



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
Ann Arbor | Michigan

## Sermons from

### **“Stranger in a Strange Land”**

The Rev. Evans McGowan

August 11, 2013

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-10,13-16

Luke 12:32-36, 40

It was a dark and cloudy day a few weeks ago. We’ve had many this summer in Michigan, but on this particular day members of my family were visiting my Great Uncle Reid, who was my grandfather’s younger brother. His cancer had returned with a vengeance, and he now lay in bed in his home under hospice care. The family decided to give him some time to rest after a long day of visits and paying respects. My aunt was downstairs when she looked out to see a window of brilliant blue sky open up before her. Light streamed through in a sea of grey, a dazzling sight for about ten minutes before the clouds swallowed the blue once more. Afterward, my aunt went upstairs to check on her husband, my uncle, to find that he had passed... perhaps right through that window and into that heavenly country...

In seminary I took a course on Suffering and Dying, and developed a Trinitarian understanding of life in the face of death that I call the three M’s: Mystery, Meaning, and Movement. There is great mystery in the world, things we don’t fully and perhaps never will understand. We respond with awe and wonder, and sometimes a great deal of fear. In the midst of this mystery we try to create meaning, try to make sense of what at times is nonsensical or only understandable in part. And then there is movement, movement between these two poles of not knowing and understanding, movement in life as we go about our daily tasks and dream dreams of what may come. We see mystery all around, evidence of God’s strange yet wondrous ways. We discover meaning here and there, most notably in Christ and the path he freely lays before us. And we move through life in the Spirit with what hope and faith we can find or are given.

Moving through life can take many forms: Dancing through life. Trudging through life. Running through life. Meandering through life. After two years here in Ann Arbor at First Presbyterian – where I have learned so much from all of you, sharing my gifts and my foibles, succeeding in some places and stumbling in others – I have

experienced growth in a myriad of ways: in preaching, teaching, pastoral care, administration, youth, Mature Ministries, and much more. I now embark on a new chapter in the journey. As I set my sights on a ministry job in 2014, I'm planning to spend the remainder of the year traveling to see friends and family, gathering stories about my grandfather to put into a book about his life overlapping with mine. Roy Ledbetter was an orthopedic surgeon who chose his specialty while serving as a resident here at the University Hospital for two years in 1949 and 1950. Always a helper and healer, he practiced and trained others for his entire career in Monroe, Louisiana. Later in life he struggled with Alzheimer's, which will play an integral role in the book. This mysterious disease threatens to rob all meaning and memory as movements become uncertain and strange. In writing the book – for which I received a small grant from my seminary – I hope to reclaim some of his life's memories in a meaningful way, moving in and out of the mystery of living and dying and living again.

Although I will be traveling through familiar territory and seeing familiar faces, I will be a stranger in a strange land as I try to recover his memory and explore memories that I and others have of him, whether they knew him as Dr. Ledbetter, Roy, or Daddy Roy, as I knew him. In our scripture today we hear of Abraham and others living as strangers in a strange land. Where are they to find hope? And yet how desperately do they need it!

Many of us are on journeys where we need hope or a sense of direction. We are commissioning today a group to go Iona, an Isle off the coast of Scotland where a monastic community models a different way of life. The last days of summer are upon us, and many will be starting new schools or new jobs, particularly are next cohort of residents. And even if our own lives feel stable, we probably know and care for people whose lives are in turmoil, who have suffered a loss or simply have lost their way. We can think of a student bullied at school. We can feel for the person who has lost a job. We are concerned about gun violence, the economy, persistent racism and ageism and sexism and all the rest, the gridlock in Washington, the prisoners on hunger strike, the peace in the Middle East that like sand slips through our fingers time and time again...

It is in these uncertain and troubling times that we read these words: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." How can we be so sure of what we hope for? How can we be convicted of what cannot be seen, especially if what we see is crumbling all around us? It is hard if not foolish to hope before the outcome is secure or at least plausible.

There are few darker times in history than in Yugoslavia under the Iron Curtain. Soviet tanks had rolled in to crush the “Prague Spring” in 1968. Many people were imprisoned for their dissent of the government. A man, Vaclav Havel, started a petition for them to be released by Christmas. Many thought he was dangerous for drawing attention to these prisoners, and no one thought they would actually be released. Why give them false hope? Indeed, Christmas came and went, the prisoners were NOT freed, and the petition fizzled out.

Years later, however, as the prisoners were eventually released, they spoke of the petition. Even they knew it wasn’t going to work. But in a time when everyone was looking the other way and trying not to be seen, it mattered that there even was a petition. To know that people out there remembered them was incredibly important to their morale. Indeed, the petition was the first of many, and eventually the Iron Curtain fell despite all odds and with very little violence.

Vaclav Havel later became the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic. What began in a petition ended in a presidency. Listen to what he has to say about hope, and you will hear that he was a poet before he was a president. Hope is “an orientation of the heart.” It is above all “a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t; it is a dimension of the soul.” Hope is “an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

Our faith is rooted in this kind of hope. We do not have faith because it is highly probable, or all the evidence backs us up. The good news is great news because it IS unexpected, because when all was lost, when the Savior had been crucified, dead and buried, when the clouds blocked out the light and despair set in, it was then, THEN, that the women go to the tomb and hear and see the unthinkable, the unimaginable... and yet it happened anyway. Faith is an orientation of the heart, a belief that what is good and right and true will and does happen, in this life or the next, in time present or future, in things seen or unseen.

Jesus takes us a step further (as he often does). Don’t just receive the good news. Share it. Make your faith a living hope. Do not rely on your possessions for security – sell them. Give to those in need. When faith is an orientation of the heart, then it cannot be stolen by a thief or destroyed by a moth. So, be ready. You never know

when the clouds are going to break, when the sky will open up to reveal a brilliant blue... when a wall will be torn down... when a piece of paper leads to peace.

Don't just see it in your mind's eye – FEEL it. Let the hope we have in God sink deep into your bowels – for God is good and loving and true, and what is good and loving and true will come to pass, in this life or the next, for God is the God of the living and the dead... and the resurrected. Even death cannot stop the power of faith, for our hope lies beyond the grave, beyond devastation and destruction, and into the life abundant and ever after.

So lead us not into temptation. Let us not forget those who need encouragement, those who are bullied, those who are in prison, those who are suffering from war and violence. Let us remember them, and in so doing re-member our own souls and the hope we have for a world of faith, hope, love and peace. This is what it means to pray for our enemies. This is what it means to believe in the resurrecting power of Jesus the Christ. This is what it means to join with God and see the reign of God break through those clouds of death and despair and restore our faith and energy to love one another and ourselves. As Martin Luther King said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but bends toward justice.” How might we live now how human beings ought to live, and thus usher in the Reign of God?

What are you hoping for? What are you hoping for in the lives of others? May the mystery of life be full of meaning and movement. May your hope be magnificent in mercy and generous in grace.

This is our active hope. Let us go forward in faith. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory Forever. Hallelujah! Amen.

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