

Hope Rising

1 Samuel 3:1-20
Rev. Joe Hoffman
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(This is the first in a 4 part series entitled “Hope Rising”)

A few weeks ago I was on vacation at the beach with my family. I had a day in which I got to go to a national beach park – an island named Shackleford Banks. Some of you may know about this. It’s down near Beaufort. I had a chance to take a ferry to the island where I allowed myself several hours to walk. The only residents of this beach are 125 wild horses. There are no homes, no power lines, no bathrooms – just completely native beach. It’s a nine mile stretch of beach with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the IntraCoastal Waterway on the other.

I went over there, and, there are a lot of shells there – and people mostly hang around that end of the island – but I chose to take a long walk. I walked for miles down the beach until I couldn’t see another human being anywhere. I heard the sound of the waves breaking on the shore, and I noticed in the sand the deep hoof prints of the horses that had galloped down the beach just that morning. It felt like a very holy place.

As I was taking that walk, and trying to enjoy the beauty of that place, I had a time to pray. I like to walk and pray. I brought with me the frustrations of my life, the frustrations of the church, I brought with me the strains of what it means to be the pastor of this church. And as I walked, I just said: “God, refresh me again. Give me something that energizes me the way I would like to be energized.” I walked and I walked, and tried to open my spirit. And as I continued this prayerful journey, a line from Psalm 46 came to my mind: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

I tried to still my soul as I continued to listen and pray. The more I prayed the more I tried to deepen that experience. I felt like God said to me, “Joe, go back to the book of Samuel.” The book of Samuel includes the calling text that Amanda read a few minutes ago, a text that was used on the occasion of my ordination 15 years ago. It’s one of those stories that has haunted my imagination for as long as I can remember. And I heard this voice inside of me say – “Go back to the story that grounds you. Take that story and look at it again. Explore it again and ask new questions of it.”

That’s what I have done. I have been thinking about that story. And the text that Amanda just read comes in the 3rd chapter, but as I read that story I see that we have Samuel the boy and Eli the old priest, and I began to ask – how did these two get into this situation by themselves? I went back and read the first couple of chapters of 1 Samuel, and in those first chapters we find a woman named Hannah – who was unable to have a child. Hannah really wants to have a child with her husband Elkinah.

Now, Elkinah was from a well established family, which meant he had some means, and so he could afford to support two wives. His other wife, Peninnah, had many children, but Hannah was barren. Peninnah was also the kind who rubbed it in – provoked and irritated Hannah for her barrenness. Elkinah said to Hannah – I love you dearly. Isn't that enough. And Hannah said – sometimes you can't give me everything I need.

Have you ever had that feeling before that there is something more that you need, and nobody around you can give it to you? You have to find it some other way.

Hannah went to the temple, where she actually met the priest Eli. She sat around all day and prayed and prayed to God, made a promise to God that if God would give her a son, she would give that son back to God to serve in the temple for the rest of his life. I can't imagine making such a promise. But that was the promise, and a short while later, she had a son and named him Samuel. She took him back to the temple and dedicated the child to God – much as we have done here today with a child in our midst – and gave the child to Eli to be trained to be a servant in the temple.

Now, it is interesting to note that there are 2 important women in the early history of this story. Hannah and Ruth. Hannah becomes the mother of Samuel, and Ruth – who is more well known because she has her own book in the Bible – becomes the great grandmother of David. These two women know that there needs to be a hope that the people are not experiencing. The people Israel had been wandering for years and years. Those first great narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures are of God calling people to go to a new land that God would show them. The people were nomads. Travelers. No maps. No directions. Just followers of God's great invitation. Abraham and Sarah – wandering to a place that God would show them. Moses and the captives of Egypt wandering to the promised land.

After years and years of wandering, they found home in a land called Canaan. They have settled down, they have a lot of new people who have joined them and others who have been on the journey for most of the way. They thought that getting to home would be the best of life – but they hadn't been a settled people in so long they didn't know what to do. Being settled was different from living a nomadic lifestyle. What's our purpose now? It has always been to find the Promised Land. What are we going to do now? What is our vision?

Ruth and Hannah were God-spirited women. These two women had the tenacity and courage to pray to God and call forth a hope that would not be realized for years and years.

Hope begins in prayer. Rising up inside of us with something we know needs to come. And yet we don't know how to bring it about. When I read that text I heard God say to me again: "Joe, bring hope to your congregation. Remind them to hope."

The people Israel who had moved into Canaan, if you read the story in Judges, Ruth and parts of Samuel, you see that once these people got settled, everything just fell apart. The old ways didn't work anymore. Times went from bad to worse. There was political and moral chaos. There was no sense of hope. There was a sense of – why did you lead us here for us to fall apart or even die?

This story feels a bit similar to our story. For 10 years we have been putting all our time and energy towards moving to a new place. We have most recently moved twice in 4 years. We have worn ourselves out with building plans and capital campaigns and congregational meetings. And now we are settled. And waiting. Waiting for the mountain land to finally sell so that we are not only settled but can put all our resources into being this new church in this new location that we are. There seem to me to be some similarities between our story and the story that we find about the people Israel long ago. In our waiting we are trying to learn how to be here. What does that look like? We have been re-writing our by-laws. Developing facility policies. Really fun stuff like that. Trying to know what it means to be a church that is not on the move to some other place.

The story from Samuel is an important story for me because it helps me ground myself again. And I find a lot of hope in it. As I was thinking through these things, Emma Claire, my 16 year old daughter, gave me a book that she had been reading. I had noticed that she was reading this book at night, and she had read parts of it to me. The title of the sermon series – Hope Rising – is the name of this book.

The book was written by a woman named Kim Meeder. Kim and her husband Troy, a few years ago, decided they needed to live their lives differently. Kim had had a traumatic experience when she was 9 – both of her parents had been killed in an automobile accident – and what saved her life were horses. The horses were very caring toward her, offering her a kind of therapy that touched her in the deepest places. Places where words often cannot penetrate. She and Troy had a dream of starting a farm where she could have horses.

They bought this piece of land that was absolutely nothing at all. It was nothing to look at. It had no value. It was barren. It had no fertile ground. It was a used up cinder pit that had once been carved out of the side of the mountain. They bought this even though their friends and family thought they were crazy. But they believed in the possibilities of what was not yet reality. Troy was a landscaper, and he said – we can bring something forth from this land. So they began to collect mess – you know what I mean – manure, old straw, dirt, debris – the things that other people were trying to get rid of, they would take it in and start building up the worthless dirt in the cinder pit. They began to cover up the many acres of the cinder pit with the mess that no one else wanted. Because they knew that out of mess grows hope.

Troy was able to also find trees and plants that good money didn't want to buy – plants that were not big enough or healthy enough for people to want to buy. They planted these in the mess of manure and dirt and straw – and they loved them with tender care – and they grew. And the farm became a fertile place.

Then they began to bring horses – one or two at first, then some more. Horses that had been abused or injured or neglected. They brought the horses there to give them love and care.

And then – they brought children. Children who had been hurt. Children who were hurting. Children who didn't have much to hold onto. And they let the children and the horses love and care for each other. And they found hope.

I realized as I read these stories that they were touching a place inside of me. I realized that we all need to know a place called hope. Whatever it is that happens in our life, when the surprises come, when the hard times come, when the disasters come, when the doctor gives us bad news, when the bridge at 5 o'clock collapses, when the storm comes and tears the house down, where is hope?

Hope rising. For the next four weeks I want us to talk about hope.

Kim Meeder tells the story in this book about one of the first horses that she got. She went to examine a horse that had been reported for neglect. The pasture was behind a very large, expensive home – but the horse was completely emaciated. The owners just hadn't paid attention. The horse had not been fed enough – the field had not provided what the horse needed. So Troy and Kim bring the horse home.

They feed it – and the horse begins to look better medically and physically. But the horse doesn't have the will to live. The horse is too far gone. Kim is devastated by this because she wants to give this horse life. She does everything she knows to do – but she cannot pull out that spark of hope in the horse. So she decides to do the only thing she can do, and that is to let this horse know that it is cherished before it dies. So she gets all the tools that you need to rub a horse down, to massage it, to really make it feel good. For hours she combed the mane and the hair. As she brushed the old winter hair it just fell out, and there was nothing to replace it underneath. Just raw skin. This horse was just about dead. She rubbed and loved on that horse, and then, it overwhelmed her so much, she began to cry. She cried uncontrollably, and leaned up against the horse to hold her as her grief and pain took over. All of the blond horse hair was underneath her and the horse like a carpet. She said that the angels looking from above would have seen an old, dirty woman and a emaciated dying horse on a carpet of hair.

After what seemed a long time, she felt the horse move. She looked up and saw that the horse had turned and was looking at her. She felt the warm breath of the horse nostrils gently breathing on her. She looked the horse in the eye, and for the first time the two held a gaze. And what had been lost was now found. This horse had found the will once again to live. To take a chance and try again.

Hope rising.

A lot of us are in need of hope rising in our lives. Emma Claire, and she has given me permission to share this, started reading this book last year after one of her friends at the farm was killed in a tragic accident. I have spent the year trying to figure out how in the world to help her as she went through this grief process. What she taught me was that sometimes, I can't give her what she needs. Hope has to come from in here. Sometimes you just got to find it yourself – with God's grace. But there is always hope.

Hope is rising.

Hope was rising with Ruth and Hannah. Hope was rising between Eli and Samuel. Is it also possible that hope will rise in us again?

We've been settled in this place for a year and a half. We're trying to figure out who we are again. We're trying to figure out what to do. We're not trying to move someplace else. We're here.

Where is the hope and what is the vision that will carry us on our way? It's in here. It's in us. God is calling our name. We are invited to say – here we are God. And I have to tell you, it's hard. It's hard work to do that. I invite us to do the work that will help us find the hope that will carry all of us. I believe it is there.

Hope in the midst of mess. Hope that brings possibility. Hope that brings new life.

Next week I'm going to talk more about hope and possibility. This week, will you think with me about what it is inside that hurts. Where it is that you grieve. What's broken that needs your love and care? Hope in the mess. Hope rising. Amen.