



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Pursuing God’s Hope”

May 21, 2023

Romans 12:1-2

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. ² Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God’s hope for every life.

I don’t know how to break this to you gently, so I’ll just say it. *I don’t believe God has a plan for your life.*

Now, before you choke on your breath mint or reach for your phone to call the bishop’s office, let me explain. I believe God cares a great deal about you, and that what you do with your life matters to God. I am fully aware that “God’s will” is mentioned about 20 or so times in the New Testament. And I know and even memorized many years ago the oft-quoted passage from Jeremiah 29:11 – “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

In Jeremiah, God was speaking to the people of Judah exiled in Babylon, not individuals in middle-class America seeking a Prosperity Gospel. *If God has a plan, it is a single, ultimate, overarching plan for the fulfillment of time – to restore all of creation in relationship to God, where good ultimately triumphs over evil and we all will rest in everlasting peace. “God’s will” as articulated in scripture is more properly understood as “God’s hope” or “God’s preferred future,” than a master plan written before the beginning of time that we are merely playing out (see my sermon from September 11, 2022). I believe God does have hope for us.*

So it is in our statement of purpose that we articulate that we are a church committed to *pursuing God’s hope*. Because while God may not have a hidden script for us that is a mystery we have to unravel, God *does* have hope – big hope – for us as individuals and for us as a church, and, more to the point, for all of Creation. And if God has hope for us, we want to find out what God hopes for; not only to *find* God’s hope, but to pursue it.

What does it mean to *pursue God’s hope*? First, we need to identify what it is that God hopes for; we need to know God’s heart. The way we do this is the same way we know what’s in the heart of anyone else in our lives – by investing in relationship. We invest in relationships with our spouse, parents, children, and friends by spending time together, learning each other’s stories and dreams, listening carefully for the things that matter most. The same goes for God. We get to know God by spending time with God – we talk with God in prayer; share our joys and our sorrows, our praise and gratitude, our best experiences and our deepest longings in worship; and we make time to practice being in God’s presence. We learn the stories of how others have experienced God by studying the Bible and by learning from the wisdom of those who have gone before us in faith. And we invest our time and attention to listening for God’s voice, offering the best of ourselves in response.

Last week, we talked about growing deeper in faith. Growing deeper is a *component* of our vision, but it is in many ways a *prerequisite* for the rest of that vision. Rev. Moseng shared with us the importance of going deep in our relationship with God, not being content with superficial spirituality. And she offered several practical ways we can be intentional about spending time with God, becoming “dwellers” in God’s presence. By investing in our relationship with God, we can better know God and what it is God hopes for us.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul urged followers of Jesus not to be “conformed to the patterns of this world, but (to) be transformed by the renewing of (our) minds (to determine) what God’s will (hope) is. We are not to be *conformed* to the patterns of this world; we are to be *transformed* by the renewing of our minds. Unless you’re cloistered in a monastery, the amount of time you are surrounded by secular influences likely far outweighs the time you spend focusing on your faith. From the workplace to the radio station in the car to the kids’ soccer games to the shows we watch on television, we’re constantly surrounded by messaging that subtly or not-so-subtly suggests what we should value, what we should buy, how we should look, what we should eat and drink, what pharmaceutical products we should take, how we should spend our time. That’s why being intentional about our relationship with God is so important. Who we are in Christ shapes how we interact with the world. By investing in our relationship with God, we can be better prepared for receiving and responding to or resisting the messaging that surrounds us. Growing deeper in our faith helps us to engage appropriately with the world – saying “yes” to what brings life and “no” to what takes us away from it. When we allow God to transform our minds, we are better prepared to tell the difference.

The transformation Paul calls for requires a posture of humility and openness to what God has in mind for us. What God hopes for us may be very different than what we think we want for ourselves. It may be different from what other people expect of us. It may even be different than the things we were raised to think about God or what it means to be a Christian. One of our greatest challenges in seeking God’s hope is that we too often read scripture or pray not seeking *transformation*, but *validation* – support for our biases and the things we’re already inclined to believe. Friends, God wants more for us than that.

If we’re going to discover God’s hope, we need to humble ourselves, open our hearts to what *God* wants more than what *we* want, look for signs of God’s activity in the world, and go where we are led. As a congregation, God’s hope needs to be our singular focus – not our history or our programs or our metrics or growing simply for the sake of growth. If we’re going where God wants us to go, the rest will follow.

Once we begin to identify God’s hope, what does it mean to “pursue” it? Pursuing God’s hope is more than just looking for God’s hope or following behind it. It implies a dogged commitment to *achieving* God’s hope with an almost obsessive purpose. Pursing God’s hope means going where God is and committing the full weight of our resources to get there. An earlier draft of our vision statement put it this way: we are called “to relentlessly pursue justice, show mercy, and love and care for our neighbors.” I like the description that this is something we do *relentlessly*, without ceasing. Pursuing God’s hope takes both commitment and persistence.

What might it look like for us to pursue God’s hope? It might mean:

- hosting a refugee family seeking a better life
- passionate worship that brings us into the presence of God
- helping kids discover a God who cares about them and wants to know them
- instilling a love of Christ-centered serving in our young people
- bringing the hope of the Gospel to incarcerated individuals through Kairos prison ministry

- deploying and supporting mission partners who bring life-changing opportunities to kids in Haiti, minister to migrants at the border, help people recover from human trafficking in Cambodia, and teach sustainable agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa
- creating opportunities to encounter God through reading scripture, exchanging ideas, and engaging in meaningful relationships

As you've probably recognized, we're already heavily invested in pursuing God's hope at Church of the Saviour today. There's a lot here already worth celebrating, and we can rejoice in God's guidance that has led us this far. But vision is more than just celebrating past or current accomplishments. Could we go further? What might that look like? What if we:

- center the voices and experiences of those who are too often overlooked or pushed to the margins – children, teens, our LGBTQ siblings?
- equip parents and families for the most important job they'll ever have – raising children in an increasingly difficult environment?
- create space for people to honestly explore their questions about faith and to wrestle with difficult conversations?
- use the resources and relationships we have to address the epidemic of loneliness and isolation that plagues so many of our neighbors?
- move beyond lament and prayer to active advocacy, exercising our voices and influence to speak out about gun violence, food insecurity, racial and economic justice, building stronger communities through connection and investment?
- share our resources, knowledge, and experience to replicate success and inspire contextual innovation in ministry?
- invest in each other by building trust and transparency in our relationships and developing leaders who make a difference inside and beyond our walls?

In the time you spend with God, where do you see signs of hope emerging? What else might God be calling us to do in pursuit of that hope? Church, I have an audacious belief I want you to share. I believe that our future is brighter than our past, even though we have a very storied past. But I also believe that what got us where we are today will not take us into the future God has in mind for us. To be the church God imagines we can be, we need to identify where God is on the move and go there, not attempt to replicate the past. And when we see where God's hope is beckoning us, I want us to relentlessly pursue that hope.

Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God's hope for every life. As we strive to be a faithful, visionary church, let's set a watch for signs of God's hope in the world. And when that call becomes clear to us, let's have the courage to pursue it with everything we have. May it be so. Amen.