INTRO

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, several area faith communities gathered for an interfaith worship service downtown at First Church. I had the privilege of offering the message that evening. My reflection posed the question: **What If Community is a Verb?** I suggested that rather than concentrate on the word in its noun form – which defines a kind of people or kind of place; or describes a kind of kindred feeling; or depicts a kind of ultimate result -- that people of faith could instead think about community in terms of action steps. I talked about saying, “Yes, of course” when you’d rather say “Of course not” and stepping forward when you’d rather shrink back.

Thankfully, the message was received well. Folks seemed to appreciate the idea that, using imagination, you can take a word that is commonly understood as a noun and give it some get up and go.

A few years ago, I took a similar approach with the word ‘hope’. Borrowing from something that Rev. Quinn Caldwell said at Synod, I wrote
a sermon called ‘Hope is a Verb With its Sleeves Rolled Up!’ That is one of my favorite images ever. And it struck me as being so absolutely true that I think I stopped thinking about ‘hope’ as an emotion but motion.

Can I confess something right here? I was going to do it again this morning. In fact, I originally sent Krista a sermon title that was something like: “Hope With Your Sleeves Rolled Up”. I wasn’t going to recycle the message; but I was totally going to do that thing where I tell you that the word means only ‘this’ and not ‘that’.

Gratefully, God spoke my heart and by Wednesday I had this conviction that hope is an inside job and a job itself. It involves both spirit and body – the whole self. So, I’d like you to meditate with me on the topic: Hope Fully. [prayer]

A FLICKER OF HOPE

Whenever I’m struggling to get into a sermon-writing groove, I always do one of two things. I’ll either start right where I am at the moment or I’ll go back to a place that I have been in the past. That strategy helps me keep it real. Friday night I was reflecting on a very dark season in my life exactly ten years ago this month. I didn’t realize as it was happening; but it turned out to be the beginning of a months-long battle with clinical
People who have experienced depression personally or who have lived with or loved someone who has struggled in that way understand that it is a heavy, heavy phenomenon. It’s not about being bummmed out for a day or two and then snapping out of it. It’s a serious, scientifically verifiable sadness that is most often accompanied by a lack of energy, an inability to take pleasure in the things that once brought joy, and a sense of hopelessness.

Hopelessness was the most troublesome and terrifying for me. It was alarming to watch my life horizon shrink. Instead of envisioning a long life full of possibility, I could barely see two hours ahead. I had distorted thoughts…thoughts of meeting my maker not making plans and manifesting dreams.

As hope diminishes, according to my experience, your life light dwindles to a flicker. Your humanity is in jeopardy. I’m not mentioning this episode with any sense of exhibition or to tell tales to take up time. I share these things recognizing that somebody may need to hear me so that that somebody can give voice to her/his experience. I’m recalling this private struggle in order to put hope in proper perspective. It is a THING…”hope
is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

I’m so grateful for that last little flicker because that little thing saved my life. When we lit that candle this morning and Jillian read those words, I did think about how God works in my life – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly…sometimes right beneath my nose and sometimes behind my back. Hope never disappears entirely…always appears, thus affirming that love is on the way.

In the last ten years I’ve tried to be attentive to the signs, especially the seemingly unimportant and insignificant ones...the ones that don’t seem on the surface to point to anything. There have been days here at South, for example, when the whole day is a series of disappointments and upsets. But, there has never been a single day when some little flicker didn’t present itself even from within someone else.

And it’s the flicker, friends, that is the ultimate measure of a day or a lifetime…the yardstick by which you can estimate spiritual progress…the benchmark of successful ministry. You won’t always be on fire. Indeed, it gets dark sometimes. Don’t ever dismiss, though, the presence and power of a flicker of hope emanating inside you and around you.
STOKED!

Whereas I’m extoling the virtue and veracity of the spiritual spark – that emotional in-dwelling thing -- hope needs help to come to full fruition. You know that we moved to East Hartford in late February. We settled in just as the weather was beginning to warm up. So, I didn’t get to take advantage of the fireplace – a feature of the house that was a great selling point. Now that the weather outside is more frightful…building a fire is so delightful.

I think I might like it a little too much! Not in a pyromaniac way; but in a slightly obsessed- with-minding-the-flames way. I find myself, almost compulsively, adjusting and adding logs. Sometimes I talk to the fire, offering words of encouragement. Now that I say it aloud, maybe I should see someone about the time and effort I’m spending fireside?

Meanwhile, all of that focus is only partly problematic because flames revert to flickers and then to embers and then ashes unless you tend the fire. I’m still on topic. Hope is an entity; but it’s also about energy. Hope. Verb. To want something to happen or be the case. To intend if possible to do something. "He’s hoping to finish high school and attend college.” “She’s hoping to be reconciled with her estranged friend.”
“[We’re hoping when morning dawns, the King shall come.]

And light and beauty brings: Hail, Christ the Lord!

Thy people pray, Come quickly, King of kings!”

In order for hope to be actualized and realized, we have to stoke it. The person who expects to finish a project has to be busy busting his backside to make it so. Hope is expectation and exertion. The person who desires a different result might have to stop doing the same things over and over again. Hope is longing and laboring. We who anticipate the coming kingdom must lend a hand, sleeves rolled up. Hope involves intentionality and wanting and working and active waiting. It is the faint flicker and the force we apply to fan it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

As I mentioned during the introduction to scripture, my sermon is generally guided by the Luke text but not grounded in it. For the sake of the bible study folks, I thought I’d offer some study questions based on the reading. Which is concerned with preparation for the drawing near of the kingdom of God:

1. What are the things you hope for? Are those things earthly or eternal?

1 The King Shall Come; lyrics by Austin Lovelace
2. What is your hope built upon? Is it wishful thinking or anxiety or durable faith?

3. What signs do you notice meantime that affirm your hope is leading to something…that your redemption is drawing near…that the kingdom of God is near?

4. What steps are you taking toward the anticipated outcome?

Whatever your answers turn out to be, I pray that you might understand that hope is not an either-or proposition. It’s a noun and a verb. You have to apply your entire self -- from the depth of your soul to the soles of your feet…your heart and your hands. This is what it means to hope fully.

Amen.