

She admits that over the years, they've been losing their forest lands, but then she tells them this-that as a community they have gone on fighting anyway. She tells the company of travelers how *"together through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat."* and the sweet nostalgia of the many hand-made ornaments hang

In Christ, together, we too fight against the forces that oppose God's loving plan for the flourishing of this world and all its people. We are a part of the long defeat. And though what we do may not seem like it's making a difference in the arc of God's unfolding plan-it's not so. The same loving power that raised Jesus from the dead, and that raises us from the waters of baptism-is at work in and through us and through every small act done in the

power of God's great love.

And so, my encouragement to you this evening, this week-is to give up loving-even in the face of troubles, or even resistance. Keep praying for that person or situation that seems it won't ever change. Keep showing kindness even when it's not returned. Keep encouraging. Keep shining the light of love into dark places. And keep hoping. Keep hoping. Keep hoping.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

©Rev. Ruth Bowen

We're in the season of Epiphany which means I've taken the Christmas tree down and have packed away the ornaments that another year. As much as I enjoy the ambiance of the soft twinkling branches, it's also always a good feeling to have the tree out of the living room. We no longer need to deal with the dropping of the awkward task of crawling under the tree to water it. We've moved the chairs back to their usual spots and the look of the living room is I'm not a super neat or highly organized person, but I do have a semblance of order in my life, especially when things around me are not out-of-order. I think that might be something common to many of us when life seems chaotic, when it feels messy or disjointed or out of control, we look for something that gives us some semblance of certainty or control.

This week I listened to a sermon by the late preacher and theologian, Lew Smedes, who at the very beginning of the sermon he would watch the evening news, or when he was plagued with concerns about his children, when he contemplated the troubles of the world-and there's no shortage of those today either-one of the things he would say to himself was-keep hoping, keep hoping, keep hoping.

The words we read from Colossians 2 tonight help us dwell on the hope for Paul's words are words of hope. And if we boil down Paul's dense, thick teaching in our text, the hope Paul has for us is the hope of being "in Christ." Paul loves that term. According to Paul, our grace and security is the truth that you and I are in Christ. My life is in Christ. Your life is in Christ. But understanding what Paul means by that is the important and it's what we'll explore for a little while tonight.

Years ago, while at my previous church, I baptized a little boy around 3 years' old who had been adopted by a family in our congregation. Because he was such an alert, inquisitive child, I directed the teaching of baptism directly to him. Soon after his mother contacted me to tell me what had happened a few days later. Little Landen had a doctor's appointment

Maybe the radical nature of this is captured through something Lewis Smedes once wrote, when he suggested that being “in Christ” points to a “situational Christology.” In other words, what Jesus did on the cross and rising from the dead, created a whole new situation in the cosmos. Smedes suggests there was an actual shift in the universe’s balance of power. As Paul indicates in verse 15, the powers and authorities that had been vying for cosmic supremacy were disarmed and turned into a spectacle. To put it a little more concretely, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection created a new situation in the universe.

As one commentator put it, “When you through baptism enter this new situation, when you cross the border into the new world Jesus made, things become possible for you that simply would not be true were it not Jesus. . . objectively speaking, there is power available for changed living. There is wisdom available to discern truth. There is grace available to continually cleanse our lives. There is a gospel to proclaim as we invite others into this new world.”

What strikes me about Paul’s words and about this idea of a shifted cosmic landscape, is that it’s all about what God has done and is doing. Then God, through Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit graciously includes and incorporates us into God’s grand story. That’s why Paul, in text, recalls Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. Because with baptism, that becomes our story too. We died. We were in the tomb. And we were raised with Jesus into a new life. Into a new cosmic landscape. And friends, with that knowledge and hope and comfort-we can face the troubles of our world and the heartaches and hardships of our own lives.

As I studied this passage, an image formed in my mind; a landscape image, and I found it helpful in summarizing what’s true about our baptism and about what it means to be in Christ.

The first part of the image is the ground, the foundation of the landscape. And what forms the foundation are the hands of God. Meaning that in Christ, through baptism, there is no place you will ever go where God’s hands are not beneath you.

I turn one last time to Lewis Smedes. His book *How Can it Be All*

own hands holding you up.” Friends, because you are “in Christ” the landscape of your life is now on an immovable foundation, the hands of the Creator, the real ones, the originals, the archetypal creative ones. And there is nowhere you can go where those hands are not beneath you. Which affirms the truth, that in this world there will be no one who can rise above the waves of this world or are isolated from the pain of it. We too are in the uncertainties and difficulties and indignities of being human in this broken world. As we know well, being in Christ doesn’t exempt you from cancer or debilitating diseases, or destructive addictions, or underemployment, or financial worries, or making mistakes that can ruin your life. Which leads to what I see at the center of that cosmic new landscape. On top of the foundation of God’s hands in our new life, the very center, rising above all else, is the cross of Jesus. Being “in Christ” means that Christ’s death on the cross is a decisive victory over the powers of evil and death, and now although we have not yet experienced that final defeat, in this life, in this world, because of the cross, we get to glimpse and even participate in the victory of love over evil, of goodness over evil, of life over death. Once, many years ago, I visited a parishioner with dementia who was being nursed home. I stepped into the room, and the woman’s face was already there. Lunch had been delivered on a tray and her husband was leaning over from the side of the bed, tenderly feeding his wife. I didn’t see them saw or heard me right away. As her husband leaned over to feed her, she had a spoon up to his wife’s open mouth, the cross he was working around his neck swung forward. She grabbed it in her hands and held it tightly for a little while, then she let it go and he went on feeding her. That experience stuck with me because it was such an incredible picture of the power of cross-shaped love. The power of the love of God for us on the cross is what animates the lives of all who are in Christ. That power rises above all other powers and will ultimately win the day. Finally, with God’s hands as the foundation, and the cross