WHERE THERE'S HOPE THERE'S LIFE

First sermon to Pilgrim Church, August 1, 1971

"And he said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' and I answered, 'O Lord God, thou knowest.'" Ezekiel 37:3.

"I find a great deal of pessimism and despair among both many students and faculty members. On several occasions I have found myself involved in discussions with campus people, many of whom I did not know, who are looking for a word of hope in a world full of crisis and despair. The events at Kent State have had a tremendous impact on students. But I find a very interesting phenomenon occurring; many of these persons are seeking a word of hope from the church." Annual Report of K. James Davis (Duluth United Campus Minister, as recorded in church's annual report).

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Many centuries ago there was a rather far-out preacher by the name of Ezekiel. He belonged to a group of displaced persons who had been carried off from their homeland to a strange country. And as he considered the situation among these people, Ezekiel called to mind the sun-blanched bones of a slain army that he once saw lying in the wilderness. His people were like that, he thought to himself, dead, dry bones without a spark of life. And as Ezekiel thought of his people in those terms, in those very accurate and realistic terms, he found the God of his fathers putting to him an astonishing question:

Son of man, can these bones live?

It seems to many people today that we are standing in the valley of dry bones once again. A wave of despair sweeps over the nation, the church and the world at large. We seem to swing from a defeatist apathy to anger to apathy again,but with no real hope along the way. The campus minister is undoubtedly right in discerning a deepening pessimism among students. Of course, it is dangerous to generalize about any group of people in these complicated and swiftly changing times. But it does seem that much of the exuberant idealism of a decade ago is now giving way to a creeping depression of confidence. Last year I led a discussion group made up of students in a seminary theology class. The ecological band wagon was already in motion, and these young men were much concerned about that as well as about other current issues. But I noted among them a pervasive mood of defeat.

"It's too late," they told me. "We've already had it."

Nor is it only among young people that we perceive this spirit of hopelessness. I recall a doctor, a pediatrician, who spoke to a group in my church a few months ago. He came presenting the Sacramento Peace Center and his passionate dedication to working for peace belied his claim to cynicism. Yet the gist of his message seemed to fit in with the title of a syndicated cartoon of former days:

"And nothing can be done about it."

It is very hard for those who care deeply about the world to hope today. It is hard for young men who once saw visions, and for old men who once dreamed dreams. Here in this parched valley the mind wanders only into nightmares. And so we are tempted to cry out as did the people of Israel:

"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off."

Now the church is not exempt from this mood of hopelessness. On the contrary, the church, especially our kind of church, has been losing hope for a long time now. There was a brief period about two General Synods ago, when we worked ourselves up into a sort of religious high. People told us that we were entering a New Age with a capital "N" and a capital "A" and that all the church had to do was to greet the secular city as the Kingdom of God. It didn't matter if people seemed to be fighting in the church all the time; conflict is the one true path to Christian peace. It didn't matter if people were disappearing from the churches; God was just getting around to separating the wheat from the chaff. It didn't matter if people lost faith in God; in this day and age the liberated man could make it on his own. All this to a little rock guitar and we went hom feeling all lit up inside.

But even then the disillusionment was rising, the mountainous grief of those who were sick at heart at the church's selfishness, its subtle sanction of pride and prejudice, its sheer dullness, its utter lack of passion for anything that matters. I am frank to say that I was among the sharpest tongued of those who felt that way about the church. Yet I don't think any of us have wanted the church to die, not even the so-called "institutional church." For no matter how much we may try to kid ourselves on this matter, without some sort of institutional church there is no church. Without a body there is no soul. And now as we look at the shrunk membership statistics and read the conference newsletters about the loss in finances, and bring to mind all the drop-out ministers and all the drop-out church members we have known, we are disheartened. Whether we are tradition-minded, or innovation-minded, whether we call our approach to the church conservative, liberal or radical, the scene there is not very encouraging.

So the church too stands in the valley of dry bones. Or perhaps we should say, the church lies among the other bones. And now we are told that people seek a word of hope from the church! But those of us who have been living near to the heart of the church ask another question: Is there a word of hope for the church?

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But may be it does not matter whether we hope or not, in or out of the church. I think it does matter. I do not believe that either individuals or communities can survive for long without hope. And beyond survival - beyond the mere continuance of life - the quality of life depends on hope. Life is always predicated on a positive expectation.

I think it may be said that nothing of any consequence in the history of mankind was ever undertaken without hope or accomplished without hope. Again and again it was hope that made the difference in achieving some break-through in the human condition. It was hope that made the difference in the valley of dry bones, God's hope first, then Ezekiel's hope, and then the hope that the prophet kindled in his people. As the spiritual tells us, those dry bones "they buckled roun'" at the word of the Lord. The people of Israel rebuilt their nation, and renewed their religious institutions. Without the hope of Ezekiel you and I might not be here today.

By the front door of this church there is a memorial window depicting scenes in the history of American Congregationalism. Every one of those scenes from pastor Robinson's farewell to the Pilgrims to Lyman Abbott's sermon on slavery tells how people were propelled by hope into a daring venture, a creative change in the human situation. Hope made the difference. Without the hope of the people depicted on that window, you and I would not be here.

It seems that in preparation for coming here I have spent at least a month doing nothing but rummage through old papers. Among the old papers I came across was a copy of a speech by a man named Percy Moore to a father and sons banquet in a former parish of mine. Percy Moore was a member of the United Church of Christ, vice-moderator of his conference, a family man. We expected him to deliver a pleasant little talk appropriate to a jolly get-together of men and boys.

But Percy Moore was also a black man, and only four days earlier the people of California had voted in favor of a proposition that would strike down the fair housing laws. As he looked out over that sea of cheery white faces, the speaker told us that he had tried to find an excuse not to come. He told us about the history of his people in this country, about his black Congregational church, of how he felt concerning the recent vote. He was an angry and an embittered man. But he closed with these words:

> "I do not mind telling you that I shall hold on to the vision of the just society which is my history and my tradition. A society which recognizes the fact of race, but with love and understanding declines to be racist...The struggle shall go on within and without the church.
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> When I go to church on Sunday mornings, I shall continue to join with the choir as it sings the old words, '...and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free,' and that, too, is what I shall teach my son!"

Without the hope of men like Percy Moore, you and I may not be here much longer.

The old adage goes, "Where there's life there's hope." But like many old adages, that can be turned around. "Where there's hope, there's life." If we are to live a life worth living in the future, we need that word of hope both to the church and from the church.

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Now right here we confront a serious temptation. The temptation is to fall back into some sort of escapist brand of optimism. The optimist has been defined as the man who when he hears the preacher say "and finally," starts to put on his coat. We all know that that man is a fool. When the preacher says "and finally" he is only trying to cushion the fact that he has thirty minutes to go.

There is a sort of shallow optimism that sometimes passes for the gospel in American churches. I mean that bland and blind attitude that tells us that if we think positively for a few moments everything will turn out all right. If we can just build up a little pep rally spirit we don't need to worry about what's wrong with us and our world.

That attitude has nothing to do with hope. True hope arises from discontent. It begins with protest. Hope asks of the future something better than what we have today. Neither the people on the campuses nor anywhere else will be taken in very long by a word from the church that makes light of the fears, the griefs, the injustices and the agonies of the world.

Indeed, what helps to make a great hope believable is that it comes from the valley of dry bones. Like the hope of Ezekiel. Like the hope of the Pilgrims whose leader William Bradford wrote that they set up housekeeping in "a hideous wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Like the hope of young Anne Frank who wrote in her diary as she hid in her garret from the Nazis:

> "I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look into the heavens, I think it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again.
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> "In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

When hope comes from sources like that, we begin to take it seriously. Perhaps it is true to say that only those who have stood in the valley of dry bones have a right to hope. But some have stood there whose hope becomes the hope of the world!

Even God has stood there. That's the Christian insight. God stands with us in the wilderness of our despair and then finds a way to make those dry, dead bones rise up again. After the flood, the ark; after the exile, the return; after the Cross, the risen Lord. The Christian insight is that there is no discontentment with the human situation so agonizing as the divine discontent, no protest against us so severe as that of our heavenly Father. Yet to that protest is added a life-giving faith, the Creator's faith in our human possibilities that is far more important in the last analysis than our human faith in the Creator. Out of the convergence of God's protest and God's faith, out of the Cross of Jesus Christ, there comes hope for mankind. God himself stands in

our valley and asks the impossible question, "Can these bones live?" And because he stands there he stirs within us the impossible dream.

Now today we stand again in Ezekiel's valley. It is about time that the church came here. For this is where things are told the way they are. But among the words spoken there is the word that makes the dry bones spring back to life. It is the Word that Someone at the heart of things shares our protest, believes in our future and leads the way into it. It is that Word in all its many dimensions that we in the church are summoned to listen to again and then to share.