people of faith, we have something to rely on, to count on, to remember, and from which we can take hope when we find ourselves in hard or uncertain times. And that something that gives us assurance, promise and hope for the future is the Scriptures. Let's listen now to our second scripture reading, Romans 15:4-13.

When reflecting on this important passage, Christian pastor John Timmer said, “Hope is like oxygen. Take oxygen away and people suffocate. Take hope away and people perish. The Scriptures keep us breathing.”

Friends, I couldn’t agree more! The Scriptures keep us breathing, not because they fill us with facts, but because they fill us with hope. This morning I want to invite you to breath in the hopeful encouragement found in both of our Scripture texts.

We find ourselves on the edge of an uncertain time this morning. In just a few days, my thirteen years of service at HPPC will conclude. You will be embarking upon a time of pastoral transition, and my family and I will begin a new chapter in Lake Oswego, Oregon, complete with a new home, a new job for Roger, a new school for Erica, and I hope, eventually, a new place of ministry for me.

Nothing about this transition feels very natural yet...for you or for me and my family. You see, we’ve grown very accustomed to each other, haven’t we? I’m reminded of that delightful song from *My Fair Lady*, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face.” Remember the lyrics? Henry Higgins sings these words of Eliza Doolittle.

I’ve grown accustomed to her face.
She almost makes my day begin.
I’ve grown accustomed to the tune
That she whistles night and noon.
Her smiles, her frowns,
Her ups, her downs
Are second nature to me now;
Like breathing out and breathing in.

That’s really how it is. Over thirteen years, we have grown accustomed to each other...each face...each life has become a precious gift from God to us. Your smiles, frowns, ups and downs, and your stories have become as second nature to us as ours have become to you...like breathing out and breathing in.

Yet, even as we face a transition that feels a little unnatural this morning, as we breathe in the words of our scripture readings, I find myself undeniably filled with hope.

I have chosen for our first scripture reading verses from the book of Proverbs that have become extremely important to me over the years. As I've shared with you before, these verses are stitched onto the edge of this stole that was hand-crafted for me by the women of Opportunity Presbyterian Church where I was ordained several years ago. Hear again the familiar words of this passage. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (3:5-6).

As we survey the contours of the Scriptures, these verses so accurately summarize the experience of countless people of faith who have come before us. The pattern is almost always the same. God calls the person to set off into an uncertain future, asking them to trust that the future is in God's hands.

The poster child, if you will, for this common pattern is Abraham. Hebrews 11:8 summarizes Abraham's experience with these words, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going."

Abraham and Sarah were called into an uncertain future, not knowing where they were going, but trusted that the future was in God's hands...that God would make their paths straight.

You might ask, what gave them the courage to trust God when the way was so unclear? I am convinced that they were able to put their trust in God because they felt assured that God would go with them into the future.

You see, God never calls people into an uncertain future without assuring them of his faithful presence at every step along the way. This pattern repeats itself again and again throughout the scriptures. When Moses is called by God to go and lead God's people out of Egypt, God promises, "I will be with you..." (Exodus 3:12). Later, when Moses is preparing God's people to enter the Promised Land, he exhorts them to "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:8). Still later in the history of God's people, the prophet Isaiah speaks God's words of reassurance during the uncertain time of exile. God says, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God" (Isaiah 41:10a).

Finally, in Matthew 28:20, in the context of giving the Great Commission, Jesus himself, God with us, reassures his disciples, and all of us, with these words: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Friends, breathe in the reassuring witness of scripture this morning. Like countless people of faith who have come before us, we can move into an uncertain future, not knowing exactly where we are going, because we know with certainty that God goes with us.

Some of you may remember an illustration of this truth that I shared in a sermon several years ago. The illustration comes from Gail Godwin's novel *Evensong*. You may also remember that I enjoyed this novel so much because the main character is a woman minister by the name of the Reverend Margaret Bonner. Hey, it's not often that a minister, let alone a woman minister, is the hero of a story!

In any case, Margaret is the pastor of a small parish in a little town in North Carolina. Over time, she accepts an extra responsibility for something called “Night Prayers” at a boarding school nearby where her husband was the headmaster. Each night she would roam the halls of the orphanage and say prayers with each child that asked her to stop. Many of these children had never had a parent to tuck them in, review their day, and say bedtime prayers.

It was in this context that Margaret struck up an unlikely friendship with Josie, a young teenager who openly admitted, “I’ve never prayed in my life,” and asked Margaret, “How do you start?”

As the evenings unfolded, Margaret introduced Josie first to the Lord’s Prayer, and later to the Psalms. Josie became an avid reader of the Psalms over the course of their nightly prayers. She came to love the ones that assured her of God’s enduring presence in the aching loneliness of her teenaged years.

One night, Josie confided to Margaret that she liked the Psalms better than the Our Father. “Really? Why?” Margaret asked. Josie replied, because “You’re not begging for anything and you’ve got company. Someone’s going with you.”

That’s what we all long for, isn’t it? The assurance that there is someone to go with us as we face the chances and changes of this life. But, not just anyone will do. For us, as people of faith, the only promise that is entirely reliable, and that gives us the courage to move into an uncertain future, is the promise of God that “I will go with you.”

As I close, I want to come back to our second Scripture reading for this morning, and I want you to breathe in a final word of hope. We find this final word of hope in the last verse of the reading, Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and

peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

These words of Paul form one of several benedictions contained in the letter to the church at Rome. You’ll remember that the word benediction comes to us from Latin, with bene meaning, good, and diction meaning, words. A benediction is a blessing, usually offered at the close of a worship service. A blessing of good words...good words that leave us with hope.

Friends, this is my benediction, my closing words meant to do what I have sincerely tried to do over the course of these past thirteen years...to give you hope. Hope that the God who calls you and me and my family into the future holds this future securely in his gracious hands. And best of all, hope because, though we may not know with certainty exactly where we are going, we are going to a place that is good because we have certainty that our God goes with us.

Receive your benediction. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

-Robin Garvin
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