

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
June 8, 2008

Readings: Hosea 3:3-6; Romans 4:18-25; Matthew 9:9-13

Hoping Against Hope

A number of years ago, I went up to Paradise, Michigan, up in the Upper Peninsula, for a 4-day wilderness retreat. A group, The Companions of Christ the Lamb, has established an extensive retreat center with a chapel and many community buildings all built with logs from their property. They also have a number of campsites spread throughout the property. One can go up and stay in a rustic cabin for a retreat, or hike out into the woods and set up a tent at one of the camp sites and be completely alone for four days; some go for forty day retreats.

I planned to hike in the woods carrying everything I needed for four days. It would only be a couple mile hike, so I didn't need to be as conscious of minimizing weight in my pack as I usually am on a regular backpacking trip. But I still had to plan wisely and could only take a limited number of books. I had my bible and my breviary and decided to take one more book. It was one that *I* thought would be appropriate for a retreat. I was packing in a little bit of a hurry as I prepared to leave home, so I quickly reached for the book on my bookshelf and tucked it in my pack.

I started my retreat by attending Mass in the log chapel dedicated to Blessed Kateri, and then, after receiving a blessing, hoisted my pack on my back and headed off into the woods to my assigned campsite. I set up my tent and arranged things to be as comfortable as possible for my four-day stay, and then reached in my pack to retrieve my book so I could sit down on a log and read. But I found, that in my haste to pack, that I did not bring the book that I intended. It wasn't necessarily the wrong book, however. It was the one the Holy Spirit intended. And the Holy Spirit guided me those four days to reflect on a particular chapter of that book entitled "Hope".

After my fourth night in the woods alone, I packed up early so that I could hike back in time for daily Mass at the chapel. And after communion the priest called me up to share my reflections on my retreat. And so I shared a little about my reflections on the virtue of hope. After Mass we shared a meal before I started my journey home. And as we were cleaning up after the meal, a young lady named Mara approached me. She was up at the retreat center for the entire summer preparing to enter religious life. She handed me a piece of birch bark with an inscription that had been hanging on the wall of her room all summer. And this is the piece of birch bark she gave me that day. Months earlier she had written on it these words: "***Abraham, hoping against all hope, believed ...***".

Hopefully you recognize these words from our second reading this morning from the letter of St. Paul to the Romans. We heard: "***Abraham believed, hoping against hope, that he would become 'the father of many nations.'***" Abraham didn't have a clue how this was going to happen, but he had great faith that God would make it happen. He was almost 100 years old and his wife Sarah was 90 and they had no children, but he did not doubt God's promise. Abraham trusted in God's promise of *what* was to happen, but he didn't need to know *how* it was to happen. Abraham had great faith. I don't think that I will have the faith to hope for children when I'm 100 years old.

I kept this piece of birch bark hanging on my wall at work until I retired, and now it hangs in my writing room as I try to write my first book, a book I believe God wants me to write. It reminds me to have hope; to trust that the book will happen if God wants it to, even though I can't begin to comprehend how it is going to happen. And this is the basis for hope for all of us in all the different aspects of our lives. We need to hope for what we cannot see, and then conduct ourselves daily according to God's will, trusting that He will take care of the big picture.

On another retreat, at the same location but a few years later, I prayed for God to give me answers to a list of decisions that I had to make in my life. And God told me to get my life back in order first, to be more humble and obedient, and the rest of my life would take care of itself. I needed to try to be more righteous like Abraham. We need to be careful talking to God; He is a wise Father who knocks us down a few pegs when we need it.

In another place in St. Paul's letter to the Romans, we have more instruction on hope. St. Paul says: ***"For in hope we are saved. Now hope that sees is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance. In the same way the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings."*** (Romans 8:24-26)

I love these verses. I often recommend them for reflection to those who are confused and troubled with situations in their lives; people who don't even know what to pray for; people who don't see a way out of their dilemma, or who are angry with God for letting a tragedy occur. And that is all of us at one time or another. We often pray asking God to grant our intention and then we set down all the rules and conditions by which we want our prayer intention accomplished. Instead, we need to have strong faith like that of Abraham, we need to trust that God will answer our prayers according to His plan, not ours. Many times we need to hope and pray for what we do not see and cannot imagine. We pray in hope and we wait with endurance as we let the Holy Spirit intercede for us. For most often ***"we do not know how to pray as we ought"***.

Deacon Joe Hulway