

October 29, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost~

“God is the God of Hope.”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Romans 15 v 4-13 and Hebrews 11 v 1

1. Introduction:

One of the most hopeful things, besides listening and being supportive of one another, I think, we as people of faith can do for one another during difficult times, is to share our own stories of faith and our trust in God when we needed God the most. We are living through challenging times of uncertainty and suffering, despair, helplessness, financial difficulties illness, and disease, loss of loved ones, and feeling lost, especially during this time now in our world, of war, and destruction. The sharing of how God showed up in answer to our prayers, helped us, guided us, relieved our pain and suffering and uncertainties, is probably the most hopeful and inspiring thing we can do for others. Our stories are an authentic way of giving of ourselves, and they are building blocks to growing our bond with one another and strengthening our faith and spirituality. There is indeed hope in the story we tell of how our situation was changed through the grace and mercy and power of God. There must be hope in that!

2. My story:

I have shared my own story about my calling to seminary several times, to make a point of how God touches our lives and makes clear to us our purpose and calling in life. We all are reminded occasionally of our purpose and God’s call in this life, and how we respond to that call. One of the key aspects of my call to seminary as a young person was the surprising spiritual awakening I experienced at such a young age of 16-17 years old, when I had my eyes set at becoming a medical doctor. Through the unexpected and powerful intervention of the Divine in my life, my life’s course would change forever. This awakening which arose during the spiritual renewal of many in my hometown and in my family shook my innocent young life and led me on a journey of seeking God in ways foreign to me. I learned how to pray without ceasing, and I found my way through scriptures with the eyes of an inexperienced young person, but with the help of the

Holy Spirit, who would become my Counselor all these years, and my trusted pastor, who would become my spiritual mentor then and during my time in seminary and beyond. To learn how to talk to God, searching for guidance at such a young age, was a powerful experience, and for the next two years that deep relationship with God would become the foundation for my life's journey, finding my way into seminary as the first woman in my denomination in South Africa to qualify for ordination, opening the doors for women later on, and my own journey in peacebuilding in South Africa and beyond. That experience, however, while so very special, so real and different from anything I had experienced, was not without its own challenging and stressful moments within my family. We all realized I was dealing with a call that was extraordinary, and I knew in my heart that God had something special install for me, but to find the way and the direction was the difficult part, with much patience from my parents. Through it all, I knew with certainty there was something at the end of the tunnel, and that while I did not see it yet, I believed God would show up with a clear answer. And that happened indeed two years later, with a special phone call and a special invitation to attend seminary. That phone call and the journey ahead opened the world for me where my faith and experience with God as the first woman, but also as a person of faith learning about God, and faith and hope in a country such as South Africa under apartheid grew from strength to strength. Life with God was rich, even with life's daily challenges. I learned how to have hope when you do not see what you need or want, personally and in my country. I learned that God is in every situation and realizes that hope, (maybe not completely we envisioned, but still shows up miraculously), when we believe and hold on to our faith tightly, not giving up, even during times of tiredness and despair and fear and uncertainty. My story of coming to my faith is a reminder to me personally that the God who was with me then, is the God now as I am reflecting on life today in this world we live in, life that makes me feel lost sometimes, and now especially during this time of war and destruction in the Middle East. I know and believe inside of me, that my hope comes from God in all circumstances.

3. God is The God of Hope:

Our Hebrews text affirms for us that the key to life with God, as spelled out in the Old Testament stories in Chapter 11 is a life of faith and hope. It talks about Abraham who responded in faith to the call to a foreign land, and his wife Sarah, who was barren, and yet received the gift of

childbearing at their age, by faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land, and by faith the walls of Jericho fell after the people marched around them for seven days. In faith and hope they believed in the power and presence and intervention of Yahwe. Their faith and hope were not perfect though. There was complaining and anger, because they resented their departure from Egypt, and they resented the fact they had to suffer from hunger in the desert. And yet, their leaders placed their hope in God and God showed up, again and again. The word to describe their faith in verse 1 is hypostasis, which means having a faith and hope in God that makes them believe in full confidence that they have what they cannot see. It is a faith and hope of substance and certainty, that God will show up and hear their prayers. And in Romans Chapter 15 Paul encourages the church in Rome to understand that faith in Christ is for everyone, irrespective of who they were, Jews or Gentile. He ends that section with the words in verse 13 , “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” It is indeed the hope in God that will be their help as they are trying to figure out how to be Jew and Gentile together. And the Holy Spirit will be their help, their Counselor.

4. Conclusion:

As children of God, we have many opportunities to share our stories of hope and faith in God. We must share those stories to give hope to the hopeless, to help strengthen the faith of those who need encouragement. And as we do that, we must also pray and bring to God all forms of suffering, so that we are bound together in that experience of loving support as children of God. This is an interesting time for Stewardship month, given the blessings from God upon us, all the plans and ideas we have as a church, and then it is also a time to bow down before God and together declare that God is our God of Hope in a world that needs it so much. God will hear us, and God will show up miraculously! Amen!