

“Hope amid hornets”

A Gratitude and Generosity sermon

Eric Ringham

Oct. 3, 2021

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Reading: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Well, I’m sorry, but as a happily remarried divorced person I have very little to say about Mark’s Gospel this morning. It’s one of those passages of Scripture that can make me feel isolated and alienated – as if the good news isn’t actually meant for the likes of me. For now, as they say, let’s stick a pin in it, and move on to one of the day’s other texts.

This summer our family gathered up north at a cabin we rent every year. One evening Ann and I took the canoe out for a sunset paddle. When we got back, I aimed the bow of the canoe at a spot of shoreline next to the dock. My plan was to beach the canoe and haul it up the bank. I’ve done this dozens of times at that exact spot, but this time, the bow poked a hole in a thatchy part of the shoreline, and from that hole came a horde of surprised and angry hornets.

If you've ever seen Ann and me walking together, you might have observed that we go everywhere carefully. She's blind, so she takes my arm, and I narrate the features of the landscape: Curb. Five steps up. Two steps down. Patch of grass, rough ground, puddle to your right.

No time for that now. I threw caution to the wind, right into a cloud of excited hornets. I grabbed Ann and yelled, "Hornets! Run!" and began pulling her over the rocks and tree roots that stood between us and the safety of our cabin. The hornets gave chase.

Naturally, in a moment like that, one's thoughts turn to Scripture.

Here's a verse from the passage we heard this morning,

**2:7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.**

Something like that was happening to us.

Unlike us, with our nest-destroying canoe, Job had done nothing to deserve what was happening to him. Job was trying to live a life of devotion and integrity, and you would have to say he was succeeding. He was prosperous. Satan targeted him because of that success, as a means of humbling God, to show God that even the most pious and upright of God's servants

could be brought down to Satan's level, cursing and hating the God who had created him.

As we know, Satan did not succeed. Job had a bit of an existential crisis, and he lost his family, but he remained a servant of God, and God gave back to Job everything he had lost.

I'll come back to the hornet story in a moment but I want to make a detour -- to Finland in 1939, and I'm sorry if you've heard me tell this story before. It was a favorite of my dad, who used it in his stewardship sermons.

Finland was being invaded by the Soviet Union. Finnish troops were going door to door to evacuate civilians, because they intended to burn their homes and deny Soviet invaders the use of them.

A Finnish soldier came to the home of an older woman who lived alone. He explained what he was there to do. "Mother," as he called her, "We're going to have to burn your house. Gather a few things. I'll be back for you in an hour."

An hour later, the soldier came back -- and found the woman on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor. "Mother," he said. "Didn't you understand me? I said we're going to burn down your house."

“I heard you,” the woman replied. “But if it’s for Finland, I want it to be my best.”

I bet I heard my dad tell that story four or five times to different congregations. If I’m being honest, I never liked it. It seemed to appeal to an otherworldly kind of devotion, and I couldn’t relate, or see the point.

But then I came across a recent Facebook post by our own Pauline Hendrickson. She wrote: My dear husband (of 55 years) (that would be Dick) has spent hours of the last two days cleaning the kitchen at [University Lutheran Church of Hope](#). He’s up for sainthood as far as I’m concerned.

Pauline left out a pertinent fact -- that she was part of the cleanup too. Together, as I imagine it, Pauline and Dick took on some of the most demanding and probably nauseating tasks known to civilization.

But it’s clear to me that they had something in common with that Finnish woman: Their devotion. They wanted to make a contribution and they wanted it to be their best.

So consider these exemplary people: Job; the nameless Finnish woman; Pauline and Dick. If you’re like me, you find their examples not only inspiring but a little intimidating. I ask myself: Are these examples I’m supposed to follow? Because I don’t think I can. (6:28)

Thank God it's not a competition. As Lutherans we know that our salvation does not depend on how much we give, or the good works we perform, or the sins we avoid. Our salvation is a gift to us, a gift that asks nothing in return other than that we believe it.

If you're of a certain age and a lifelong Lutheran, you probably grew up singing the offertory that begins, "Create in me a clean heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit within me." We'll sing a different setting of that same text in a few minutes. It comes from Psalm 51, and for me it will always be the prayer we offer when we give of ourselves. It's also the text that helps inspire this year's Gratitude and Generosity campaign, Sustaining Hope: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your bountiful spirit."

Maybe you heard the "On Being" broadcast a week or two ago in which the author and theologian Kate Bowler spoke about the difference between hope and optimism. I knew I was going to like her when I heard the title of her book, "Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)." She's a cancer survivor, and she posed a question that sticks with me: "Now that we know life can come apart in an instant, how do we live?"

I think the answer has to do with sustaining hope. My life isn't coming apart at the moment, but it has and it surely will again. If you or a loved one are infected with COVID, or you've been diagnosed with something bad, or you're going through a

divorce, or soldiers are about to burn down your house, or you have some loathsome sores, or you're being pursued by a swarm of hornets, you can be sure of one thing: God is not doing this to you. Just as God did not do this to Job. God waits for us at the other end of the equation. God gives us hope, and that hope sustains us.

God has placed us in a creation in which anything can happen. The one constant is that God is there with us, loves us, and holds us close through it all. That is God's gift to us.

We are talking here about what we do in response to that gift. What we do with the freedom it gives us. What we do to share it with others. What we do to make room for that gift in our hearts. When that Finnish woman scrubs her kitchen floor, it is not because the sacrifice of her home might not be accepted if her floor is dirty. It's because she's giving her house, and she wants her heart and soul to be part of her gift. She wants her love of Finland to be manifest. I bet Pauline and Dick feel something similar, though not about Finland.

Ann and I made it to the cabin, brushed off the hornets and got inside with only six or seven stings between the two of us. My hand swelled up for a couple of days and itched for a couple of weeks. Ann looks back on it with the philosophy she brings to everything: It makes a good story.

But now I'm the one who got to tell it. Sorry, but it was for Hope, and I wanted it to be my best.

Thank you and amen.