



Sermon Transcript
Easter Sunday
April 12, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption
Hope! Expectancy! Faith!
Micah 4:1-8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Micah 4:1-8

¹ It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, ² and many nations shall come, and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

³ He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore, ⁴ but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

⁵ For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

⁶ In that day, declares the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; ⁷ and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore.

⁸ And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.

Introduction

I recently joined a book club in town. It is me and a delightful group of retired men who meet once a month to discuss a book over lunch. We are currently reading the historical novel *D-Day Girls*. Bonnie and I share a Kindle Account and the other day she was surprised to see this book on our account and so she inquired; “Did you order *D-Day Girls*?” I felt as though I had just been caught watching a Hallmark movie all by myself curled up on the couch with tissues in hand. Don’t let the title fool you.

In 1942 the Allies were losing the war and Germany seemed unstoppable. Special Operations Executive was a secret network of spies established by Churchill to work at undermining the Nazis and to loosen their grip on Europe. This network of spies were later known as “Churchill’s Secret Army.” These spies were trained in everything from demolition to sharpshooting. With every able bodied male on the front lines, Churchill was forced to do something unprecedented: recruit women. Thirty-nine women answered the call and became saboteurs in France. Together, they destroyed train lines, ambushed Nazis, plotted prison breaks, and gathered crucial intelligence—laying the groundwork for the D-Day invasion that proved to be the turning point of the war. (Clearly, in my defense, this is more like *Band of Brothers* than a Hallmark movie!)

Early in the book, when two of the main characters were being parachuted into France to begin their assignment, you discover that the way British intelligence communicated with the resistance was through a BBC half hour radio broadcast done in French. In the last five minutes of the broadcast, secret messages were conveyed through odd and cryptic statements like “Jean has horned feet” . . . “The rainbow gives birth to hope” . . . “Monkeys do not ask questions.” In fact it was this last cryptic message—“Monkeys do not ask questions”—that signaled the resistance that two of these spies were being parachuted into a disclosed location and so a team was dispatched to receive them.

The author, Sarah Rose, reflected on the hope that these cryptic messages gave to those living under the harsh conditions caused by the German army now occupying their homeland. She wrote, “The rebels would always remember the joy of hearing the messages through the static, this tangible proof that contact existed, that the Allies were working to liberate France.”¹ This contact with the Allies gave them hope. It gave them a sense of expectancy. It gave them faith to hang in there. Hope! Expectancy! Faith!

This week began with the warning to brace ourselves because this was going to be a week of death. We have received a daily tally of those who have died in our country due

to the COVID-19 virus. It is projected that the numbers of those who die each day will continue to increase for the foreseeable days ahead. And yet, there was a glimmer of hope that was interjected into the national conversation on this virus. Originally, it was thought that the number of those who may die in our country from this virus could top out at 200,000. Now, with a measure of hope, that number has been downgraded to 60,000. While that is still a grim and sobering number, it has interjected a measure of hope that the curve is being flattened. This leads to an expectancy that we might soon turn the corner and gives us faith to press on with what we have been doing to mitigate the spread of the virus. Hope! Expectancy! Faith!

The other day at his press conference, the Governor of New York, Governor Coumo, said something that caught my attention. After giving the grim news that the day before had resulted in the highest increase in deaths to date in the state—731 people had died in New York that day—he shared the encouraging news that social distancing was working and that there were signs of mitigating the spread of the virus. And then he declared: “This is not an act of God, we’re looking at. It is an act of what society actually does.”² I get what he is saying and agree that our actions of social distancing have been critical. But it also reminded me that the kind of hope we can offer—whether it be the Allies assisting occupied France or social distancing mitigating the spread of a virus—has limits. But the kind of hope we celebrate this morning is an act of God. It is the kind of hope only God can bring!

The hope we proclaim this morning is a living and sure hope. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has risen from the dead. Therefore, we live with a sense of expectancy because we know that through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, death has been defeated. Erwin Lutzer wrote a book called *The Vanishing Power of Death*. In it he says, “Death is not a period at the end of a sentence, but a comma.”³ We know that because Jesus rose from the dead, “*even though we die, [COMMA] yet shall we live.*” This expectancy allows us to live with great faith in this world filled with death. With a measure of great faith, we don’t need to fear death. In his commentary on Micah, Gary Smith says “trusting God is the most sensible act of faith anyone can propose.”⁴ It is logical. That is what Paul is getting at when he says that if Jesus did not rise from the dead then we might as well pack our bags and go home—“*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.*” But if Jesus did rise from the dead, and he did, then the most sensible thing you can do is turn to him in faith. Hope! Expectancy! Faith.

That is the story of the Bible. That is what the New Testament leads us to. That is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday. Hope! Expectancy! Faith!

The Story of the Bible

Back in January, we began walking through the story of the Bible. While the Bible contains a lot of stories, it tells one grand story. Even though the Bible is divided into two main parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament—they combine to tell one unified story. To help us put the story of the Bible together, we are using the acronym CASKET EMPTY. The word CASKET helps us put together the story of the Old Testament: Creation, Abraham, Sinai, Kings, Exile and Temple. The word EMPTY helps us put together the story of the New Testament: Expectation, Messiah, Pentecost, Teaching and Yet to Come.

I understand that the acronym CASKET EMPTY can seem a bit quirky or odd at first. But it is memorable and aside from being memorable, it does have merit. Someday, we are all going to end up in a casket or an urn or however our remains are dealt with—dead. Death is the final enemy we face in life. But this acronym for the Bible holds out the prospect that death does not have the final answer and that the Bible gives us hope as we face our most feared enemy—death. The acronym CASKET EMPTY reminds us that the death and resurrection of Jesus (Easter) are the focus of God’s saving purpose in the story of the Bible. That is why Easter Sunday is such a big deal and why it is hard to imagine not being together on this Sunday. It reminds us that the empty tomb of Jesus assures us that our sins have been atoned for on the cross and that there is resurrection life after death. That is why we eagerly greet one another with that triumphant greeting: “Christ is risen! He has risen, indeed!” Our hope rests in a definitive act of God.

Adrian Warnock said “The Bible is, in many ways, a book about death. It begins in Genesis, when Adam and Eve sinned and death entered the world. It ends in Revelation with the judgment of sin and the celebration of the end of death for all believers. The Bible constantly reminds us of the human predicament and of the inevitability of our mortality.”⁵ And so when the Bible talks about resurrection it is like a shaft of light that penetrates our hopelessness . . . Resurrection is the only answer to death. And so the resurrection of Jesus we celebrate this morning shouts out that this hope is real and that trusting God to raise us from the dead is a logical expectation that emerges from this story. The empty tomb tells us that trusting Jesus is the most sensible act of faith anyone can propose. We have been *born again into a living hope*.

This morning we begin our journey through the New Testament. Warnock says that coming into the New Testament is like sitting in the doctor’s office and listening to the doctor give you a long explanation about the life threatening cancer you have. But

towards the end of the conversation he turns to you and says, “But all you need is an operation and you will be fine.” This news of hope is all you need to hear. Warnock says, “The Bible is like that, showing first man’s total inability to save himself. The turning point is Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.”⁶ The Old Testament tells you that you need a Savior. The New Testament announces to us, “Here he is!” Hope! Expectancy! Faith!

The New Testament: E - Expectation

So this morning we take our first step into the New Testament. If you are joining us for the first time, or are somewhat new to worshiping with us, this is a great time to jump in with us. Wherever you are on the continuum of faith—a seasoned follower of Jesus or someone with a lot of questions and a bit curious—this would be a great time for you to join us. When we walked through the Old Testament, we actually hosted a half-day seminar that put the whole story of the Old Testament together. We were going to do that at the end of April for the New Testament and we had to cancel it because of the virus. However, we are talking with David Palmer, the presenter of the New Testament seminar, about doing it as a livestream for us. When we have a date for that, we will let you know. So between our weekly Sunday sermons through the end of June and this pending half-day seminar you can learn a lot about the New Testament and a lot about Jesus and a lot about what it means to know God.

If you are curious and have questions, it is worth taking a serious look at the New Testament. To be honest, if all of this is new to you this morning and you come here on Easter Sunday, you are actually stepping into the climax of the story. It is like stepping into a movie when the story is coming to a climactic conclusion. There have been times I have stepped into the living room and Bonnie is near the end of watching a movie and I ask a question about what is going on in the movie and her response is “there is too much to explain to get you caught up with what is happening. You will have to watch the movie from the beginning.” That is what I am encouraging you to do as well. Take time to get the whole story of the New Testament so that you can better understand what we celebrate this morning: “Christ has risen from the dead!”

But I can say to you with confidence, if Jesus has risen from the dead, then that changes everything. It tells us that Jesus is God. It tells us that Jesus is the way to God. It tells you that your sins can be forgiven. It tells you that you can know God. It changes how you live and how you view life. If Jesus rose from the dead, then putting your trust in Jesus is the most sensible act of faith anyone can propose.

This morning we take our first step into the New Testament without even going into the New Testament. The acronym EMPTY begins with the letter “E” which stands for EXPECTATION. The word EXPECTATION captures the mood of the people of Israel during the time period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Did you know that when you close the pages of the last book of the Old Testament—Malachi—and open the first page of the first book of the New Testament—Matthew—that there are 400 years that exist between those two books? That is a lot of time. As those 400 years passed, there was a growing EXPECTATION among the people of Israel that God was going to act on their behalf. There was anticipation building—hope was stirring—that God would act in a decisive way to save and redeem his people.

I did some reading this week about the history of those 400 years between the Old and New Testament. It wasn’t just history that had to do with the people of Israel. It was also the historical account of what was going on with the major empires that ruled the world at that time. And what you discover about the time between the Old and New Testament is that Israel faced a lot of adversity. In fact, at the end of this 400 year period, Rome was in power over the people of Israel and Herod was appointed as Rome’s regional ruler over the Jews. The people of Israel suffered greatly under Herod. A delegation from Israel was dispatched to Rome to appeal to Caesar for change. The historian Josephus tells us that this Jewish delegation said of Herod, “that in the course of a few years, the Jews had endured more calamities at Herod’s hand than their ancestors had endured since they left Babylon.”⁷ Whether that is true or not, it does describe the constant state of adversity the people of Israel experienced

This 400 year period is often referred to as the “Silent Years” because during this time there was no revelation from God. Don’t you feel like that at times when you face adversity? It can feel like God is silent or absent. But that was not the case. The testimony of this period is that while the people of Israel faced adversity, God was sustaining them. Their hope and their expectation that God was going to act in a decisive way to save them rested in what the Old Testament prophets had said God would do. Their hope was in the promise that God would act once again on their behalf.

One of those prophets who spoke with a measure of hope for the nation of Israel was an Old Testament prophet by the name of Micah. He was a contemporary of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and the words he recorded for us in Micah 4 were written over 700 years before Jesus was born. And when he wrote these words of hope, the people of Jerusalem were facing incredible adversity. Their city was surrounded by the Assyrian army and in Micah 3 the prophet did deliver the people of Israel some grim and sad

news. Do you know how we were told at the beginning of this week to brace ourselves for a week of death? Micah told the people of Jerusalem to brace themselves because in the not too distant future the city would fall. He ends Micah 3 by saying, *“Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”* We saw Jerusalem fall in our journey through the Old Testament.

But then notice how the tone of the prophet changes in Micah 4:1. Micah says, *“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it.”* At the end of Micah 3 this mountain is in ruins and overgrown, but at the beginning of Micah 4, the prophet sees a day when this mountain will be the highest of them all and people from all over the world will come to it.

When the prophets spoke about *the mountain of the house of the LORD* they were talking about the temple that was at the center of the city of Jerusalem. And we saw in our journey through the Old Testament that the temple was the place where God dwelt. At the end of Micah 3, the prophet saw the time coming when the temple and the city would be in ruins. But in Micah 4, the prophet sees a day coming where not only will the temple be restored, but it will be the highest of the mountains and the nations will flock to it to meet with God. In verse 2 those who come to this mountain will be changed. They will say, *“Come, let us go to the mountain of the LORD . . . that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”* Can you imagine that? Can you imagine the peoples of this world streaming into God’s dwelling place? And when will all this happen? The prophet says, *in the latter days . . . the distant future . . . the day of God’s salvation.* As the people of Israel waited between the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament, they had a sense that God was going to act once again on their behalf. There was hope. There was expectation. There was faith.

Other Old Testament prophets used the imagery of *the mountain* to give the people of Israel a measure of hope and expectation that God will once again act in a decisive way on their behalf. Isaiah looked towards this day and said these words. *“And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil the is spread over all nations.”* What is the shadow that is cast over people all over the world? Death! And so the prophet sees a time when on this mountain, *“He shall swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.”* I love what it says in the next verse. *“And it will be said on that day—the latter days—Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

We saw a few weeks ago how the prophet Daniel used the image of a mountain to describe what God was going to do in the *latter days*. He said that this mountain was like a rock that struck down the kingdoms of this world and it grew into a mountain that covered the entire world. This mountain in Daniel was a picture of the coming kingdom of God. And with this coming mountain—the kingdom of God—comes a Messiah. Daniel saw a vision and at the end of it he says in Daniel 7, *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and languages should serve him.”*

All of these things led to an air of expectation as we open the pages of the New Testament. God was going to act again and people from all over the world will make their way to God. Death will be swallowed up. The kingdom of God will fill the earth. The Messiah will come to Israel and accomplish these things. Hope! Expectation! Faith!

Easter Sunday

When Jesus begins his public ministry, do you know what the first words are out of his mouth? In Mark 1:14-15 we hear Jesus say, *“The time is fulfilled.”* The latter days are here. The day that Micah saw in Micah 4 is here. For those who know the Bible well, for those who have been hoping, longing, praying, waiting with expectation for this hope for centuries, the first words of our Lord Jesus are that *“the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.”* Hebrews 1:1 says: *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son,”* There it is again, “in these last days.” In 1 Peter 1:20, we read: *“[Jesus] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.”* There it is again. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:11: *“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”*

Jesus is that temple that the nations flock to so that they can meet with God. Speaking of his own body, Jesus said in John 2:19, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* Through his death and resurrection it is Jesus who has swallowed up death. Paul proclaims in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57, *“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Jesus claims to be the Son of Man—the promised Messiah—that Daniel saw in his vision. It is the title Jesus uses most often to refer to himself. In Matthew 9:6, Jesus says, *that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he then said to the paralytic—Rise, pick up your bed and go home.*”

We can be sure of all of this—you can come to God through faith in Jesus, your sins can be forgiven, death is swallowed up, the kingdom of God has come and Jesus is the promised hope of heaven—and we are sure of this because Jesus has risen from the dead. The long expected Messiah has come. During this period of EXPECTATION the people were waiting and ready for God to act. He did! He did it through Jesus!

Conclusion

Hope! Expectation! Faith!

Are you living with that sense of EXPECTATION? Here is the hope I offer you this morning because of Jesus!

You should EXPECT that if you seek God through the Scriptures, you can find him. So if you are searching, join us.

You should EXPECT that if you turn to him in faith—confessing your sins and trusting in what Jesus has done for you on the cross—that you are forgiven and even though you die, yet shall you live.

You should EXPECT that if you belong to him that God is making his appeal to this broken world through you. God will use you for his glory as you serve him.

If Jesus rose from the dead—and he did—the most logical thing you can do is turn to him in faith and serve him with your life.

¹Sarah Rose *D-Day Girls* (New York: Broadway Books, 2019) 57

²Jesse Hellman “Coumo reports another 731 coronavirus deaths in New York, its largest one-day increase” www.thehill.com April 7, 2020

³Erwin Lutzer *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2004) Kindle Reader 801

⁴Gary V. Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 509

⁵Adrian Warnock *Raised With Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) 69

⁶*Ibid.*, 69

⁷David Palmer *CASKET EMPTY New Testament Study Guide* 2016—34-35

