

Hopeful Together/Hopefully Wrong Together

November 27, 2022

Luke 2:8-11, Hebrews 10:23-25

Hopeful Together

So, now that we are on the other side of this trip, here's what I can say.

On a personal level, I've been trying to get to Africa for over 40 years. Twice, I had the realization that it was actually happening, that my dream was being fulfilled.

The first time, I was standing in front of the congregation of Saviour King Worship Center in Nairobi, preaching, singing, and praying with a church that I'd never heard of until that day, yet still received and celebrated as a brother. They all say hello, and thank you for your greetings to them!

The second time was walking into the chapel building at Mukinge Girls Secondary School. A wave of sound hit us as soon as we walked into the chapel building. Nearly 750 high school girls were singing and dancing in a call-and-response worship service, voices echoing off of the rafters and the tin roof above. This moment was the culmination of over a year's worth of planning, organizing, fundraising, and finally, travelling. I can't describe that moment.

But this wasn't a personal trip, nor was it to check off my own bucket list items.

Prior to the trip, I found myself drawn to 1 and 2 Timothy for my devotional reading. In it, I was reminded of all of the distractions and temptations to get complicated that surround me. This trip was a different kind of thing. I needed to keep things really simple.

Sure, there were going to be complications: overweight luggage, lots of items to haul over for various people, coordinating flights and visas and stuff – but this is all normal stuff. I needed to focus on being simple.

Simply listen.

Simply watch.

Simply be present.

In all of these things, responding with a simple message: whomever I was with at the moment needed a simple message of God's delight in their efforts. In this way, I was to be an instrument of hopefulness.

Time and again, whether from missionaries or teachers or pastors, from National Directors (I think I met at least three!), to the short-term support teachers educating missionary kids in Kasempe, from the Head School Teacher at MGSS to the new staff at Rosslyn to the kids in the schools, the message I heard was the same:

What an amazing thing that your church would send you on a pastoral visit.

And this added the second element to my trip: hopefulness through togetherness. In other words, hopeful together.

This was something that most had never seen before. And to a person, they spoke of how precious this gift was, not only to the people I went to specifically see, but to them as the community of those people. By loving our people enough to send me around the world for a visit, we showed that we value the people that they value; we wound up loving them too!

This was in sitting in Mark's school, listening to the newly hired chaplain of elementary kids, and her desire to teach them how to find the deep treasure of God's word, and then together coming up with a modified plan to teach k – 5 students hermeneutics; and then watching it work!

It was sitting in Lisa's dining room, sharing a meal with missionaries who have given a combined 70 years of their lives to Zambian people, laughing and lamenting, encouraging each other and sharing the load. And then, with great joy, being able to offer a prayer of blessing. From all of us at First B.

It was sitting in the office of the head school teacher, and hearing his gratitude that we honor one so highly as to make the trip to his school, and show that honor to one that they find so valuable, and who works so hard on behalf of their learners. When we honored Lisa, we also honored him, his staff, and his school. We communicated our respect of their humanity in this visit.

It was in seeing the gratitude for the Days for Girls kits we brought.

It was walking into a hall with 750 high school girls, singing and dancing with everything that they have, and being invited to preach, telling them how brightly they can shine in God's creation. And then it was in the hundreds of questions afterwards, and their laughter in our answers!

It was in watching Mark be received as a travelling dignitary, a fellow head school teacher, and watching him be able to minister and bless the school in ways I couldn't, because he is both a professional and a man of God.

It was in driving with Lisa to visit the ten schools, multiple churches, and miles of dusty, dirt roads that have been her place of ministry for two decades. Watching her teach a grade eight devotional, and just be with her girls.

It was watching the gifts received from the church, with much exclamation and study of the wall hangings to the eye-rolling pleasure of a simple, Halloween-sized chocolate treat that can't be had in Nairobi.

So often, when missionaries are asked to speak or to write, or to tell their stories, it is linked to fundraising. So they feel pressure. To come up with a compelling story that will engage people, and draw them into financial partnership so that they can continue to do the work that God has called them to.

But missionary life is like life everywhere – it is mostly mundane, daily small stuff, week in and week out. And these are hard to put into a compelling story.

What I discovered on this trip is that simply being present communicated all of the value that we have as a community for the daily lives of these missionaries. And so, I started to hear the unvarnished, unfiltered, stories of joy and hardship, of opportunities and dreams, while we lived the mundane day to day together. Not just Lisa, not just the Blankenstyn's, but entire circles of people were blessed by this church's vision and willingness to send me to Kenya and to Zambia.

To simply listen.

And simply watch.

To simply be present.

In the end, we found hopefulness together.

Thank you, First B, for simply loving.

It was a dream come true.

Hopefully Wrong Together.

In our bible reading today, we read about the announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, and the news was good news, of great joy, for all people, a phrase that keeps coming up, and will keep coming up.

The second passage was about the encouragement we gain as we gather together to wait the fulfillment of our ultimate hope, the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.

So, togetherness and hopefulness go hand in hand. But how to do that?

This will be brief, I think.

Because I had an amazing sermon planned for you all today. Seriously, amazing.

And then, as I listened, Bruce covered everything I wanted to say, point, by point, by point. Literally, the same ideas. So, remember this:

The church is a place of belonging for all people, regardless of x.

Now, this frees me up to build on it!

Having shared with you what I learned and experienced in Kenya and Zambia with the Blankenstyn's and with Lisa, one thing has been reinforced for me.

With our Cuba partnership, we've been trying to adjust our thinking to prioritize presence, rather than just presents. And this was validated and emphasized in underlined, bold, italicized, all caps type during my trip.

Amie Cross, the Elementary Chaplain at Rosslyn Academy said it this way:

"When you get off the plane, you tell the people that God has not forgotten them." It has been an encouragement to have you here, and a blessing that you are serving as much as you are . . .

This is our first Sunday of Advent, the day we focus on hope. And we thought that my report back on Africa could fit in several of the Sundays of Advent – Love, because of the practical, felt expression of love that sending a representative on a pastoral visit was. Peace, as Isaiah says, how lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news." Or joy, which was so evident in the many interactions and worship services and bible studies and meals and handshakes – well, you get the point.

But we chose to put these stories on the Sunday of Hope. There is a certain encouragement, a huge validation that happens when we breathe the same air, share the same events that become our common stories. Being together is one of the key aspects of hope. It means being seen for who we are, and still accepted. It means companionship in celebration and in grief. It means feeling normal for following Jesus, rather than feeling outcast. Hope. It means reinforcing the idea that we know the end of the story with Jesus' physical return to finally restore all things to his will. Hope.

There is one, very practical, tangible hurdle to being hopeful together. It means that we have to be together! And we need to be with people that are different from us.

That means, we have to be able to be wrong. Together.

Last Sunday, Bruce spoke to us about the wide welcome Jesus offered to people, that we don't need to be perfect before Jesus welcomes us into his church.

I am so grateful that the words of the angel in Luke was not, "Look! You finally gotten it right, and now God can send his good news!"

No! Rather, the word was, "I bring you good news of great joy for all people!"

Not perfect people.

Not people who behave.

Not people who got it right, and earned it.

All people.

The sinners and the saints.

And, since Jesus welcomes sinners and saints into his church, we as a church do the same thing.

Thus, the second part of the title for my message this morning. Hopefully Wrong together.

In order to experience the great hope of togetherness, friends, we need to be able to be wrong.

To make mistakes.

Even to be sinful! (Remember, Jesus meets us exactly where we are. He might not leave us there, but that's his prerogative!)

It needs to be okay for us to be wrong, because not one of us has it right!

One of us has figured out the end times, and wants everyone else to agree with them.

Another person has sexual ethics clearly understood and mapped out. And everyone needs to be on board with their understanding.

A third person hasn't used a swear word since the day they were born, and requires the same level of language out of their community.

Can we tolerate those among us who disagree with us?

Or, even, who are getting it wrong?

Because together matters.

For two years we railed against and lived through restrictions that kept us apart for a few months, yet now we would exclude people from fellowship and community for disagreeing with us on our pet issue? Even when we are wrong on something else in their eyes?

Friends, this is a Sunday for hope.

Hope that Jesus has given us open doors to forgiveness and access to the Father.

Hope that we know the end of the story, that Jesus will return, and will finally set all things right.

Hope that in this world, the church can be a place of belonging, of togetherness, even when we disagree.

How, though, can we be hopefully wrong together? I have a few, practical ideas.

What defines us as a community is the primary issue, and the non-negotiable. We worship the risen Jesus as the only way to salvation.

Beyond this, we listen to each other with respect. Rather than judge, ask open questions. We can trust that the Holy Spirit will guide and convict. We don't have to.

We accept that others are wrong, and that's okay! Because I'm wrong too in other areas. There must be grace for us both.

Don't answer questions that haven't been asked! It takes time for enough trust and safety to develop in order to have harder conversations. But these are for among trusted friends.

And along these lines, make sure that our own questions come from curiosity rather than an agenda. Ask authentic questions, because this builds trust, relationship, and intimacy.

Intimacy comes from working through arguments together. So, we need to lean into disagreement with curiosity rather than confrontation in mind.

If you don't remember anything else, remember this. Just listen. With no agenda. This is what was so valuable in Africa. People are looking for an unshockable friend. Not one that just agrees with them in a pandering way, but one that doesn't leave them at the first sign of disagreement or difficulty. Nothing builds trust faster than being listened to.

We can be together. We can be hopeful. Even if we are wrong some of the time. Welcome to our church!