BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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APRIL 19, 2009
HOPE FLOATS

Jeremiah 29:10-14
Romans 5:1-5; 8:18-30
Matthew 28:16-20

In 1914, Ernest Shackleton led an expedition to Antarctica with the goal of being the first to cross the continent. Their ship was named *Endurance*, taken from Shackleton's family motto, *By Endurance We Conquer*. The ship was caught, crushed, and destroyed by the ice, stranding the 28 men for 19 months.

In *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*, the demented bag lady named Trudy says, *I can handle reality in small doses, but as a lifestyle it's much too confining.* The crew of the *Endurance* certainly got much more than a small dose of reality.

Mainline denominations too have gotten more than a small dose of reality over the last several decades as the world around us and our own communities have changed.

We live in a time of transition. Though it has not fully come to Blacksburg, we can remember when: Sunday morning was a community event – everyone considered an upstanding citizen was in worship somewhere – an active member of a church was someone who attended every Sunday – nurseries full – (I've served churches where youth athletic coaches told their players to get their priorities straight and come to Sunday morning games and practices, rather than go to church) – most began and ended their work life in one career – most marriages lasted until death do us part – life fairly predictable.

Today: people can expect to relocated several times and work for several companies – 2nd, 3rd careers are not unusual – a college education is no longer an automatic ticket to success – once a month worship is considered active – a whole generation of young adults grew up without any religious background at all – Sunday for many is a day of recreation, time go to movie, game, buy a car, or spend time relaxing with family.

And as we increasingly get reality as a lifestyle and see around us a decline in the regard that churches are held in society, we can long for what our culture once was.

That period of transition has very commonly been described as the end of the modern world and the beginning of the postmodern world.

In the 1600s, the beginning of modern world, people saw the physical world as one that could be mastered by the human mind – the intellectual quest was to understand the universe so that it could be tamed for the betterment of humankind – knowledge is certain and can be objectively sought – knowledge in and of itself inherently good – the more we objectively know the better off we are – there was an optimistic way of thinking in humanity's desire to manage the world rationally – technology and scientific discovery in all fields became the domain where truth could be known. – progress rooted in science and education – we could overcome nature, solve our problems, and rule our existence.

By the 19th century, humanity was very optimistic about its ability to create a utopian world, or to cast it in religious terms, to create heaven on earth. And believed we were well on our way to doing just that.

Into that world of optimism and human achievement, into that world which believed in the perfectability of humanity, World War I came. Paul Tillich was a chaplain in World War I. He walked through one battlefield among the dead, and said, The 19th century is over. Optimism was not sufficient.

Perhaps the inadequacy of the can-do spirit and the human ability to solve all our

problems did not reach America until we dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We mastered technology, but at what price?

And into the safe, secure, idyllic world of Littleton, Colorado, came the shootings at Columbine High School. Into the safe, secure, idyllic world of Blacksburg came April 16, 2007.

In the postmodern world, the civil rights movement challenged the right of one race to determine reality for everyone – the women's movement challenged right of white males to determine reality for both halves of population – Watergate marked a loss of innocence and trust in integrity of politics and government and began a downward slide – scandals involving priests and pastors shook authority of religion in defining morality and embodying values – wildlife is endangered, water and the air are polluted – climate change threatens us all.

Where was truth and who had the right to define it? Could anything other than one's experience be trusted?

For us moderns, we may be experiencing something of what Dorothy experienced when she landed in the land of Oz, where nothing was as it should be, as she had known and trusted it to be.

We moderns had *Star Trek*, where Spock was the ultimately rational being and Dr. McCoy was the emotional being antithetical to Spock. Captain Kirk (which is the Scottish word for church) had the difficult task of reconciling those two opposites.

Postmodern folk have *Star Trek – The Next Generation*, where Data wondered what it must be like to feel and to dream and Q wondered about the nature of God.

The modern world was optimistic based on confidence in human ability to understand and solve every problem. And we are the beneficiaries of what human ability has done. And still these days, the talk is of climate change and whether we are reaching the tipping point where the earth can no longer support human life.

And when optimism about our ability to control outcomes fails, the default position is fear or anxiety. I have heard the word *angst* used to describe an underlying feelings within the congregation. That could leave us, in part, like the existentialist who's so afraid of the passing of time he's paralyzed by the sound of its whizzing past his ears.

November 14, 2001. I heard the doctor say to me, Unfortunately, it's cancer. Death was no longer something that happened some day. Everyone dies, so we're all walking around with a time bomb inside us, and I heard mine tick. The reality is that I am going to die. Once I knew that and knew that my days had a finite number. I could have either just given up, resigned myself, and waited for death. Or I could decide that, if my days are limited, it matters how I spend them. I want to live as fully as I can each day I have, to.live as fully as Christ wants us to, to live life abundantly, as the gospel of John says.

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This is stewardship season when we talk about money, though we also mention time and talents.

I believe the first thing God gives us stewardship of is stewardship of Self. Not that we manage our money well or our time or use our gifts well. Not that we live a well-ordered life. Though all of that may be a part of it. The abundant life is to live a life of integrity, of wholeness, where our deepest values are realized. How we use our money, time, and talents is the means we have toward the end of realizing our values. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also, Jesus said.

The way James Michener talked about it was to write:

It's like coming home to yourself at last.
For this is the journey that [people] make: *to find themselves.*
If they fail in this, it doesn't matter much what else they find.

Money, position, fame, many loves, revenge ..
all are of little consequence,
and when the tickets are collected at the end of the ride,
they are tossed into the bin marked failure.

But if [you] happens to find [your]self --
if [you know] what [you] can be depended upon to do,
the limits of [your] courage,
the positions from which [you] will no longer retreat,
the degree to which [you] can surrender [your] inner life to [another],
the secret reservoirs of [your] determination,
the extent of [your] dedication,
the depth of [your] feeling for beauty,
[your] honest and unpostured goals --

then [you have] found a mansion which [you] can inhabit with dignity
all the days of [your] life.-- James Michener

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In the context of stewardship season, I believe we also have stewardship of Christ's mission and ministry, the mission and ministry of Christ's church, of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church.

We are not called to be managers of the church's business. We are called to be stewards of the mysteries of God.

Talking about stewardship now is daunting. In the last year, the economy has suffered greatly. People talk about losing 40% or more of their investments, their retirement income. People are losing jobs and homes. Our endowment lost enough, however, to reduce the amount of outreach giving in the coming year.

As if the troubles of the current economy were not enough, we are continuing a capital campaign to raise the remaining $870,000 for the building renovation and trying to meet an annual budget.

When I was told I had cancer, I was in the best health I'd been in for 20 years or so. I was in the best shape I'd been in at least that long. The only problem was a gland about the size of a walnut, and 80% of it was healthy, only 20% of it was malignant. I couldn't ignore that 20% or it would grow.

Our courage this stewardship season faces the current economy, the financial needs of the church, and the remaining debt on the building renovation with the directness I faced the cancer – before it becomes more threatening and diminishes about ability to do mission.

One of the things said in the first session of the mission study was that one of our energizing attributes is *self-esteem/knowledge/success, that BPC is a group of very accomplished people who feel good about ourselves*. And that is true.

While the current situation seems to some to be dismal, I sense an conviction that BPC will find a way to thrive.

I think in part that is because we know we didn't renovate the building so that we would have a nice building; we renovated the building because our building is a means of our doing Christ's mission and that the end result is serving God from this place.

A part of our stewardship is to manage the church's business well, so that we can do the mission and ministry of Christ. Managers do things right. Good stewards do the right things.

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If optimism fails because we're facing a problem we can't solve and if fear/anxiety/*angst* inhibits us because we don't know what to do, where do we turn?

I believe we turn to Hope. Paul says, *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, [2]through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. [3]And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4]and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5]and hope does not disappoint us....*

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says, *[11]For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope*.

Do we believe it? Do we believe that God has plans for us that are for our welfare and not for harm? Do we believe God will give us a future with hope? Do we trust God?

God has given us a job to do: to make disciples. And has promised to be with us.

We don't see that future yet. What is seen is not hope. So we are called to trust God.

The church is not an organization; we are an organism, which is the body of Christ. The church is not an institution; we are a community of faith. In order to accomplish our mission, we sometimes take institutional form, but that is not our primary existence. God does not call us to be managers of the church's affairs. God calls us to be stewards of the mysteries of God.

One form of stewardship that is important now for Blacksburg Presbyterian Church is, I believe, the stewardship of hope. When much around us seems to be working against our ever returning to the good old days when being the church was easy, we need to be good stewards of Hope. The way Paul said it is, *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us*. Do we focus on the sufferings of this present time, or do we trust God that there are glories about to be revealed to us?

The whole crew of the *Endurance* survived 19 months in Antarctica. Shackleton's leadership is given much of the credit. *Shackleton became a keen reader of men and had no qualms about giving his crewmen what they needed to survive. When the ship was stuck in the ice, he gave up his own bed for the crew's biggest complainer, who was suffering from sciatica. "What sacrifices would I not make for such a leader as this," said* one of the crew. [Stephanie Capparell, "Drawing Inspiration from Shackleton's Leadership"]

Paul said, *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, [2]through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand*. Jesus did more than give up his own bed for complainers. He had no qualms about giving us everything we need to live the abundant life. He died and rose for us. What sacrifices will we make for such a leader as this?

Because we believe that God keeps promises, we are willing to sacrifice our anxieties. Because we trust God, we are willing to Hope, and to be good stewards of Hope.