

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Barnabas Church
11.17.24; Pent. 26B

HOLDING FAST TO HOPE

I speak to you in the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, And Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is both an honor and a privilege to be here with you this morning. I am grateful for St. Barnabas and the opportunity to be part of this community. I would like to begin by sharing a couple of memories of how this parish has helped me over the years to hold on to hope.

In the mid-80s I was serving on the staff of Rolling Bay Presbyterian Church here on the island. Fresh out of seminary, I was green as could be. Looking for a service in which I wouldn't be expected to lead and could just recharge, I snuck into St. Barnabas through the back door and attended a contemplative Taizé eucharist right here in this sanctuary.

I was a hurting young man back then. My father had recently died after succumbing to a chronic illness of 18 years. My grieving mother had lost her faith and had descended into the throes of depression and alcoholism. My beloved grandmother had recently developed dementia and had moved to Mary and Martha nursing home.

Friends, I was a hot mess! And then out of nowhere God appeared through the beautiful liturgy and music of this Church. It worked like medicine on my soul—it was definitely prescribed by God and best of all there was no deductible or co-pay! The Body of Christ at St. Barnabas opened her arms to me in a spirit of hospitality with no strings attached. I was not a member of this church—I was not even an Episcopalian. And still the Gospel medicine worked! Seeds were planted and well, here I am so many years later!

But the story isn't over. God created another moment for me to remember. About 25 years ago, I once again found myself back at St. Barnabas in this pulpit in a very unexpected way. I was married then and a proud father of a 6-year-old living in Redmond, preparing to be ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church. I hadn't lived on Bainbridge Island for many years. The last part of my ordination exams included successfully preaching a sermon at a parish other than your own. So, as God would have it, I ended up right back here at St. Barnabas.

God truly has a sense of humor! I am not sure how many of you were there or if you would even remember the event. But if you were, thank you for giving me the thumbs up or at least not strongly objecting to my being ordained.

Why am I telling you, my history of moments with God at St. Barnabas? Because it is your history as well and it points to how vital Christian community is for your spiritual formation and mine, regardless of our callings. And so, it is with great joy to have come full circle, to

be back on the Island, along with my dear wife, Jannie, to serve among you as one who seeks, along with all of you, *more* faith, *more* hope, *more* unconditional love in our lives.

In today's gospel lesson from Mark, we are reminded, in a powerful and unmistakable way, of what was most important to Jesus and what is important for us—especially during these troubling times in our culture when faith, hope, and love are in short supply.

The gospel story begins with Jesus coming out of the great temple of Jerusalem. It will be Jesus' last time at the Temple and his final break with the religious establishment. The priests at the temple were presiding over a system of exploitation that depended on keeping the people in a constant state of fear and salvation insecurity. The people of that day were led to believe that if they stopped making sacrifices, God would withdraw His favor or even worse, display His wrathful judgment.

The temple complex in Jesus' day was a colossal structure equivalent to a 15-story building. Archaeologists have excavated stones as large as forty-two feet long and weighing as much as 500 tons. It was considered one of the great wonders of the ancient world and it was the pride and joy of King Herod who was a tyrant of equally large proportions. It was at the epicenter of religious, political, and economic life in that day. And so, if we take that all in and ponder it for a minute, we can begin to see how radical Jesus' statement was **“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”**

Often this statement, combined with the dark predictions of war, famine and earthquakes is interpreted as an end of the world prophecy. There is certainly historical support for this dark interpretation as the Romans completely destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in approximately 70 AD and the entire region and its institutions tumbled down with it.

Interestingly, this word apocalyptic is often used in a very frightening sense to describe this passage. There's a lot in our culture right now that reinforces this notion. Netflix and all sorts of media, provides us with a steady supply of dystopian dramas that lead us deeper into fear and make us prisoners of this fear.

However, the word apocalypse, at least in a biblical sense, is full of rich possibilities other than fear. Apocalypse can simply mean an “unveiling” of a spiritual truth, opportunity or moment of authentic encounter with God that is transformative. This unveiling is God's sense of timing and is not determined by human calendars or predictions. It often is called Kairos or divine time—the inbreaking of spiritual energy and movement that brings something to fruition or harvest. This hope-filled and possibility filled perspective, is what I believe Jesus is directing us to in this gospel story today. Jesus is unveiling and exposing corruption and pointing us to the bedrock of transformative community that is less calcified, and institutional, and more personal, relational, and above all things compassionate.

In the second chapter of John, Jesus tries another strategy to expose the spiritual bankruptcy of worldly ambitions and false promises made to people, like us, looking anywhere and everywhere for hope and security. After Jesus overthrows the money changers at the temple Jesus challenges the religious authorities by declaring, **“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”** The leaders completely missed his point thinking Jesus was talking only about physical structures. The temple elite respond, **“It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?”**

But Jesus was speaking of the temple of His body and what would later be known as the Body of Christ that would form the life blood of the Christian Church. Rather than cold stones, he was pointing his followers to the idea of a new temple in which holiness was held and carried by human hands and compassionate hearts of ordinary people verses some kind of religious elite. He was thinking of what creates transformative moments in human lives.

Experimental fledgling Christian communities, often facing persecution and minority status in the Roman Empire, began in small houses and were places where faith, hope, and love were birthed in the form of sharing material resources, providing homes for refugees (many were refugees and immigrants themselves), and caring for the sick and dying.

So strong was this willingness to help each other that some secular historians have hypothesized that one of the reasons Christian communities thrived was that they had developed immunity to some of the diseases of their times precisely because they would care for the sick and dying rather than cast them out into the street to die which was a common practice in ancient Rome.

In our reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews, we get a clear view into the life of one of these early Judeo-Christian communities struggling to find hope and direction during great social upheaval and major economic and political disruptions.

What advice does the writer of Hebrews has for us today? It is advice which has withstood the test of time: the rise and fall of a countless number of empires and nations, secular and religious messiahs, earthquakes, and wars.

In the words of the writer of Hebrews who some scholars believe it might have been St. Barnabas himself:

“Let us hold strong to the confession of our hope, never wavering, since the One who promised it to us is faithful. Let us consider how to inspire each other to greater love and to good deeds,²⁵ not forgetting to gather as a community, as some have forgotten, but encouraging each other, especially as the day of *His return* approaches.

Dear friends, as we all reflect upon what St. Barnabas means to each of us and attempt, together, to discern the mission that God has for us as a community of Christ followers and bearers of hope, let us not be passive recipients of God's grace but active participants in the rebirthing of this world into a place where faith, hope, and love reign; where the wounded are healed; the lost, found; the lonely connected; and the hated, embraced. Where everyone has their opportunity to witness the unveiling of God's grace. Where everyone has their moment. Amen.