

For the next three weeks, we're going to look at the basic building blocks of life in God's kingdom. According to the Apostle Paul, "Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love." -- 1 Corinthians 13:13

We're going to begin with hope, then next week we'll look at faith and end with love. That's because HOPE is trusting God's promises are true. FAITH is acting on that trust, and LOVE is what that action looks like.

So today is all about HOPE. What is hope? How do we have hope? One of the best stories of hope in the Bible is the story of Gideon. I want to read his story to you, beginning in Judges 6. In this story, God's people have been conquered by a neighboring tribe - the Midianites. God is about to call Gideon as a Judge, to rescue his people from oppression. Let's watch what happens:

The angel of the Lord came and sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, "Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!"

"Sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn't they say, 'The Lord brought us up out of Egypt'? But now the Lord has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites."

Then the Lord turned to him and said, "Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!"

"But Lord," Gideon replied, "how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!"

The Lord said to him, "I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man."

But Gideon was afraid, and he listened to the words of Dr. Albert Feinstein and he did not answer the Lord's call. -- Judges 6:11-17

[VIDEO: JR. uses the time machine to fix Dr. F's blunder]

Okay, let's try this again. Let's see - *scanning original story* - Gideon lays out a fleece, God tells him to recruit, he gets an army of 22,000 men, but then 10,000 stay, then he narrows it down to 300. Okay here we go. So Gideon and just 300 men go to attack Midian. Let's see what happens:

It was just after midnight, after the changing of the guard, when Gideon and the 100 men with him reached the edge of the Midianite camp. Suddenly, they blew the rams' horns and broke

their clay jars. Then all three groups blew their horns and broke their jars. They held the blazing torches in their left hands and the horns in their right hands, and they all shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" Each man stood at his position around the camp and watched as all the Midianites rushed around in a panic, shouting as they ran to escape. When the 300 Israelites blew their rams' horns, the Lord caused the warriors in the camp to fight against each other with their swords. Those who were not killed fled to places as far away as Beth-shittah near Zererah and to the border of Abel-meholah near Tabbath. -- Judges 7:19-23

God had a crazy plan, one that never should have worked. But Gideon trusted God when God promised Israel would be victorious. Gideon believed God when God says Israel would be free.

With as much bad news as we're hearing all the time lately, I bet a lot of us feel like Gideon did at the beginning of the story. We feel like just keeping our heads down and going about our business. Maybe we've even threatened to give up social media or shut off the TV because we can't take yet another report of a shooting or stabbing or bombing.

Gideon hid in his winepress, threshing wheat and hoping Midian didn't find him. So too we hide from all the evil of the world and just hope it doesn't find us.

When Gideon is first told God is moving, God is on a rescue mission, he's skeptical. He says exactly what we all feel so often when we read these amazing stories in the Bible:

If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about?

Gideon had heard the stories of the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea and the defeat of Pharaoh's armies. He knew the stories of the manna in the wilderness, of the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho. He knew all these stories, but as he looked around *now*, he said, "If God is really with us, where're all the miracles today?"

You feel that. I feel that. We wonder why God doesn't show up and fix everything. Where are the miraculous stories like we've heard in the Bible again and again?

That message - "the world is getting worse" - it's not the only story out there. In fact, the Scriptures insist that the opposite is true, that Jesus' death and resurrection completed God's plans for a global rescue mission and that since Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven as the resurrected king of a new creation, God has been at work, setting the world right.

The story of the Scriptures is that God is reclaiming the world. God is taking us somewhere good, somewhere better.

Sounds like wishful thinking, doesn't it? We want to say, But look how bad things are! It's never been like this!

The problem is, the numbers don't bear that out. Today, infant mortality rates are lower than ever in human history. More children than ever are going to school. Fewer people die from war than at any point in modern history. Global poverty is at an all-time low and fewer people than at any point in human history are going hungry.

Just about any way you measure, the world is better than it was a century ago. Better than it was 50 years ago. Better than it was a decade ago.

So why doesn't it *feel* that way? [show smart phone] Because now we know about *everything*. Before the advent of the internet, the vast majority of us simply didn't have access to the chaos happening all over the world. Nations rose and fell and we never even knew they'd existed. Diseases swept across the globe and we never heard their names unless they landed on American soil.

But now, everyone knows everything. Every tragedy, every act of violence, we hear it all. We see it all. And we ask, Why? How long, oh Lord?

But the truth is, God is at work. And the world is getting better. Because God is calling God's people to respond. To stand up and work for justice, to make peace.

Take HIV/AIDS, for instance. A deadly, global epidemic that has nearly crippled an entire continent. Millions of children in Africa have been orphaned due to the AIDS crisis. [Pic] Back in 2004, a 10-year old boy named Austin Gutwein heard about the AIDS crisis. He was heartbroken to hear about all those kids halfway around the world, kids who were just like him except they'd lost their parents to AIDS.

Austin wanted to help. But he was only a 10-year old kid who liked basketball. So he decided to shoot free throws. He had learned that every day, while he was at school, 2,057 kids became orphans because of AIDS. So on World AIDS Day in 2004, 10 year old Austin shot 2,057 free throws after school. Family and friends donated money to sponsor his free throws, and that day, Austin raised almost \$3,000. That money went to 8 orphaned kids.

[Pic?] Over the next decade, a movement grew from Austin's hope. He founded an organization called Hoops of Hope. As of today, more than 40,000 people in 25 countries around the world have hosted free throw marathons and raised nearly \$4 million dollars. That money has been used to build schools, clinics, food and water projects and computer labs for orphans in Zambia, Kenya and India.

All because a 10-year old boy believed the world was going somewhere good. Because Austin trusted God's story: that the bad of today doesn't predict tomorrow. Austin chose to use what he loved - basketball - to *do something*. And with Austin's simple act of hope, God did immeasurably more than anyone ever dreamed possible.

Friends we have a choice which story we listen to. That there is evil at work in the world is not in question. The only surprise is that we are now coming face to face with it more and more often. We are assaulted by voices that want us to be afraid, that want us to think things are bad and getting worse. They want us to be paralyzed, to freeze, to turn to them for hope. Or worse, abandon all hope and just be afraid.

But our hope comes from the very creator of the universe, the God who promises that perfected love drives out fear. We refuse to listen to the voices that make us afraid. We choose to hear the God who comes to us while we're cowering in our winepresses and says, Hail, mighty warrior!

We choose to listen to the God who promises we are mighty, that we are capable, that we are called. Because when we say, as Gideon did, Who, me? Are you sure you have the right person? God replies, I am with you.

This is the good news friends. God is taking this world somewhere good, and God is calling us to be part of it

God turns a frightened coward into a savior. Hope is trusting that this same God is not done with you.

God turns a clay pot and a torch into a military victory. Hope is trusting that this same God is not done with the world.

God turns a freethrow into hospitals and schools and computer labs for orphans. Hope is believing God is calling you, too.

God turns crucifixion into resurrection. Hope is believing that same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is living and active in your life and in our Church and in our world.

We're going to leave and go back into a world that's hearing a bad story. Say no. Literally. The next time you hear a story that makes you afraid, say No. The next time someone tries to tell you to be afraid, that they're your only hope for a better world, say No. Out loud. Verbally reject despair. Choose to hope, to trust that God is faithful to God's promises.

We can be a people of hope, a whole church like Austin Gutwein who just do what we love for the good of others and we trust that God is turning that into something beautiful - life and hope and flourishing. Not just for ourselves, but for the whole world that God loves and is rescuing.

Communion and Examen

[Communion Slide]