



"Romans 5"
Sermon by Rev. Ashley Bair
Romans 5:1-5

JUNE 16, 2019

God of hope, open our minds to hear you as you approach us this morning. Let the words of my mouth and intentions of our hearts be suitable to you, our rock and comforter. Amen.

About a year ago, I joined a book club. After years of reading heavy academic literature, I was looking for a change. So, I joined this book club with the hopes that I would keep reading and engaging my mind, but have some fun and get the chance to read things I, myself, might not ordinarily pick off a bookshelf. And it's been a pretty wild ride, actually.

For anyone else who's in a book club or another club of the like, where you're engaging with people either you know or you don't know, but either way you have limited choice in what happens next, it can get interesting. The way my book club works, each of us submit five books to a form and then the form has an option where you can randomly select the title. We go through the year completing this list of books randomly selected. Sometimes, the novels are similar

in nature and sometimes, the difference is stark.

Earlier this year, we finished Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamazov" which is an incredibly dense (in more ways than one, its about 1,000 pages long) novel with rich imagery about love and darkness and sin and what connects us as human beings on this earth. It was a little hard to get into, and very hard to let go. It's a wonderful story.

After finishing that dense, deep novel, the next book selected from the list was "Ready Player One" by Ernest Cline. So, in less than a week we went from reading about late nineteenth century Russian angst to a futuristic adventure following a teenager wanting to win a series of video games. "Ready Player One" is a novel about a video game contest in a hyper-technological world. I have to admit when I saw the title, I was a little disappointed; going back to the purpose of my book club, I wouldn't have likely picked this book up from a shelf on my own. Mostly because, I just know next to nothing about video games. I know that

there is a deep culture surrounding it and I haven't yet entered that culture. At first, I was very judgmental toward this book. I just didn't think a book about cyber worlds and a video game competition could intrigue me.

But, beyond its cover, the story of "Ready Player One" is, of course, about more than video games. That's only one layer. Without telling too much, in case you haven't read it and want to, the book takes place in a post-climate crisis world around the year 2045. In this world, cities that are still inhabitable have stacks of homes on top of each other reaching up to the sky to accommodate the population. Because reality is so dire: homes are crowded, food is scarce, transportation is nearly extinct, and health and well-being are constantly compromised from the air pollution, people turn to virtual reality to live the kind of life they desire.

In the virtual world, everything around you is only as you want it. You can customize the way you look and sound and you can build an entire world around you that fulfills your life's fantasies without ever having to leave your chair. As the characters in this novel find out, though, even in a world that is entirely make believe - in a virtual world where you would assume you can control all of your surroundings - even there, the world is quickly corrupted by those who want to make a profit off of your dreams. Vast economic disparity becomes a part of the virtual world and companies start selling virtual clothing and virtual cars and virtual homes and virtual friends and virtual weapons.

The whole world clings to the promise of a video game contest that offers

a reward of millions of dollars, because even in a made-up world, most have little room left for hope.

Even though I wasn't expecting it, this book moved me because, it seems actually like a very possible future we could encounter. And I was struck that even 20 or 30 years from now we could be a people who, no matter what kind of advances we make, are still longing for hope.

I landed on that feeling just as I was reflecting on our scripture text this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans, where he writes, "hope does not disappoint us." And at first glance, I was very confused by that. Hope does not disappoint us. Doesn't it? I don't know about you, but I feel awfully disappointed in my hopes, sometimes. I feel like I hope for things, good things, faithful things, and am left disappointed.

I hope for an end to violence, I hope for a home for every person, I hope for love for every child, I hope for equity amongst all people, I hope for clean air and food and water, I hope reconciliation, I hope for kindness and generosity and abundance. I have a lot of hope. I could ask any of you what you hope for and we would be filling this beautiful space with all of our good intentions and wishes. I could stand here for days and quote passionate leaders from the past who spoke about their own hopes and visions.

Sometimes, it feels like we're making progress towards our hopes, and sometimes, it feels like we are not. It feels like even in 2045, we are going to be longing for something to bring us hope. So, hope does not disappoint us? I don't know.

But, there is obviously something powerful there, because no matter what happens to us, we keep seeking hope. What happens to us when we have hope? Stop for a minute and think about the last time you felt really hopeful --- What was happening in your mind? What was happening in your body? Were you imagining something? Were you giddy with excitement? Were you happy?

There is something powerful about hope. It seems intrinsic to our lives; its an element that, even in dire circumstances, we can't give up on.

I think Paul knew that when he was writing to the Romans. Paul's letter to the Romans is, to me, one of the most interesting letters of the Bible. Paul had not yet met those he was writing to, but he knew what had happened to them. Rome was, of course, a big city and he had friends there. He had heard about the struggles the Christian community was facing. When the Christian community in Rome started, it was preserved in its Jewish roots. There was a high level of interest and loyalty to Jewish tradition. When Gentiles joined the Christian community, they were accustomed to observing many Jewish traditions.

Then, the Jewish Christians were forced to leave the city, which meant that most of the Christian community left in Rome were Gentiles. A few years later the Jewish Christians returned to Rome and discovered that the community had become mostly Gentile and not Jewish. There were likely many, many reasons that Paul wanted to get to Rome and to meet the Christian community there, though scholars agree that one of the main reasons was because the

Christian community had become two communities divided between Jewish and Gentile.

The Christians in Rome were trying to be faithful, each with their own perspective, but they were having trouble reconciling their differences with the other. They were letting the things that divided them become more important than the things that united them. Neither was very open to changing for the other and their lifestyles and beliefs started taking precedence over the faith they shared.

Even in the big city of Rome with a growing Christian community, there was no guarantee that they would make it. Neither group had full, assured hope that their faith tradition would survive. So, Paul wrote them a letter. And in this letter he tries to assure the Gentile Christians that the Jewish traditions stand firm and he tries to assure the Jewish Christians that we have all been renewed in Christ and when our faith is placed in God, the details behind our divisions don't matter so much.

He writes to them, offering a word and witness to how the fact that we can call ourselves beloveds of God is more powerful than anything we try to cling to. God came to us and lived with us all and died for us and that is where our unity is found. God's love for us, that is our hope.

Christ completed our hope. The divine side of the work is all and well and finished. What remains is humanity's acceptance of the good news and trust in God's grace.

Our hope, then, is not any wishful or wistful thinking about what we can control and what we can't control. Our hope will not be found in the resolve of the global economic situation of 2045 or even in the communion of peoples long divided. Even then, we will still have suffering and still be longing because we will have placed our hope not in God, but in the world and in ourselves.

God has declared peace unto us through Christ, the problem is that we have not made peace with God. Peace with God means putting down our fears, defenses, and hostility. Having hope means being assured in the expectation of God's grace and love.

While time has surely given us advances, the ways in which we seek hope and comfort have not changed too much. Just like the Romans, we are often "between the times," moving from one generation to the next. We are sad for the changes and stubborn at times, but reaching a place where we have to accept where we are. With our faith, we are not exempt from suffering. And given our faith's history and the prospects of the future, perhaps our hope for the end of suffering is wistful. After all, both Paul and Jesus assumed it would be our normal lot.

But, if our hope is in our expectation of God's grace and love, our suffering results in endurance through difficulty. God's love has been poured into our hearts in a personal, intimate way. And nothing can separate us from God's love and faithfulness, no matter what difficulty.

The Christians in Rome were learning how to be faithful, but when they looked around at their circumstances they didn't have much hope that it would ever continue. Even so, with faith in God, here we are today. Still practicing the faith. Our hope is not found in ourselves or in others, but in God who transcends time and is more powerful than our deepest despair or concern. And so, our hope does not disappoint us.

Amen.

Works used in this sermon:

Paul's Letter to the Romans by Arland J. Hultgren (2011)