

“Optimism”
Habakkuk 3:17-19
October 21, 2018

We were relaxing after Sunday dinner about 40 years ago – my Scottish minister, myself, and a classmate I had invited, just getting to know each other. And though I cannot remember much of what I have said in the last 40 years, something my minister mentioned that afternoon has stayed with me ever since.

My classmate, a woman seeking ordination in the United Church of Canada, didn't want to have any children. I wasn't thinking much along those lines myself, not being interested in marriage, much less any offspring. But after our group broke up, my minister shook his head and said he just couldn't understand it: how could any aspiring clergy not want to bring children into this world, when our Christian faith is essentially an optimistic one. And I guess the Rev. Peter C. Douglas was very optimistic, since he had four children of his own.

But Beverly didn't want any children, she said, because she didn't want to bring any new life into a world which she characterized as cold and cruel. I guess she had never been to Colebrook!

This sermon is not about Colebrook, however. And, it is not about children. It is about Peter Douglas' comment that Christianity is essentially an optimistic religion. I hadn't really thought about it in those kinds of terms at that point, and wasn't really sure that he was right.

Optimism, for so many of us, can be summed up in a phrase that was heard quite a bit from the lips of our Victorian forebears around 125 years ago: “Every day, in every way, things are getting better.” It's hard to get more optimistic than that. It sums up a view of history that sees progress as never ending, and humanity as sane and rational.

All that came crashing down around people's ears in August of 1914 when the world went to war in a way so horrible it seemed unimaginable. And can you believe that in just a couple of weeks we will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the end of what was then called The Great War – the War to End All Wars. Yeah, right...

The society that had had such an optimistic view was destroyed, by and large, by that war. And the church, though not destroyed, changed course from a humanistic bent to what is now called Neo-Orthodoxy, where revelation trumps reason, emotion outshines intellect, and faith replaces rationalism.

So much for the history lesson. And just as this sermon isn't about Colebrook or about children, it's also not about history. But it is about scripture. And a look at the Bible does not always show that God's people have any given cause for optimism. The prophets of ancient Israel were rarely into pie-in-the-sky, but more into doom-and-gloom. The Apostle Paul is not everybody's idea of a "Fun Person." And even Jesus of Nazareth cursed fig trees, excoriated the religious leaders of his day as hypocrites, and preached an ethic of sacrifice – doing without, for many people, is not exactly a recipe for optimism.

The Church, by and large, has taken up the cue. We're very often seriously sorrowful. But there is another side to our faith which IS an optimistic one, though not optimistic in the sense that most people might use to define the term.

From some pulpits – many on television – we hear that there is reason for unbridled optimism. We are told to "expect a miracle." We are led to believe that God will enrich us not only spiritually, but also financially. And, of course, sometimes God does exactly that. On the opposite side of things, we think that if anything goes wrong in our pocketbook, it is the "judgment of God" upon us for some supposed wrongdoing.

That's an old heresy that is long in dying out, even though the entire point of the Book of Job, and much of Jesus' teaching, contradicts that kind of thinking. And if Jesus himself contradicts it, we should think twice before believing it ourselves.

Somewhere in between, however, lies the reality in which we live and by which we experience God. Let's look at our Old Testament lesson again. The prophet expresses optimism – no doubt about it. Yet he does so not because materially things are going well, or because God has rewarded us in the here-and-now. In fact, the prophet's experience is just the opposite. Habakkuk expresses joy not because his circumstances are happy, but because his vision of God leads him to realize how trivial and meaningless the disappointments of this life really are. While others would look to abundance in this

life to make them happy, Habakkuk sees that despite the failures of this life to provide for complete human contentment, God provides for the soul.

Habakkuk realizes that there is no sense making a mountain out of a mole hill, or seeing in every trouble a grand disaster, in every pain a calamity, or in each sorrow a tragedy. He is too optimistic for that.

Think of the life of the Apostle Paul. A story I remember from Sunday School is how Paul is imprisoned, and yet from his cell sings hymns and praises his Creator. Paul could not change his circumstances, but he made sure that life's circumstances didn't change him. He didn't pretend that a Christian never falls, but he affirms that a Christian will pick herself up again. It is not that Christians will never be beaten, but that we struggle in the knowledge that the campaign can never be lost. For Paul there are, quite literally, no dead ends, but death itself loses its horrors and its final say.

That is the kind of optimism that leads the Psalmist to sing, "When my father and mother forsake me, then will the Lord take me up." It allowed a martyr for her country to say, when all had abandoned her, "It is better to be alone with God. His friendship will not fail me, nor his counsel, nor his love. In His strength I will dare and dare and dare until I die."

It is this kind of optimism, of course, which lies behind Jesus' saying, "My yoke is easy, my burden is light." Now this phrase, I suspect, is very often misunderstood. Jesus did not mean that there is no yoke, or no burden. On the contrary. Jesus was a carpenter. He knew all about yokes and oxen and plowing. An easy yoke is almost a technical term, meaning a yoke that fits the beast well so that it works WITH the animal instead of at cross-purposes against it. But is still a yoke – and a yoke means work.

Indeed, Christian optimism is not of the kind that says God will shield us from all suffering or pain. Rather, it's the kind that says we might be knocked down, but not out. That we might occasionally be at our wits' end, but not at our hope's end. That we will have to carry our Cross, but we can either treat it like a heavy trunk and cross-beam, or have it uplift us, as wings do for a bird, or a mast and sail carry a ship over treacherous waters to a safe haven.