

**Living Biblically:
LIVING HOPEFULLY**

Revelation 21:1-7

*The Bible is a story of hope;
therefore, we are a people of hope.*

A sermon preached by
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This Thanksgiving, there were nearly two dozen sets of parents that were thankful for Kevin McKay, the school bus driver who rescued their children from an inferno of a forest fire in Paradise, California. Kevin, who has only been a bus driver for a few months, got an emergency call when the students at Ponderosa Elementary School were stranded, and their parents couldn't get to them. His own family had already evacuated. He took two teachers to keep the kids calm and 22 students and headed out to safety, with fires blazing on both sides of the road. Because of the traffic, 30 miles took five hours in what they described as "Armageddon." McKay said: "That's when we realized—it's a silly statement—but Paradise was lost."

The smoke was choking and blinding McKay and his passengers. A person in another stranded car offered a water bottle, and McKay took off his shirt, and the teachers ripped it up and wet it to make masks for the kids to breathe through. Finally Kevin got them to safety, and he and the teachers stayed with the kids until each one's parents came and got them. At some point, Kevin received word that his own house had burned.

Kevin McKay now feels a sense of destiny about his new job, given the ordeal he went through. He told a reporter, "I was where I was supposed to be. I feel blessed. It hadn't made sense financially for a while, but it all makes sense now. It's wild. It was the right place at the right time." Mary Ludwig, one of the teachers, said, "We had the bus driver from heaven."¹

I'm sure the residents of Paradise, California, are having a hard time feeling hopeful right now. But even in the midst of such a devastating tragedy, there are silver linings like Kevin McKay. (Ironic literary trivia: the phrase "silver lining" for the sunlight coming from behind a cloud was coined by English poet John Milton, whose most famous work was the epic poem "Paradise Lost.")

We all experience those times in our lives when hope is hard to come by. We receive a diagnosis that doesn't go like we wanted; we lose a loved one to death; our marriage fails; we lose a job; we struggle with

addiction. How can we stay hopeful in the hard times? How can we have a positive outlook when the negative is so overwhelming? Where is the hope?

During the month of November, we have been talking about “Living Biblically,” taking Scripture as the foundation for our lives. Today for the last installment in the series, we want to talk about “Living Hopefully.” If there is anything the Scripture invites us to do, it is to live hopefully. The story of the Bible is the story of hope—hope in the future, hope that the hard times won’t last, hope in God. The Psalmist promised in the midst of difficulty, “*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.*”² Can we live hopefully?

Think back in the Old Testament to the Book of Exodus. The Hebrews had gone down to Egypt to escape a famine, and the Egyptians made them slaves. After centuries in slavery, God sent a liberator named Moses. Moses brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, out of slavery, into the Promised Land of Canaan. Their hope was restored.

Almost a thousand years later, the Babylonians swept over Jerusalem and carried all the leading citizens of the Kingdom of Judah into exile in Babylon. The people suffered in a foreign land for 70 years until a new emperor allowed them to go home to Jerusalem. Again, God restored the hope of Israel.

Then, as the Bible says, in the fullness of time God sent his Son Jesus into the world—Emmanuel, “God with us.” God became flesh to give us eternal hope and salvation. The most tragic and hopeless event ever—the crucifixion of the Son of God—became the hope of humankind for all generations when God raised Jesus from the dead. Our hope in that death and resurrection in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago continues to sustain us today.

The rest of the New Testament testifies to our hope in eternal life. In Romans, Paul says, “*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if*

we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”³ In I Corinthians, he testifies that when we die, our perishable bodies will put on imperishability, and our mortal bodies will put on immortality, and death will be swallowed up in victory.⁴ In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that when this earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.⁵ This is our hope for eternal life through faith in our risen Lord.

When the end of time comes—and it will—Christ will come again and reign as King. All evil will be destroyed. The Book of Revelation gives us this awesome vision of a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, the fulfillment of the vision of the entire Bible: *“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 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... See, I am making all things new.”*⁶

That is our hope! That is the hope we celebrate on this Christ the King Sunday. This is the last and climactic Sunday in the Christian year, and so we end the Christian year like we will end the history of the world—with Christ on the throne. We have hope because we know the end of the story. We know what the Scripture says. We live Biblically, so we live hopefully.

Living with hope is essential to our spiritual health and well-being. Neuroscientists have studied hope, and they say that hope is hard-wired into the human brain. Human beings seek hope like moths seek light. Having hope is a factor in academic success, athletic performance, and longer lifespan. Dr. Shane Lopez, considered by many to be the world’s leading researcher on hope, says that hope is more than just an emotion; it’s an essential life tool.⁷

So how do we find this tool? Where do we look for hope? How do we live hopefully?

Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister who was “Mister Rogers” on TV, often told a story about when he was a boy and would see scary things on the news: “My mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day,” he said, “especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”⁸ Every year during the holidays, despite wars, disasters, murders, terrorist threats, we see multiple acts of compassion. People feed the hungry at Thanksgiving; toys are rounded up for kids who can't afford them; helpers are everywhere.

Year 'round, in the midst of war, we see the peacekeepers. In the midst of disease, we see compassionate doctors and nurses. In the midst of danger, we see first responders who rush into harm's way. Kevin McKay, the bus driver, got choked up as he talked about the firefighters who were going the opposite way from his busload of kids—toward the fire. I got choked up this summer at the 9/11 Memorial in New York City as I heard the stories of firefighters and police officers who came to help when the World Trade Centers were attacked in 2001.

When we know how to look, when we know where to look, we can see hope. We can see the silver lining in the cloud. We can take positives from the negatives of life.

Dr. Jamie Aten is a psychologist who does research on how people respond to trauma in their lives. He is also a cancer survivor himself. He has found that the ability of people to see good in the midst of bad is one of the key factors in helping them cope with disaster. In responding to the devastation after Superstorm Sandy in 2012, his team encountered a man who had his roof blown off by the hurricane-force winds. His statement to the relief workers was, “Sometimes you have to lose the roof to see the stars.” That's taking positives from the negatives.

Dr. Aten has interviewed dozens of people in the wake of catastrophes and has found that two people can go through exactly the same experience of loss, and one will believe God saved them, and the

other will believe God is punishing them. Those who can find positive meaning in the midst of trouble—those who have hope—are more likely to do better recovering from the loss. Here is Dr. Aten’s advice: “Even in the worst moments, look for the stars.”⁹

We see the Biblical equivalent of this in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, when he tells them that no matter his circumstances, he has learned to be content. In good times and bad, happy and sad, Paul knows the secret of hope: “*I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*”¹⁰

To find hope, look for the helpers, find positives in the negatives, and become a witness of hope. You can be the reason someone else has hope. You can be one of those helpers Fred Rogers was talking about. You can be one of the positives that comes out of someone’s negative experience—because you helped, because you had compassion, because you said the word or did the deed of hope when it was most needed.

Sometimes the most positive words of hope come from the deepest experience of pain. Kara Tippetts, author, mother of four, co-minister with her husband, fought a long battle with breast cancer that ended on March 22, 2015. Throughout her struggle, Kara embraced her suffering with courage and looked for the good and looked for God through all she was experiencing. Her story became a book entitled *The Hardest Peace*.

Kara refused to be defined by cancer and considered every moment a gift, a chance to learn more about grace and trusting God. She believed suffering was not an abandonment by God, but an opportunity to understand God's love on a deeper level. Near the end of her life Kara wrote:

My little body has grown tired of the battle, and treatment is no longer helping. But what I see, what I know, what I have, is Jesus. He has still given me breath, and with it I pray I would live well and

fade well. By degrees doing both, living and dying, as I have moments left to live. I get to draw my people close, kiss them and tenderly speak love over their lives. I get to pray into eternity my hopes and fears for [them]. I get to laugh and cry and wonder over heaven. I do not feel like I have the courage for this journey, but I have Jesus—and he will provide. He has given me so much to be grateful for, and that gratitude, that wondering over his love, will cover us all. And it will carry us—carry us in ways we cannot comprehend.¹¹

One last way that I think we can find hope in our lives is to take the long view. Think long-term. I don't mean it to be trite when I say the clouds may be dark today, but the silver lining will soon appear. Today it may be raining, but tomorrow comes the rainbow. As the Psalmist said, "*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.*"¹² The troubles of today will pass away, but the reality of God stands forever. Ultimately, we can have hope because we have read the Book. We know the end of the story. We know who wins. So we can look beyond the tragedies, trials, and tribulations of today and see the bright hope of the future.

If you own stock in Amazon, you get a letter from founder Jeff Bezos each year. He opens the Amazon annual report with a letter to investors, in which he always emphasizes Amazon's commitment to think long-term. It has worked pretty well. Since its founding in 1994, Amazon has climbed into the top 10 in the Fortune 500 list of biggest companies in the world, and last July Jeff Bezos surpassed Bill Gates and Warren Buffett to become the wealthiest man in the world. All of Jeff Bezos' business practices are not worthy of sermon illustrations, but his commitment to long-term thinking is legendary in the business community. In the first letter to investors, published in 1997, Bezos outlined nine ways Amazon would demonstrate their long-term approach, including this statement: "We will continue to make investment decisions in light of long-term market leadership

considerations rather than short-term profitability considerations or short-term Wall Street reactions."¹³

If I could translate the business language into hope language, I would say, “We will continue to make life decisions in light of long-term faith considerations rather than short-term comfort considerations or short-term reactions to our circumstances.”

The Bible is a book of hope. We are people of hope. Whatever fires you have to fight in this life, eternity is sure. The victory has been won already. So it makes sense to live Biblically; it makes sense to live hopefully. Thanks be to God.

¹ Steve Beard “Finding Gratitude When Paradise is Lost, “ *Good News* 11-21-2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-camp-fire-school-bus-driver-hero-students-harrowing-escape/>.

² Psalm 34:18.

³ Romans 6:4-5.

⁴ I Corinthians 15:54f.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:1.

⁶ Revelation 21:3-5.

⁷ PreachingToday.com.

⁸ Steve Beard “Finding Gratitude When Paradise is Lost, “ *Good News* 11-21-2018.

⁹ Dr. Jamie Aten, "Spiritual Advice for surviving cancer and other disasters," *The Washington Post* (8-9-16).

¹⁰ Philippians 4:12f.

¹¹ Blythe Hunt, "Homecoming," Mundane Faithfulness blog (3-22-15).

¹² Psalm 30:5.

¹³ Will Mancini and Michael Bird, *God Dreams* (B&H Publishers, 2016), 31.