

In Love: In the Fire (HOPE)

Week 6/6 – 20 March 2016 – Jacob’s Well – Greg Meyer



We are in the last week of our series, “In Love” and we’re talking about being “In the Fire” today. Now, if you’re familiar with traditional church at all you might recognize this 6 weeks we’ve talked about LOVE as a time usually referred to as LENT. A **sad** time because it is usually associated with Jesus heading towards Jerusalem and his eventual death on the cross... and we’re talking about LOVE... A little ironic, but I think we get it wrong when we think what Jesus did in dying on the cross is all about what we have done wrong and don’t realize that it is even more so about **how big Jesus’ love is. How big God’s love is. For us!** And that reminds us how much there is to learn about a love that big. So that’s what we’ve been doing, and are still doing today.

So these past 5 weeks we’ve been talking about all these game-changing places love takes us, and today, we’re talking about how love – how our relationships – take us INTO THE FIRE. *Let me start by telling you another story from the Bible.* It’s a pretty bizarre story that comes from the Book of Daniel. A one-of-a-kind, very short book in the Bible from an era 100’s of years before Jesus when the Jewish people were suffering great persecution, and were in exile in Babylon after having been conquered and taken captive. The book is a collection of HERO STORIES that are all pretty extraordinary. And for our 21st Century ears, the point of these stories isn’t to wonder whether they really happened that way or not – that’s not the helpful question here – but to listen for the messages about life and God were that they believed were so important for us to hear. If you’ve been keeping up with our SOAP readings, you’ve been reading from Daniel these last several days.

The story is about the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In this book he is a crazy character, I won’t go into that, but here he has created a huge golden statue and declares it a god that everyone must bow down and worship. If they don’t they get thrown into a fiery furnace. Anyway, there are these 3 young Jewish lads, Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego, in King Nebuchadnezzar’s gov’t and they won’t fall down and worship it and someone rats them out to Nebuchadnezzar who says, “*What?!? You haven’t been worshipping my awesome new god? Because if not... you know what I have to do to you!*”

Here’s where the part that is printed at the top of your outline comes in, they say, “*King, we don’t need to defend ourselves. Our God can save us from your fiery furnace. And if our God doesn’t, it doesn’t matter, we aren’t going to worship your god anyway.*” So the king throws a complete hissy-fit, has the furnace turned up to 7x the usual French Fry level and tosses them **in the fire**. “In the Fire” get it?!? And as the story tells it, the fire doesn’t even make them break out in a sweat.

Ok... what’s this about? What does it have to do with love? It is telling us that:

Our relationships, our love, leads us to the place of “WHAT’S NEXT?”

Call it the future. Call it transition That place where we don’t know quite what’s going to happen. What the other person you are in a relationship is going to do; Whether we can really trust it; If everything is going to be okay with our partner or spouse, our kid, our sister or brother, our friend, our boss or coworker... That’s the fire. Our relationships always take us to that unknown place...

where we must choose either the fire by GOING FORWARD or to avoid the fire by OPTING OUT.

Those 3 friends had to choose to go forward with the relationship they had with their God, the God of Israel whom they had known and served and loved, or to say that the risk of the fire was too great and they needed to opt out. Play it safe.

Their choice represents ALL of our relationships. You always have a what’s next. You are always confronted with a new moment, a new twist, a new challenge, a new day and you never know what’s going to happen. The future looms and you don’t know where it is going and you have to choose to go forward into that fire, or to opt out.

Sometimes it is in **Little Ways** – Will it stay this good? Even get better? Why did he/she react that way? So *small that we may not even be consciously aware of our unconscious is monitoring and weighing.*

Sometimes it is in **Not-Quite-So-Little Ways** – I'm a little uncomfortable with this new situation... New school; new teacher, new position at work and the dynamics with my co-workers is all thrown off; new twist to an otherwise predictable relationship. You feel a little out of your depth. Your comfort zone is being stretched.

Then there are the **Big Ways** – It can't go on like this. Something has to change. We are growing more and more distant. My coworker's behavior is not acceptable. I don't think my child is making the decisions that will provide with a healthy future. I've been hurt too many times.

These are all The Fire. You can't escape the fire. Not forever. You can opt out, you can run when the heat gets too hot, but not every time. To do so is to always be on the move. Leaving relationships before they ever ask anything of you, before they become 'relationships.' It is to be the loneliest person on the planet.

The only way to go forward into the fire is to have HOPE. To believe that there is possibility. A future worth having. The 3 friends in the story had hope. They weren't sure what God would do, but they weren't ready to opt out, even though the figurative fire was hot. They were going to stick by that relationship.

Before I go any further let me say that hope isn't answer for every relational situation. I'll get into that later, but there are hopeless situations. There are times when you do not follow someone into the fire. In fact there are a lot of them. But overall we need more hope; more hope for each other, not less. We just need to understand it better. God wants you to be filled with hope for the people around you is because love can't live without it. And if that means hope is pretty important, then we need to dig into it.

Hope, you see, is always a RISK. Just like love. If it weren't, it wouldn't be hope, would it? God is asking us, through what our hearts learned long ago about life, that there are risks we can't afford not to take. To not take them is to give up on what it means to be human. But hope is more than just risk.

Hope is AIR. Hope is what allows us to breathe in the unpredictability of "What's Next" and other people. You can't live without hope, just like you can't live without air. Physiologists say you can't live without food for more than 40 days and you can't live without water for more than 3-4 days. But air, you can't live more than 3-4 minutes without it. You need air. You need hope. You can't go on, you can't face a new day without hope.

You may say, "I do it all the time. I live with reality, not hope." And I'll say that you are just lucky enough to have your hope be such a part of what you do, how you see your world and relationships, that you don't notice it. Like the air you breathe. How many of you have thought about the mixture of 79% Nitrogen and 21% Oxygen that is floating around you right now, filling your lungs every 5 or 6 seconds and fueling your body? Probably none of you. It's the same with hope.

But if you get into a situation where air is hard to come by you'll be aware of it real fast, I promise. The same with hope. When you discover your partner or your parent will no longer be able to be there for you, hope will become very real for you. When your child grows up and starts making decisions on her or his own – *no thanks mom and dad, I got this* – you will become a close friend of hope very fast.

You see, what hope does is this: **Hope creates SPACE that gives a relationship room to breathe...** Just like what air does. It makes room, creates space. We need that breathing room. Time to adjust. Space to move forward before we can know what will happen. It's like hope says, "Okay, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what he'll do. I can't be sure... BUT I don't need to panic. I don't need to give up. What I have known shines a light of possibility into the future, and for now, that is enough."

You need that space. That room to figure out what the relationship is going to be like now, **but you know who also needs it? The other person.**

Let me help you understand another reason this space, this breathing room, is so important in our relationships. If you and I are in a relationship and I need to change – I've picked up some bad habits, I'm inconsiderate, drinking too much, letting little things become the main things, forgetting to put down the toilet seat... you name it. What I don't need is your fix. For you to tell me what I need to do differently. BUT I do want your hope! Not "I hope you'll change" but the space your hope for me can create, where you believe in me. You vision of who I really am. I want you to see it, I want you to expect it, I want you to behave towards me as if that were true.

That's the 2nd half of that line on your outline. **Hope gives people room to CHANGE.**

It makes the issue not be my faults, but my possibilities. It motivates me from the inside rather than coercing me from the outside. Jesus' final act for us wasn't based on anger, resentment, and annoyance for us, but upon hope for us. When someone believes in me that radically, I don't know about you, but it awakens something inside me. It makes me want to be what that person sees in me.

Ok, we're getting deep enough into this hope-business and I think it is important to differentiate it from its neighbors that it gets confused with.



On the one side – the bubble on the left – you have I WISH. I wish our relationship would be better. I wish he would be more thoughtful. I want her to understand me better. All that unsubstantiated wishing that would be nice, but there really is no reason to think it will ever happen. Under that write "Wishful Thinking" Hope isn't wishful thinking. Feel it... what is it like to only WISH something would be different in a relationship? What does it feel like? *RESPONSE IDEAS: Dangerous – Gullible – Inappropriately vulnerable – Awash, swept about by circumstance*

If we go all the way over to the other side you have I KNOW. There really is nothing at risk here. The outcome is certain. It assumes everything is under control. *Like you are of your children, right? Got any other jokes for me?* Under that write "Certainty/Guarantee" This isn't hope either. What is it like on this side of Hope? What are the consequences of basing a relationship on Certainty and having Guarantees of the shape of that relationship? *RESPONSE IDEAS: Lost potential, nice to not have any surprises, but gives up too much possibility, suffocation, UnSustainable.*

I'm a great skeptic of certainty in any form. If the other side of hope is unrealistic because it is mere wishful thinking, this side is an illusion all together. There is no real relationship that has certainty and guarantees built into it. You may have signed a pre-nuptial agreement to determine who gets the billion dollar estate in case of death or divorce, but do you think that pre-nup is going to make your love last even under the wear and tear of years gone by? There are no guarantees.

Between Wishing & Knowing is this wonderful place of I HOPE. I hate to define a word with the word itself, but it operates in a world of HOPEFULNESS What do you think it feels like to have a relationship that is infected with Hope? *RESPONSE IDEAS: Visionary – Supported – Proactive – Patient*

So, **WHAT MAKES HOPE HOPE?** (and not just wishful thinking or certainty?) What gives hope the ability to take that delicate middle ground between them and be transformative? What makes hope strong enough to allow us to head into the fire with only it?

Two things:

1 - Hope always has a FOUNDATION. It's based on something substantial. Not guarantees, but something that allows it to live and give us that air we need to breathe and go forward and not opt out. Things like:

- **History of this relationship** – is there any reason to make you believe this isn't wishful thinking? How much trust exists between you? I'm not looking for enough evidence that you are all but certain, but I'm also know that you should never marry someone expecting they'll change when you're married, even though they never did in the relationship before.
- **Your personal capacity to hope?** – Have you experienced going through the kind of change with someone before? How did you do? Are you in a healthy place? Do you have good sense of self? Do you understand your personal boundaries? Do you have time to let a healthy transition happen?
- **Support from other people** - Are you on your own? Because if you are, your ability to maintain hope in difficult situations goes way down. Do you have others who can help you hang on if it gets rough? Will they just be **cheerleaders** for you, or will they be **truth tellers** and really be there the way you need them to?
- **Patience and a bigger picture of what is happening** – Stephanie spoke about patience a few weeks ago. It isn't waiting idly by, but it is going to be needed in that space that hope creates. Patience doesn't come from some strange ability to not think about the situation, but the ability to see the bigger picture of what is happening. To understand the other person's situation, to give yourself time to adjust and adapt. To see beyond what is happening now to what could be happening tomorrow or next week.

It is wishful thinking that is like a rabbit just pulled out of a hat. It is certainty that is the done deal requiring little of you except to experience it. Hope has foundations, but uses them to reach further than those foundations can on their own.

Paul, that man who took Jesus message out into the world after Jesus' death, was helping people wrestle with how to continue living in a hostile environment, and he said,

...We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5

That suffering and endurance and character are foundations for hope. They are real and carved out of real life. And that last line that sounds so churchy – *hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us* – what that is saying, if I am to roughly translate it for our world today is this. *'This is how God made the world to be, and God has made you part of it. That's why you will find hope here and all the stuff you go through will only grow more hope for you.'* That's good stuff!

Ok, hope always has foundations, but second...

2 – Hope also always has a LEARNING STRATEGY. That's right. What is a goal, but hope with a plan? Does it mean you know how to make your friend quit drinking? To get your coworkers to cooperate instead of compete? To get you kids to stop fighting? To resolve the cycle of anger and argument you are stuck in with your significant other? Probably not, but hope wants a plan. A path towards the future it sees. Something to try. Somewhere to start.

NOTE: I said a **LEARNING** strategy. As you move ahead you will learn what is working and what is not. You will discover things about this person you are in a relationship with that changes what you will expect and do. You will also learn things about **YOURSELF** that *had better* change what YOU expect and do. That's an incredibly important power of hope. If you're like me, most of my relational hopes are about how the other person will change so that I can enjoy them more – or be annoyed by them less. But it isn't just about the other person, is it? You see, **It's important to LET HOPE CHANGE YOU.** Things change in the fire. That's good. You can do with some change. *Even the worst experience in the world with the most horrible person can teach you something about yourself.*

Take a look at the Homework Practice for this week...

	Homework practice... Start a Hope Journal for your relationships.
	Write "What do I WANT?" and "What do I HOPE?"
	Be honest. Don't just write what you think you should be feeling, but what you really feel and wrestle with it. Let it teach and mold you.

Last thing about hope...

Hope STRETCHES – It stretches everything. It stretches you. It stretches other people. It stretches what you thought was possible. And that is because God gets in there and makes it bigger. There is more to this world than our knowledge or imagination can ever fathom. God infects us with it. We sense it, if we dare to trust it we begin to see it and live with it.

In the story from Daniel the king throws the 3 men into the fire, and then he looks into make sure they are crisped to a crackly crunch and has another hissy fit because they aren't! They aren't only still alive, but they are walking around and not even tied up anymore. AND he doesn't just see 3 men, he sees four – and the 4th – the story tells us – looks to Nebuchadnezzar like the son of a god.

It's a story. But wow, what is it trying to tell us? It is telling us something important. Something essential to hope. It is saying that God is with us. When you hope you are tying into what God has given you to see. You don't do it alone. You do it with us, people – a community that God has given you so that God can be present in your life. You do it with God's love and vision seeping in from the universe God has put together.

Be stretched. Don't opt out. Opt in. Love others. Hope greatly. Dream great dreams and make great plans to get there. The world needs you to.

COMMUNION: Two thousand years ago this week Jesus was walking into his own fire. We celebrate this week not because we feel so sorry and guilty for what Jesus had to do. No we remember it because Jesus opted in. He said YES to us. Jesus knew the kind of hope he had for us needed something tangible so he gathered the dozen or so through whom he was going to pass on that hope and let them know this was something that they would do together. And he gave them something to see and touch and smell and taste. Reminders of the hope they couldn't quite grasp but would carry them forward. I invite you to join the tables full of hope around the room and be hope with one another... *Instructions...*