

*“Dum Spiro Spero”*  
Reverend Bill Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 18, 2019

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup>The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. <sup>3</sup>His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; <sup>4</sup>but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. <sup>5</sup>Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup>The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. <sup>9</sup>They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

**Second Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-5**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”



**Sermon: “Dum Spiro Spero”**

Last week we read the story of Jesus’ arrest and of how one of his disciples tried to intervene by using a deadly weapon to strike one of those who had come to take Jesus away. We considered Jesus words to that disciple and what they might mean for us today; that if you take the sword you will die by the sword. And we considered the arguments that go on for and against gun control and how those don’t seem to be helping us solve the problems of gun violence and in particular, mass shootings in this country.

I invited you to come and talk to me if you had questions or concerns and some of you were willing to share your thoughts on the issues I raised last Sunday. But one of the comments I heard last week got me to thinking about a bigger issue in the life of the disciple. And that is the nature of hope.

You see, I realize that even a cursory look at the daily news can leave you thinking that things just couldn’t get any worse. Violence and scandal and childish behavior dominate our public discourse. Is it that things have gotten worse over the years? Or are human beings as sinful as they’ve ever been it’s just that now in the age of information overload, we know more about that seedy underbelly of humanity and we have a broader understanding of just what we are capable of and of just how low people will go for their own selfish benefits?

My hunch is it’s the latter. We’re not worse people. We’re just better informed. But either way, the issue of gun violence serves as a microcosm of a larger problem: that human beings are capable of evil. And that evil can seem overwhelming sometimes.

I’ve learned that when something feels overwhelming, there are two ways to go: you can give in and let it wash over you. That’s resignation. Or you can swim against the tide and fight to stay on top of it. You can refuse to be overwhelmed because you know that evil is not the way of the world; evil is not God’s plan for us, and God’s Kingdom will ultimately prevail. That is hope.

Scripture teaches us that while human beings are capable of profound evil, evil is not the way of the world; it’s a deviation, an aberration. Think about it this way, when you go out to the Columbus Zoo to see the zebras, you see some truly majestic animals adorned with white and black stripes. But which of these colors is the actual color of the zebra and which is the variant? In other words, is a Zebra white with black stripes? Or black with white stripes? Which is the base color, and which is the contrast color?

Different people probably give different answers depending on how they see zebras. The evidence shows that zebras actually have black skin beneath their coats, so the animals are black and the stripes are white.<sup>1</sup> “[But] if you look at most

zebras, the [black] stripes end on their belly and toward the inside of the legs, and the rest of their fur is all white.”<sup>2</sup> So you could also argue that the coat is white with black stripes.

Which is it? Depends on how you look at it. It’s really your choice.

And we also have a choice in how we see the world. Is the world evil and when we see good people do good things, we are only seeing points of light in the darkness? Or is the world inherently good and the evil we see is just an aberration? Put another way, is the world evil with good stripes? Or good with evil stripes?

For the Christian, the answer should be easy. When we know God, we know that God made the world good. The creation story in the very beginning of Genesis, the root of our story as a people, states over and over and over again, that what God made, God made good. Water, light, air, the plants, the animals, and even us, were created good. And the evil we see is but an aberration that God is overcoming; working through you and I and the processes of human history to transform the world into the good and pure kingdom that God intended. That’s what we see in the passages we read this morning.

But no matter how things actually are; no matter what God is doing in the world, the choice of how we see the world is our own and we can choose to see black with white stripes, or white with black stripes; we can choose to resign ourselves to the tide of evil in the world, or we can choose to resist that tide, to focus on God’s goodness; to have hope.

Now “hope” is a word with many attachments. We use it so often and for so many things that when we talk about hope, the word loses some of its power and meaning. As you get close to your birthday, you hope for good surprises. You hope for a good performance review at work and the raise that comes with it. You hope the rain holds off because you have plans this weekend. You hope that the today is going to be a good day.

But Christian hope is something different and more heartfelt; something that grows from a place deeper within us. Hope is close kin to faith and in fact, in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, Paul connects them together when he writes that “faith, hope, and love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love.”

Hope is often confused with optimism. But the two are very different. Optimism looks at a bad situation and says, “This isn’t so bad.” Hope looks at the same situation and acknowledges how bad things are but knows that they can and will get better.

I’ll show you what I mean. Three Ohio State fans met together at their local watering hole just after the end of the last college football season The Buckeyes had done extremely well but missed the playoffs and were denied a chance to repeat their national championship run from 2014.

One fan was an optimist who could always find the sunny side of any situation. He said “Well, at least we won the Big 10!” One fan was a pessimist who always saw the worst side of things. He said, “We’ll never win another national championship.” But the third fan had hope, and she said “We’ll be back.” Hope is more than just a sunny disposition. Hope knows. Hope expects. Hope waits.

In an interview with the New York Times Magazine in 2010, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa explained this difference between hope and optimism.

Midway through the interview, the reporter notes that Trevor Tutu, the Bishops eldest child and only son, had been arrested and jailed for making a bomb threat in 1989 and asks what he is up to now. Bishop Tutu replies:

*“He’s a very gifted person, but you see a little bit how God must feel about us because he has really undermined his own life by his abuse of alcohol. When he’s not under the influence, he’s incredibly wonderful, he really is, and it makes you weep to see how he... is almost intent on destroying himself.”*

Then the reporter asks her next question:

*“How do you make peace with that, as a preacher who has just written a book asking us to be optimistic?”*

And Bishop Tutu replies:

*“Not optimistic, hopeful. Optimism is a much lighter thing. Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”<sup>3</sup>*

Hope is not a Pollyanna sunny disposition that dismisses the facts. Hope is not the belief that everything will just work out. Hope understands that the evidence may point to darkness, but that God’s ability to bring light has not been overcome. Optimism sees what is and says, “This isn’t so bad.” Hope sees what is and knows it’s bad, but waits expectantly for what will be.

Hope is anticipation of the coming of what God has promised that is grounded in the memory of what God has done. Hope drives us forward. Hope gives us strength to get up when we are knocked down. Hope inspires us to continue waiting even when the evidence suggests our waiting is futile. Hope gives us wisdom to trust that God will make things right and courage to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people while we wait.

There is darkness in the world. If you pay attention to the news at all it's hard to miss. We hear the news of war in Yemen and Syria and threats to democracy in Hong Kong. We read about refugees on our own border fleeing violence in Central America and of our own government's rejection of them. We read of gun violence and opioid addiction and the destruction they cause. And we see the darkness.

But the promise of God, experienced most fully in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is that the darkness is just an aberration. The proper way of the world is light. And that light will overcome.

The book of Revelation, so often seen as a spiritual thrill ride of beasts and horsemen and tribulation, is actually a pastoral reminder of that very fact.

In the new world of God's reign, the things we fear; the things that throw our lives into chaos and disorder will be no more. Death, and mourning and crying and pain, all of it. "See," says the voice from the throne, "I am making all things new." The world as we know it is to be transformed to more closely resemble God's original intent for creation. Note that the voice does not say "I will make *all new things*," but rather, "I will make *all things new*." This is not a new act of creation, but a prolific act of redemption. The world will not be replaced, it will be transformed!

In the Kingdom of God, there will be no divisions, no classes; there will be no pain or hatred or any of the things that fracture relationships. But instead there will be peace and cooperation and appreciation for the grandeur and majesty of all of God's creation. It will not be a return to what was, but a fulfillment of what God has always intended the world to be.

That is the hope that sustains us. It is the promise that inspired the early Christians who faced persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, just as it has sustained Christians across the centuries who have faced powers and principalities that laid claim to their loyalty. The promise of God's ultimate victory; of the irresistible advance of God's Kingdom; the assurance of the inevitability of God's reign being established here among us is what has driven the church onward throughout the years. It is what has comforted and inspired us during the darkest days. It is reassurance that the tragedies and drama and evil we find along the way do not ultimately win.

God does.

On the seal of my home state of South Carolina is the state motto: "Dum Spiro Spero." Now, South Carolina doesn't have the most sterling historical record (see: slavery, civil war, Jim Crow, etc.) but they do have a good motto. "Dum Spiro Spero" is a Latin phrase which translates "While I breathe, I hope."

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in the words of John and Isaiah and the other writers of scripture; in the wisdom of that cloud of witnesses that has come before us and in the traditions of the church we find reassurance that while human sin and evil are real and while it can be easy for us to be overwhelmed by the vastness of it, God has already begun acting to redeem this world and to make it whole. God brings light to the dark places and life to the dead places. In this we can be confident. In this we can hope.

And because we have hope in God's desire and ability to bring life, we can seek to be a part of that living, and we can be bearers of that life-giving good news into the world.

Dum Spiro Spero. While I breathe, I hope.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Zebra - Wikipedia." 14 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zebra#Stripes.

<sup>2</sup> "Zebra | San Diego Zoo Animals & Plants." 16 Aug. 2019, animals.sandiegozoo.org/animals/zebra.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon, Deborah. "The Priest." *The New York Times* [New York, NY] 7 Mar. 2010, Sunday Magazine sec.: MM12. *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 06 Mar. 2010. Web. 29 Nov. 2016. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07fob-q4-t.html>>.