

Hope as an Anchor Firm and Secure

Message 1 by Jana Honermann

Today's scriptures have the theme of hope: we can find hope in God as our rock and refuge; God promises us a hopeful future; God is compassionate with us and gives us hope; the Holy Spirit provides hope when it intercedes for us with groans that our words cannot express; we can find solace in knowing that hope is stored up for us in heaven; and hope is given to us to encourage us to live life abundantly.

But what if you are feeling hopeless, rather than hopeful? What if you are feeling burdened down with the griefs this life brings? What if no matter which way you turn you cannot imagine a future that is bright with joy? What if you feel like you are stuck in a corner with no options but to endure ... endure ... endure? What if you wonder what you did wrong to result in the punishment of your current horrible situation? What if you are lonely and feeling forgotten by others? Where is God in all of this? Why has he abandoned me/us?

Maybe you are thinking that things aren't that bad, that others have it much worse than you but you still feel a discontent within your soul or maybe even a general malaise that you just can't shake.

I recommend that you refer to Colossians 1:4-5 - "We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints - the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel." This is a perfect description of Stephen Ministers. They are full of faith in Jesus and have love for all the saints - that means love for you, and you, and you. They desire to walk beside you through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, to walk beside you as you groan in pain and grief, to offer a comforting presence in the midst of your loneliness, or to help you identify and deal with your discontent and/or malaise.

Service in caregiving is what Stephen Ministers are called to do. No, they will not be a personal assistant, nor a housekeeper, nor someone who runs your errands for you. What they do is provide a compassionate presence to hurting, grieving, broken hearted, and lonely people and listen to them. They listen in complete confidentiality so that you don't need to worry that the Stephen Minister will blab your secrets to other Stephen Ministers or anyone else for that matter. In fact, Stephen Ministers do not disclose who their care receivers are to anyone.

Stephen Ministers grab on to the anchor of God full of faith that the Holy Spirit is with them in their ministry. And with that anchor they are able to fully BE with their care receiver and see him or her more clearly. They see the struggle and the beauty of the person. To quote Henri Nouwen, "We begin to see how good people are underneath all their illusions and their aspirations. We realize they are people of God and that the Spirit of God also blows through them and breathes in them. We realize that people are wonderful, that they are beautiful, that they are persons sounding through the love of God. We see it and are glad. We can say, 'It is good to be with you, because you remind me even more of God's love.'"

Stephen Ministers do not provide care to earn anything. They don't have an agenda and they don't act on the condition that change will take place. They don't expect a "cure" of whatever ails people. They want to be there with people to reveal to them that God has not left them alone. They want to provide them with God's hope for a better future. They want to let God be the "caregiver."

I often think of the song "Bridge Over Troubled Water" when thinking of Stephen Ministry. Imagine Jesus laying down as the bridge.
Bear with me as I changed some of the lyrics of "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

When you're weary
Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes
A Stephen Minister will dry them all
We're on your side
Oh, when times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
Jesus will lay down

When you're down and out
When you're on the street
When evening falls so hard
A Stephen Minister will comfort you
We'll take your part
Oh, when darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water
Jesus will lay down

Sail on silver girl
Sail on by
Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way
See how they shine
Oh, if you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind

Will you allow a Stephen Minister to accompany you across the Jesus bridge over troubled water and towards the anchor of God's hope firm and secure?

Message 2 by Linda Piotrowski

I'm wondering how I can add much more after Jana's sermon. I'm willing to bet that you are thinking the same thing. "Oh no, another sermon, I hope this one doesn't go on and on." "I hope we get out of here in time to make brunch."

I invite you to think for a moment how often you use the word, HOPE. What do you mean when you use it? For most of us I think it is a wish or a dream that something will happen the way we want it to happen. Not really deep down trust that God will bring about what we desire.

Throughout the ages artists have used a variety of symbols to depict HOPE. Some are the phoenix, a birch tree, almonds, a lighthouse, an anchor, a rainbow, a baby, the color green. When they show up in a painting the artist is trying to convey something to the viewer beyond the images of the painting.

Perhaps you have a favorite symbol for hope. One of mine is the anchor. Then there is the color green. Also a few lines from an Emily Dickinson poem... "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul. It sings the tune without the words and never stops at all." Friends who know me well know that HOPE is my favorite word.

Why the anchor? What do we know about an anchor? Well, to start an anchor is a heavy metal object, usually shaped like a cross with curved arms, on a strong rope or chain, that is dropped from a boat into the water to prevent the boat from moving away. I learned about anchors as a young child.

I grew up in a row house in Roxborough, a section of Philadelphia. Living just a few streets away were my father's Aunt Mary and Uncle Ed. They had no children. My Dad was an only child of a single mother so Aunt Mary and Uncle Ed took on lots of care for my Dad while his mother (Aunt Mary's sister) worked. My Dad became like their child. By extension when my Dad married and had children we became like their nieces and nephews.

My Dad and Uncle Ed had served in the Navy. They loved the sea and everything about it.

Aunt Mary and Uncle Ed had a small vacation trailer in East Point, New Jersey on the Delaware Bay. It was a great escape from the big city. When summer weekends rolled around we kids were often invited to go along for the weekend. We were able to fish, build sand castles, adopt horseshoe crabs, and generally just be kids.

Uncle Ed had a small boat with a motor that he would use to fish and crab. Once we turned 8 we were invited to go on the boat with him. Uncle Ed had a great respect for the sea. He used our time with him in the boat to fish and talk about fishing, the sea, and staying safe in a boat. An important lesson was how the anchor helped to keep the boat steady, how it held the boat in one place so not to get lost. He spoke of rough seas and storms and how by staying anchored in one place chances were the boat would not capsize and we wouldn't drown. He was a deeply spiritual man and would often use our trips out on the boat to help us to imagine what it was like for Jesus and the disciples when they were fishing. It was never long before he

would tell us things like hope being like an anchor that held us fast to God in order to stay firm in our faith and trust in God's steadfast love.

Being on the boat with Uncle Ed we'd often motor down near the East Point LightHouse. This was an opportunity for us to learn another lesson about hope. He had many stories to tell of boats being lost in storms, losing their bearings, their desperation to reach shore. The lighthouse, he told us, was a symbol of hope. Light shining in the darkness when we feel lost and alone. God's love, he would tell us was light giving us hope when time was dark and despairing.

I would often wonder how it was we could find God's hope, love, and trust when we felt alone and obstacles seemed overwhelming. It seems so much easier to plod on alone even if feeling down, depressed, and not sure where God was in all that was happening.

In her book *The Liturgical Year*, Joan Chittister, a Benedictine Sister, writes: "Hope, you see, is a slippery thing, often confused with certainty, seldom understood as the spiritual discipline that makes us certain of only one thing: in the end, whatever happens will be resolved only by the doing of the will of God, however much we attempt to wrench it to our own ends.

There is the hope that we can begin, finally, to see the world as God sees it and so trust that God is indeed everywhere and in everything at all times—whether we ourselves can see the hand of God in this moment or not."

I'm here today to reassure you that HOPE is a constant in our lives. It is a discipline we need to practice. Most of the time we are all too ready to throw up our hands and say, "I give in." We forget that God is but a breath away. We need only reach out in faith and hope. When feeling overwhelmed by life and our circumstances I encourage you to remember that God is everywhere and in everything at all times. God provides others to walk with us to listen, to pray, to support. Right here in our own congregation there are people who are trained to listen, to support, to offer hope.

That is why lots of Stephen Ministers are here today. Our own pastor Craig is a trained Stephen Minister. All of us are ready to accompany you on the difficult parts of your journey, to offer hope, to be an anchor while your seas are stormy, to shine some light, to remind you that you are tethered to God and God does not fail.