

COLLOQUIES with Pastor Brian

Facing Empty Spaces With Hope

I have enjoyed seeing everyone's postings of summer activities. Getting together with family, going on outings, camping, playing sports and pursuing growing things are just some of the things shared and posted. Thank you for sharing your joy!

Since Katherine and I have been in quarantine, we've been living vicariously through people's posting and emails and sharing when we gather virtually. We are also now getting outside more and enjoying the incredible surroundings that Minnesota has to offer.

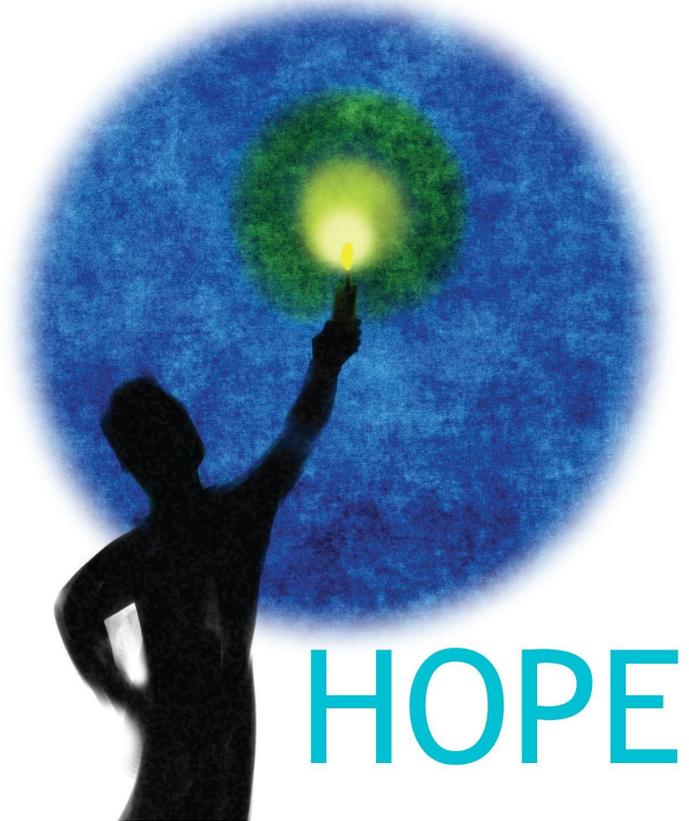
We have experienced a number of stark contrasts here in Minnesota. Weather is certainly part of it. But instead of being frustrated with our circumstances or complaining until things change, we are learning to embrace what our situations bring us.

Our two Bible passages this week certainly offer some encouragement to see challenging places as a place of promise. Jacob was alone at night in the desert when he wrestled with God and for his troubles, got a damaged hip and a blessing. Jesus was intentionally going to a deserted place to be by himself, but the crowds followed him and got hungry. But instead of Jesus ignoring their needs, he blessed them with food and blessed the entire world with a story about God's miracles in unyielding places.

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' ²⁷So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' ²⁸Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

— Genesis 32:22-31

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' ¹⁶Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷They replied, 'We have nothing here but five



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loaves and two fish.’¹⁸ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.
— Matthew 14:13-21

*L: May God add a blessing to the reading and hearing of these words. ALL: Thanks be to God!
Let us pray: Amen.*

The Pandemic and our necessary response to it have created empty spaces. Schools that used to have seats full of children are unnaturally empty. Restaurants that had wait times for seats now have ½ capacity at best. Concerts and graduations and funerals — all these are places our hearts long to return to and fill again. And that is a normal response. Nothing is wrong with longing.

Yet the empty spaces surround us. So my question for myself (and I share with you) is, what blessings can we claim in these empty spaces? We don’t have to say they don’t hurt. Jacob limped the rest of his life. And the disciples had to admit they didn’t see any way everyone could be helped with just five loaves and two fish. That must have stung. Yet the final outcome was a blessing that would not have been possible without the fierce and sometimes forbidding empty spaces as well.

For a place many see as forbidding, Minnesota has been a garden of hope for our family. Those that have been here for some time told us early, “Make friends with the winter and don’t fight it. Enter it.” That advice might be helpful for all when entering new spaces seemingly empty of things we are used to and provide comfort. But let me remind us all of two crutches we have and can absolutely lean upon. Wherever we go, God promises to go with us AND we have this greater community willing to travel with us, if we ask. Thank you for being a part of my family’s journey and for all the ways you help us face the empty places with hope. If we can walk more closely with you as a congregation, let us know.

With peace,

Pastor Brian