

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
We Respond to God's Word
Job 19:25**

Everybody's story is different, but we all want to have a sense of our lives that is generous or rich or not just...well, it's what Jesus talks about—abundance. It overflows instead of us having to hold on to it. It overflows. He says,

¹⁰ I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance [John 10:10].

That you might thrive. We have been listening to stories like this all month and talking about what an abundant life, a thriving life, might look like. I want to add just one more word today. A life that is filled to overflowing is a life that is filled with hope. The Bible talks about this all the time. It says that in the end,

¹³ Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love [1st Corinthians 13:13].

We talk about faith all the time in church and we gush about love. It's not like we ignore hope, but hope comes in third, and so as I prepared for this idea that abundance comes through hope, I discovered that it's way too big to fit into one sermon. I turned to the worship team and said, "I want us to spend all of Lent talking about hope because if there is one thing that people in Minnesota need in the winter, it is hope," so we are going to do that. I want to encourage you to buy for Christmas one of the resources I uncovered to help us. It is a book called *The Hope Quotient* [*The Hope Quotient: Measure It. Raise It. You'll Never Be the Same* by Ray Johnston]. We'll have a bunch of copies in Pathway Books. This is a book you should get. I'm not saying you should do anything drastic like read it, but you should get this book so you can give it to other people because they need it, you know? You don't even have to read the book because at the beginning Johnston says, "Let me give you the whole book in one sentence: "Thriving people thrive for one reason—they commit to things that produce inner strength and hope."

People have lives of abundance and thrive for one reason. They commit to things that produce inner strength and hope. I don't think that hope is always a felt need. In good times, regular times, we don't go around saying, "Oh, I hope, I hope, I hope . . ." But when a kid is sick in Africa or at the hospital, when the marriage is strained, when the profits plummet, when the boss starts to look at you like it might be your fault, when loneliness sets in and you think you're going to be alone, for those days when you're not sure you are doing anything that will last, anything you're really proud of, and you think you're letting yourself and other people down, you need to sit down and stop. That's when you need hope as much as your lungs need oxygen. Hope!

Sometimes you see something better when it's at the outer limits and it's all that's left, rather than in normal rushed life, so I thought about what hope and despair would look like at the outer limits. One of my favorite sources of stories is the explorers, Magellan, Drake, Vasco da Gama, Gagarin, people who go where nobody has gone before and find something new. Some of them find despair and some of them find hope.

One hundred and three years ago this month, Robert Falcon Scott raced against Roald Amundsen to the South Pole. Who is going to be the first to get to the South Pole? Scott took off in November of 1911. He and his crew set off across the ice cap with dogs, motorized vehicles, and ponies. The ponies and the vehicles only lasted a couple of days and had to be abandoned. Scott's team reached the South Pole on January 18, 1912, almost two months later, and they were terribly disappointed because they found a Norwegian flag sticking up at the Pole. It had been there for two weeks.

In his journal Scott wrote, "Great God! This is an awful place and worse to have labored to it without a reward of priority." Scott and his crew were frozen, exhausted, disappointed, and suffering from scurvy as they began their return. By February 17, a month later, members of the expedition started to die. They set up their last camp on March 11, 1912, only 11 miles from their food depot where they would have limitless supplies, but a blizzard came up and kept them from leaving the next day or the day after, and that became their last camp. The rest of the crew died right here. They were found dead in their sleeping bags seven months later in November of 1912. What do you think it was like in that camp? [Slide shown.] Were they filled with hope or despair?

Howard Hendricks has this great phrase. He says, "Discouragement," that is, removing courage, "is the anesthetic the devil uses on a person just before he reaches in and carves out his heart." You can either be hope-filled or dis-couraged, despaired. In contrast to that, two years later in 1913 an Englishman named Ernest Shackleton decided to be the first to walk all the way across the South Pole by himself.

Shackleton was a great promoter. He puts an ad in the newspaper, "Men wanted: for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honour and recognition in case of success." Over 800 men applied for the trip, but the journey was a disaster right from the start. You may have heard of Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*. It became surrounded by ice. That was not unexpected. They actually planned on that happening, but the ice comes and it crushes the hull and strands them on the Pole.

Shackleton leaves his Bible and his watch on board the ship and the crew takes off across the ice cap, pulling a dinghy and supplies for over 100 miles. They stop at what is called Elephant Island at the edge of the Ross Sea where the ice cap is, and Shackleton turns to his crew and says, "Okay, I can only take five of you in the dinghy. I'll come back for the other 50 of you. I promise I'll come back" and he leaves them, stranded at the Pole.

This story ends a little differently because six months later after four attempts to get back to his crew, this is the shot [slide shown]. He's coming back. And the hope that kept these men alive brings them to safety. It's either despair or it's hope. What makes the difference? I think part of it is a choice. You either choose to sit down and die or you choose to hang on and hope. I think the other part of it is this—is what you are putting your hope in trustworthy? What is hope? People thrive for one reason. They commit to things that produce inner strength and hope.

I love it that Dee McIntosh asked those people in the Skyway to define what hope is: the little boy who goes, “How do you use hope without using *hope*?” and the other one who said, “Hope is a feeling.” I saw that and I went to my theological dictionary and looked up *hope*. What is hope? In the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet addresses God and says, “Our hope is in You.” Jeremiah uses a noun that is formed from the root of the verb *qwh* [koh] to teach that the Lord is the hope of Israel. That means that Israel’s God is worthy of trust. Somehow hope in the Bible means somebody is worthy of trust. So hope is waiting for what you don’t have and trusting the person who promises it. Hope is not an emotion, thank God! You and I go up and down with our emotions, but hope is something that can be learned.

The last thing that anybody needs is to get a temporary shot of hope that lasts through the morning and is followed by a crash in the afternoon. Hope makes a difference. Do you think that hope doesn’t make a difference? Just think of this. Somebody is going to walk through the door and it’s going to be two people. One is the most cheerful, optimistic, life-giving, hopeful person that you know. The other person is the most negative, doleful, glass-is-half-empty, broken person. They are both coming toward you. Which one do you hope stops? One gives hope and one sucks life. Hope grows in people’s lives over time, and I think it grows in unexpected places. The saddest Book of the Bible, hands down, is Job, right? Job is a disaster waiting for things to get worse, but Job reeks with hope. Job, chapter 5,

¹⁶ So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.

Job, chapter 6,

⁸ “Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for.

Job, chapter 11,

¹⁸ You will be secure, because there is hope;

Job, chapter 17,

¹⁵ where then *is* my hope—who can see any hope for me?

At the end of the Book, God speaks to Job, but before that, Job lives in hope. Hopeful people like Job, who live in a broken world, who follow Jesus, should not be surprised when somebody gets cancer or their marriage goes bad or their job fails or when their retirement is off. This is a battlefield. Job teaches that hopeful people have friends. We are not meant to do this alone. But then our friends must be chosen carefully because they can either lift us up or suck us down. Job teaches that you better not pretend that everything is okay. The best part of Job is that he lies and screams at God for 30 chapters. People who have hope are honest enough to vent and not pretend, because people who pretend, who hold it in, who fake it—that leads to despair and bitterness, because hope can only grow in honesty.

For the hopeful, sometimes the only choice is how you’re going to respond. Sometimes you cannot do anything about it. You cannot make something get better. The only thing you can choose is how you will respond. Will you choose to trust or despair today? Job’s wife says, “Choose to respond.” She says, “Curse God and die.” Job’s friend says, “Well, it’s got to be

somebody's fault. Blame it on somebody. Blame yourself, Job." What will Job's choice be? He says, "Even if my God slays me, I will put my hope in Him." He has decided that his response is to not let go. I think that's probably what Job teaches me most, that you won't have hope unless you have a view of a God big enough to hold onto you when everything else fails. Job says,

²⁵ I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. ²⁶ And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; ²⁷ I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! [Job 19:25-27]

"I wait because I don't have it and I trust that my Redeemer lives." That's maybe the last best lesson of Job on hope, that it ain't over till it's over, and it ain't over. For the hopeful, it's not over. I could talk about this all day, but it would be just talk. I thought what would be better would be to close by asking someone who has gone through trials and despair and hope and good times to come up and share with you so, Joelle, would you mind coming up here? Joelle Syverson, has been a deacon. Her husband Leif has been an elder. She's raised three wonderful kids here in this community of faith. Thirteen years ago her life changed and it has not changed back.

John Crosby: Joelle, I'd like to ask you to give us just a snapshot of how life and faith have changed since you discovered that you had a tumor?

Joelle Syverson: I was diagnosed with a non-curable, recurring brain tumor 13 years ago, just 8 years after giving birth to my third child. My two older children were 5 and 3 at the time. Since my diagnosis I have undergone three surgeries and I've gone through chemotherapy twice. Unlike our other friend Doug Olson, because I have a partial brain, I need my health. The next thing I am about to say is going to sound a little strange, but I truly felt like God had been preparing me my whole life for this news. When I got the phone call telling me they had found something on my brain, I wasn't completely shocked. It was like "Oh, okay." I kind of knew that was coming. Probably the hardest part for me on this journey has been the way that this disease has affected my kids and my husband. Selfishly, I am very grateful to be the one in the role of the patient because I think I would do a terribly lousy job of being on the sidelines, watching my husband or my kids cope with this. I see a great friend of mine sitting over here as the caregiver and I don't know how she does it. So selfishly, I am very grateful to be the patient.

I will tell you that God has blessed me with an immense amount of peace from the moment I was diagnosed and it is a peace that could only come from Him. He also blessed us with this amazing community at CPC and all the people who immediately embraced us. This community became the hands and feet of Christ to us and has ministered to us so beautifully over the last 13 years. I truly can't thank you all enough.

I would say over the past 13 years my faith has grown immensely. Probably the two words to summarize my faith at this point would be the words *trust* and *thankfulness*. *Trust* because I simply have come to realize I have no control over this disease. I have to put my trust in the Lord and just know that He has the best plan for my life whether I think it or not. And *thankfulness* because,

quite honestly, over the past 13 years I've had way too many people come into my life with a brain tumor who have since died and I am still here, and so I oftentimes will say, I struggle with survival guilt. I just wonder why I'm still here and they are not. But I really know that when those thoughts start to creep in, that God does not want me to live in that place, and so I try to reframe my guilt into gratitude and just thank Him for every day that I have.

John: I think when something like this comes, Doug said we hunch in on ourselves, it's about all about getting through this. Yet over the 13 years, it seems to me that your sickness has been used in the lives of other folks that you've met. How has that been happening?

Joelle: I would say that because of the health that I have and because God has blessed me with pretty much an asymptomatic life to fight this disease, He placed it on my heart to start an event, a foundation, to raise awareness and funds for brain tumor research, but I want it to be a God-honoring event that will celebrate life. And so my hope for everyone who comes to our event, it happens every year in September and we just celebrated 11 years of raising funds, my hope from that evening is that everyone will leave that night with a greater appreciation for the life they've been given whether they have cancer or not. Every day is a gift from God and I want people to realize that. I want to say that what I love about the event is that I know we are bringing people together telling their stories. My hope also is that people are making connections in their lives. They are not alone on this journey; there are so many out there. And that's our event.

Last year Laura and I were there for the 10th anniversary. It's an unusual kind of fundraiser. It's called *Humor to Fight the Tumor*. Really! These people talk about their brains falling out and they mean it literally. Their brains are falling out and they talk about death unflinchingly. They celebrate the people that they've lost with real tears, but they bring humor and joy to life to give hope. Millions of dollars raised are a great thing, but more than that, this is a place where people can come and believe that God wants to offer them hope.

John: Joelle, let me tell you that from my perspective, the tumor has given you and Leif a different view of life and death than most of us have. As you look down the road, what do you see?

Joelle: I guess I would have to say as I look back over the last 13 years and as I look down the road ahead, one of the biggest things God has done in my life is, He has given me a completely different perspective in the way I live. I now live with an eternal perspective. God has put a huge longing in my heart for heaven. Quite honestly, that is not something I can share with a lot of people because I think they would think I am quite weird and it is a little bit wacky in the place that I live. My family gets a little tired of it. I truly don't talk about it all the time, but I think about heaven a lot. I feel like I live with one foot on this earth and one foot in heaven and, quite honestly, it's kind of a weird place to live. I hope that does not sound morbid.

By any means, I am in no way ready to leave my family. If I could take them with me, we would be gone in a heartbeat. My greatest longing right now is for this life on earth as we know it to pass away and for our lives to begin with Jesus. That is going to be pretty awesome. I am so psyched for that and I just want to take them all with me.

I would tell you though, during probably one of the hardest times of history, I got some great advice from Rich Phenow and that advice was to not go to the place of *what if*. Thankfully my husband and I have been able to embrace that and live in the reality of what we know today and not what might happen someday down the road because that none of us really knows. And so I am grateful for that and I am thankful that we can live in that reality because, quite honestly, I have come to believe that I think we really rob ourselves of the true joy and hope the Lord wants for us when we worry about the *what if*. So ultimately, to answer your question, my hope is truly in the cross and in Jesus Christ.

Doug is trying to memorize Romans, chapter 5. It says,

³ Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance, character, and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much for these stories of hope, not Pollyanna, not optimism, not a little song but hope that gives us faith. Faith, the assurance of what we hope for. Faith that doesn't make us strong in the gutted-out sense, but in the let-us-trust-You, let-us-hang-on, let-us-love-one-another, let-us-look-to-the-future sense. We look to a future where there is no crying or death or weeping or tears and we see You face to face. I thank You for all those folks in the Skyway, trying to figure out hope. I thank You for all those children, learning to be thankful for what they have ahead. I thank You so much for the courage You have offered to Jerri Haaven and her mom, to Doug, to Joelle and to so many of us here. Bless us, Lord Jesus, with hope that leads to the cross and beyond. In Your great Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.