

"Out of Darkness, Hope"
July 21, 1991

Text: "...and hope does not disappoint us. (Rom. 5:5)

The following story comes from the alumni newspaper produced by my seminary, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. *"In the early hours of January 1, 1991, Sarah and John Randall, asleep in their rural home near Frankfort, IN, awoke to a strange sound and the smell of smoke. Their three children - Johnny, 5, Lisa, 6, and Megan, 10, along with her friend Sarah Evans, 9, - were in bed upstairs. When John and Sarah reached their bedroom door, the knob felt hot; when they opened it, a wall of flames forced them back. There was barely time for her to throw on a robe and for him to pull on a pair of trousers before they jumped out of a window. Sarah ran to the home of their nearest neighbor to call the fire department. John, who was bare foot, fought to get back into the house, by now a blazing inferno. He desperately tried to scale the side of the house. Together they yelled to the children and threw things to break the upstairs windows. 'We had rehearsed with the children what to do in case of a fire,' says John. 'Megan and her friend were trying to find a way out - we heard her say, 'I can't see anything.' The other children probably never woke up. By the time the fire department arrived with ladders, it was too late. Sarah and John watched in helpless horror as all four children perished in the blaze - along with everything the family owned...Their 12-year-old daughter Christina, who was at an overnight church youth event, survives."*

Even though I first read this article months ago, the shock and horror of the Randall's story still affects me badly to this day as it probably does all of you who've heard it for the first time. Many people would ask and wonder why God would allow such a thing to happen. Why is there trouble in this world? Why must people suffer and be weighed down by the burdens of oppression? The poet Swinburne would have blamed it on God, whom he saw as cruel and angry, and he used these words to describe his feelings:

*"His hidden face and iron feet,
 Hath not man known and felt them in their way
 Threaten and trample all things everyday?
 Hath he not sent us hunger?*

*Who hath cursed spirit and flesh with longing?
Filled with thirst their lips that cried to him?"*

Swinburne ends with a question that we may never answer, but it is not the responsibility of the Christian to know from whence comes the world's suffering and pain. The Randalls realized this and just weeks after their tragic loss they bravely told friends, *"When we look back at the fire and the loss of our children, we find that the Christian message is not the answer to 'why' it happened, but to 'how will you face tomorrow?' We have two choices: we can either cringe from tomorrow, or reach out with the knowledge and faith that God is with us, that Someone who has gone through suffering is always present, that God really does want us to get better, that life will be good again. We choose to reach out."*

There are those, however, who can't, or won't, or don't reach out to God during their hour of grief and hopelessness. An H. G. Wells story tells of a man who was burdened by so much stress and as a result came near a complete nervous breakdown. His doctor advised him the thing which could save him was to find the peace that only fellowship with God can give. *"What!"* the man said, *"to think of God, up there, having fellowship with me! I would as soon think of cooling my throat with the milky way or shaking hands with the stars!"* For a person such as that, God becomes completely unreachable. And when we make God unreachable, then all hope is unattainable too. Fortunately for us, God is always reaching out to us and we will not be denied the good graces of the Spirit unless we shut off our ability to receive them.

In one of his most impassioned writings, Paul proclaims the hope God brings to all people suffering who are willing to receive God's sustaining power. He says our hope will not be disappointed because God's love has been poured out to us through the Holy Spirit. In other words, the power of hope is within us waiting to be revealed at each new twist and turn of life. Debbie Livingston, a counselor at the Pastoral Counseling Service of the greater Milwaukee area wrote in their latest newsletter, *"...the source of hope is no 'out there,' but 'in here,' where the God within us dwells. When I feel like I am reaching the end of my resources and running on empty, I can turn within and rest in the Light, turn within and recharge from the energy that can never run dry. The source is within and it can never run out."*

The key to Debbie's "source" is what kind of god within us is giving us hope? Do we rely on material gain or immediate

gratification to bring hope? Do our hopes wait in future moves up the company ladder or in that well earned vacation? What happens when all the fragile hopes within us come crashing down, like they did for the Randall family and many others in this needy world, and the god we let inside of us be anything but the God of real power and real hope? How hard would it be or how long might it take for us to recover from tragedy and cope with horrific loss? I was a chaplain at St. Luke's Hospital in Milwaukee the summer of 1985 and my wife is there this summer. I hear her stories and the memories come rushing back. People from all walks of life lead normal, happy lives and then boom, the world they built for themselves comes crashing down around them. A thirty-eight year old man goes to his son's soccer match, feels chest pains, comes to the hospital, and finishes his day with a triple by-pass. A forty-two year old woman plans with her family the building of a new home, but plans are dropped because she only has a year to live due to a rare blood disease. On and on the raging world encompasses us. We are as ships being tossed about in a stormy sea. Where do we ground our hope?

The Apostle Paul tells the Romans we can find hope in God. Not an angry, self serving god who delights in the misery of people, but, a God who is willing to love and care for us as only a parent would do for a child. Paul reclaims the story of Christ's suffering and reminds us that through our sufferings we can begin to peel off the layers of our false dreams of security and come face to face with our one real hope in God. When the poet Henley was lying in an Edinburgh hospital with one leg amputated and the prospect that the other one would follow, he wrote "Invictus."

*"Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul."*

Planted within us, by our loving and caring God, is the seed of life and love waiting to grow if only we reach within ourselves and tend to its production.

No matter how hopeless our situation, no matter how spiritually lost we may feel in the midst of life's crisis, Paul reminds us it is God who reaches out to even the most despised and desperate person when even we would abandon them in their hour of need. We, too, being as lost sheep, can rejoice in the hope of being found by such a loving and caring God. Rita Snowden relates an incident from the life of Colonel T. E. Lawrence which later became a famous scene in the

movie "Lawrence of Arabia." *"In 1915 he was journeying across the desert with some Arabs. Things were desperate. Food was almost done and water was at its last drop. Their hoods were over their heads to shelter them from the wind which was like a flame and which was full of the stinging sand of the sandstorm. Suddenly someone said, 'Where is Jasmin?' Another said, 'Who is Jasmin?' A third answered, 'That yellow-faced man from Maan. He killed a Turkish tax-collector and fled to the desert.' The first said, 'Look, Jasmin's camel has no rider. His rifle is strapped to the saddle, but Jasmin is not there.' A second said, 'Someone has shot him on the march.' A third said, 'He is not strong in the head, perhaps he is lost in a mirage; he is not strong in the body, perhaps he has fainted and fallen off his camel.' Then the first said, 'What does it matter? Jasmin was not worth half a crown.' And the Arabs hunched themselves up on their camels and rode on. But Lawrence turned and road back the way he had come. Alone, in the blazing heat, at the risk of his life, he went back. After an hour and a half's ride he saw something against the sand. It was Jasmin, blind and mad with heat and thirst, Jasmin being murdered by the desert. Lawrence lifted him up on his camel, gave him some of the last drops of the precious water, slowly plodded back to his company. When he came to him the Arabs looked in amazement. 'Here is Jasmin,' they said, 'Jasmin, not worth half a crown, saved at his own risk by Lawrence, our Lord.'" Such is the way the Lord looks after us as we travel the potential deserts of life. We may not be worth half a crown, but hold an eternal hope in God who will never abandon his search for us even in our darkest moments.*

Out of the darkness, comes hope. Less than six months after their tragic fire, the Randall family, strong in faith, is finding the beginnings of that eternal hope God has planted within them. Sarah Randall has been heard to say, *"We don't have it all together - sometimes we wonder if we will ever feel good again. We know that life will never be the same, we will never be a family with Megan and Lisa and Johnny and Christina and Mommy and Daddy - everything will be different. But the hope of the Christian message is that we are going to be a very happy family with Christina, Sarah, and John."* So too in our lives, the Kingdom of God offers us hope. A hope so powerful that all the pain in the world will be healed and, as spoken in Revelations, the world and all who dwell in it will come to know that God, indeed, will make all things new. As we leave today, let us take with our hearts the perfect peace of God's everlasting hope. Amen.