

## "When Hope is Hard to Find"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, December 4, 2011

I began this morning with a four letter word on my lips. It's been that kind of morning. Actually, there were two four letter words that kept coming up: the first one was "hope," and the second one is "then." As in, "As soon as this happens... *then* everything will be alright..." As soon as we pay off the mortgage *then* we will start taking vacations. As soon as the children grow up *then* we'll pay more attention to our relationship. As soon as I graduate... as soon as the holidays are over...as soon as this illness is behind us...*then*...as soon as *this* or *that* or the *other thing*...*then*... everything is gonna be alright.

Here's my point, there's a big difference between hope and postponement. It's one thing to hope when hope is hard to find, and its another thing to use hope as a way to postpone and delay. Y'all wanna hear a message this morning? Too many of us live in anticipation of what's next, and then fail to be alive now.

I know what I'm talking about because I've done it many times; we all do. I remember when I was in graduate school, I was working so hard, between schoolwork, and my internships, and other activities, that I used to tell my girlfriend Anitra (who's now my wife and my girlfriend, thank GOD! It's important to remember that "wife doesn't always sound that romantic – it's a four letter word. *Girlfriend* sounds romantic...once we're married, our spouse is our only legitimate source of romance.) I used to tell her, "Honey, as soon as I graduate and am ordained, I won't be pulling all-nighters working on term papers and working through every weekend and vacation." But then, I became a minister and in those first few years I used to frequently pull all-nighters on Saturday nights preparing my sermons, and I'd rarely manage my time well enough to be free on evenings and days off.

I'm much better about all that now. I almost never stay up all night writing a sermon, and I always take my vacations and days off. Mostly because I want to stay married and I want my children to know who I am. But I know how easy it is to be misguided and deluded by that ubiquitous four letter word... THEN. Hope is spelled with four letters, but let's remember they're not T – H – E – N. Because it's so easy to make postponement and anticipation into a way of life. It's one thing when we are going through a hard time – like grieving the death of a loved one, or going through a break-up or divorce, or we've just lost our job or destroyed our reputation – to cultivate a sense of hope that things will not

always feel like this. We have to grieve today in order for the hope of better days to come. Our hope for tomorrow comes from our actions today; *your* hope for tomorrow comes from your actions today. That's why our essential hope is not about what is to come then, but in what we can do right now.

It's seductive to focus our life on an image in our minds of tomorrow because then we never have to worry, because tomorrow never comes. Because then our whole life is based on imagination, not reality. What's the expression, "Reality is for people who don't have good enough imaginations." The renowned Disciples of Christ minister Fred Craddock put it this way, "Sometimes we'd rather hope than have. So we talk of hoping, while delaying and postponing. It's understandable," he says, "because it's a whole lot easier to hope that a messiah will come and make everything perfect and right, rather than believe that one has already come."<sup>i</sup>

He explains how back in Biblical times, every story began not with "Once upon a time," but with the phrase, "When the Messiah comes..." A poor mother would say it, trying to comfort her hungry children, because all they have are scraps on their dinner table again, "But kids, when the Messiah comes..." The beggar's tale always began with, "Sorry, but when the Messiah comes..." How many fathers in those days said it, while trying to console a devastated daughter who'd been assaulted by a Roman soldier...patting her on the shoulder and saying, "I'm sorry, honey, when the Messiah comes..." And how about the countless, beautiful, little Samaritan children who came home confused and humiliated after being called names (not because of something they did, but because of who they were) and told they were just another "no-good nothing", like all the rest of "their kind." They were just children, being treated like they were subhuman. And their parents, choking back their rage and wiping away their child's tears as they hid their own, and explaining, "Just wait, my dear, because when the Messiah comes..."

So you can just imagine, when people like John the Baptist and other forerunners of the Messiah would come and say that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, people came out in droves. They left dishes in the sink and beds unmade and fields half-plowed, and rushed to hear of the coming of the Lord. Then when Jesus came and began to preach and heal, one day he asked his disciples, "Who do they say that the Son of Man is?" And the disciples explained, some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. In those days it was thought that these were the ones who would arrive first to announce the coming of the Messiah. Most people did not think or want to imagine that Jesus was the Messiah, because sometimes it seems better to hope than to have. If he was the Messiah... what about all those expectations? If the Messiah is here, and I'm still

hungry and homeless and helpless...if the Messiah has come, and the wars and corruption continue...then what?

Once Jesus came, the disciples were prepared to march with him into Jerusalem and bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, but Jesus kept stopping to heal the lame and the lepers. How were they ever going to bring on the kingdom if he kept stopping to help people? It was a distraction. When they stopped for a break and finally had time to talk and plan and prepare, mothers would rush in with their children to see him, and the children would be loud and boisterous until one of the disciples would yell, "Get these children out of here! We have important things to talk about!" But Jesus would say, "'Suffer the children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.' And he took them into his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them."

What do we do if after a long time we finally get what we had hoped for, and it's not what we expected it to be? We can spend our lives looking forward to something and then be disappointed when it arrives. For some people, Christmas is the saddest day of the Holidays; sometimes it's better to *hope* than to *have*. And, if we spend our lives looking for the Messiah, we can make him or her exactly as we want. If we are hungry, the Messiah will bring plenty. If we are blind, sight. If we are lonely, he will bring real community. Or as Craddock says, "Sometimes it's easier to dream of a messiah than to have our dreams explode by anyone, even a messiah." Looking forward all the time can be a way of avoiding what is.

We can look forward all our life to having a spiritual community that's truly open and intelligible. We can look forward to having a church that's focused on real issues of faith and justice in this world. We can wish for a church that uses democracy rather than hierarchical and ecclesiastical authority. We can wish there's a spiritual community that's open to Yoga from India, Tai Chi from China, Meditation from Buddha, worship from Christianity, openness to Judaism, and has respect for nature and science and the interdependent web of all life. We can wish for a church that considers women as equals, that truly strives to repair the divisions between the races, and opens its doors and arms to the full participation of our LGBT brothers and sisters. We can wish for a place where we can bring our real questions without rebuke or reproach. We can wish for a community to raise our children where they will not be indoctrinated or made to feel guilty or ashamed or judgmental. And a place that will meet our grief with love and not cover it over with platitudes, or tell us that this is not our real life, our real life is yet to come. We can wish for all of these things, and then we can find it and have it,

and we can fail to believe in it or support it. Because reality will never fit exactly what we can imagine in our minds, and that's why it's often more satisfying to hope than to have.

Looking forward can also be a postponement of the problems of today. Here at All Souls, we can dream of a new campus downtown that will have all the things we want in it: classrooms with enough space to create real community, a location where we can truly reach out to people of all cultures and classes. For the next few years we can start every sentence with, "When the new church is built, THEN we can grow our membership. When we move downtown, THEN we can really start welcoming our guests properly. Once we have our new church, THEN we will be able to address real urban problems...THEN we will be able to offer a powerful example of Love Beyond Belief..."

You see, he's right: it's much easier to believe that a messiah will come than to believe that the Messiah has already come. There's always enough injustice and pain in the world to make the argument that a messiah will come. And there's enough injustice and pain in the world to argue that the Messiah has not yet come. But the whole point of the messianic age – the whole point of a messiah coming – is to turn the world and all its expectations on its head. So, Dr. Craddock tells us that in a world that said, "Wherever the Messiah is there will be no misery," has been flipped to say, "Wherever there is misery, there is the Messiah." It's a reversal of the order of things.

But, most people would rather hope than have, and so many, including most Christians, live with expectation of Jesus coming back rather than with the reality that Jesus has already come. Craddock, who is a devoted Christian minister, says, "The first great task of the Messiah is to get us to stop looking for one." The first great task of this church, now that we have voted to begin a multi-year process of moving downtown, is to make sure we don't turn the new building and location into a new messiah. Not THEN, but NOW is the time for us to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, heal the sick, and educate the children. Not THEN, but NOW is the time to engage in urban ministry. Not THEN, but NOW is the time to build a congregation of all colors and cultures and creeds.

Postponement is merely an imitation of hope. Too many people get addicted to anticipation of what's to come. They live for tomorrow, instead of living for today. Our hope comes not from a fantasy of what tomorrow will look like; real hope comes from making good decisions today. Our job is to make sure that the ministry of this church continues to grow stronger and deeper and wider, right now and right where we are, and not to let visions and hopes of tomorrow keep us from living today. I'm as excited as anyone about the possibilities that are before us with a new location. But we all know that

the church is not the building, it's the people. And the church is not going to be built... the church is already here.

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<sup>i</sup> "Hoping or Postponing" from The Collected Sermons of Fred. B. Craddock, Westminster John Knox Press 2011.