

## THE PURSUIT OF HOPEFULNESS

*preached by the Rev. Ruth Everhart at Palisades Community Church on 9/19/21*

Romans 8:18-27

Romans 15:1-13

A few weeks ago I flew to Michigan to visit my mother, whom I had not seen in nearly 2 years. She's 92 and I was eager to see her again.

One day we went to Lake Michigan together. We call it "The Big Lake" — some people are surprised to discover that it really does feel as big as the ocean! There's an undertow that takes people by surprise. From the surface, you can't really see it — but it can grab you and pull you under. It can kill you. A powerful undertow is a dangerous and powerful thing, so it's good to acknowledge it.

What is the undertow that's affecting you right now? What unseen but powerful forces are pulling at you? It's important to acknowledge those forces, because they erode a sense of hopefulness.

Last Sunday I was talking with Sylvia Becker, who commented that there were some silver linings early in the pandemic. There was this sense of life being put on pause — the release of many obligations, a sense of some quiet, maybe the chance to sit and read a book. But at this point in the pandemic, obligation has come roaring back, and everything is so difficult.

I agree with Sylvia, and I would add that public discord is high. Both of these contribute to the undertow that pulls at us. Let me pause and allow us to name the sources of undertow in our lives.

(PAUSE TO SHARE)

Is there hope for the Palisades Community Church? I've been asked that question directly, and today I will respond.

For the past 18 months, or 2 years, or maybe more, PCC has been pursuing a vision that was cast by various people, some of whom have moved on. I'm referring to the creation of the Palisades Hub.

That journey has been surprising in many ways, as no one counted on the pandemic, and no one (including Pastor Elizabeth) expected Elizabeth to leave when she did.

I want to acknowledge how hard the people at the core of this church have worked to create the Palisades Hub. That small group is plain old tired right now.

That, of course, applies to many of you gathered here today for worship. You are the backbone of this church. Many of you are also the backbone of the Hub.

This is why I ask about undertow. It's important to notice what's pulling at you. It's important to rest.

It's also important to acknowledge what motivates you, and where that motivation might be wearing thin. What do you need to find your sense of hopefulness again?

Which causes me to pause and look backward for a moment. Why DID this church decide to boldly create a new way of being?

Some people have interpreted the creation of the Hub as an act of inspiration, others as an act of desperation. Quite frankly, I see elements of both at play — because life is messy.

Quite simply, the old way of being church was no longer working.

From what I understand, for years there's been an open question floating through the air here — can the Palisades Community Church survive? I know that that question was voiced during Pastor Jeff Stinehelfer's time here, which ended in 2016. And the truth is that his tenure ended largely because he had a different answer to that question than some of you. He did not believe the church had a future.

In the years since then, you have been facing difficult questions with uncommon bravery. I see that bravery. I also see your exhaustion. Sometimes I sense an undertow of hopelessness.

I get it. Ministry is always hard. For my entire adulthood, the church in America has been dwindling and declining, which has made ministry challenging. But ministry during a pandemic when it is not possible to physically gather in safety? That can feel impossible.

In the email that I wrote to the congregation this week, I shared one of my mantras, a rule for life — a quote from the writer E.L. Doctorow: *Writing is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.*

I'm a writer, and that quote speaks to me about the writing process, absolutely. But I find that it's also true about ministry. As we journey, there is so much we cannot see, or know. Sometimes everything around us feels very dark and unknown. But we do have headlights, and if we trust them, we can travel a long distance.

I don't know much about E.L. Doctorow's faith, but when I apply this metaphor to my life, it is a faith statement. I affirm that the light — whether from headlights or from the moon overhead — is a gift from God, since God is the source of our life. When we trust the light God gives us, and dare to follow the direction it points, we can take a surprising journey.

The journey PCC has been on for this past year has been surprising. It has been sometimes difficult. And it has been very successful, by many measures.

I, for one, am astounded at the level of programming that the Hub is providing already — lectures and concerts and increased usage of the building by various individuals and organizations. I believe that in choosing Julie Simonton as the Executive Director, and the intrepid Polly Johnson as all-around sidekick, you hired the right team.

I'm also aware that some members of the church have not engaged much with the Hub, or with the church lately. We've seen some folks drop away. That's why in the past weeks I have reached out to everyone on our lists. There are a multitude of reasons why people don't engage during a pandemic. Everything has shifted.

In my email to the congregation this week, I addressed some of the folks who rarely attend worship, either by Zoom or in person. I called them Skeptics. I hoped that word would register with them, or even irritate them. A spark of emotion might cause them to click on the email and I wanted their ears and eyes.

How does the word Skeptic apply? I suspect there are folks waiting to see how the vision of the Hub will take shape so they can then decide. Will it look the way they think it should look? I know that 80% of ministry is done by 20% of the people — while the remaining 80% often feel free to judge the results.

Of course the pandemic is a wild card. Those who are no longer engaged in the church may have a variety of reasons. Maybe an undertow has pulled them down.

Regardless of their reason for not being involved, I told them they are missing the journey, the exploration, and the joy of what PCC is doing. I urged them to get involved now!

I shared the Doctorow quote about headlights — even though I realize that the headlight metaphor may seem rather inadequate to some. Shouldn't a pastor cast a grander vision? People aren't used to a vision that talks about inches, and faithfulness. People — especially folks in Washington DC — like grand schemes and backup plans. They like numbers, and multi-year projections. They like success.

And sure, there are numbers we could discuss — budgets and attendance — numbers that matter. But they matter for evaluation, and we're not there yet. We are still embodying a vision, inching along together to make it come alive.

I have experience in three things: doing ministry — and writing books — and parenting daughters. They are all difficult things. In fact, I'm likely to say that the thing that's the MOST difficult is whichever one I happen to be focused on at the moment!

In all of those pursuits — ministry, writing, and parenting — it's not the numbers that govern our decisions, or evaluate our success.

The question is a simple one: Have we been faithful to the inch God has put in front of us? Do we plunge ahead and pursue the inch we can see, trusting that the next inch will appear?

Those who are hanging back or feeling skeptical may be missing the chance to be faithful. That is a loss for them. As well as a loss for us.

Vision is a shared process. It's never just one person who has a vision. A vision might originate with one person, but all participate in shaping it, in putting flesh on those bones.

And therein lies the hope. The hope is that we can trust the light, and when our eyes are shutting from tiredness, we can depend on someone else to follow the light for us, for a moment.

This Body of Christ has been following the headlights — the light cast by those who faithfully sought it. I can assure you that the light is trustworthy, and our journey together is secure.

We read two passages from the book of Romans — an early and a late passage. It's unusual for me to not read the gospel on a Sunday morning, but there's a reason for the texts I chose.

The Apostle Paul talks about hope frequently. It is one of his touchstones. In fact, if you go to an online Bible, and type in the word Hope, you will find very few occurrences in the gospels, but scads in the letters of Paul.

Interestingly, the few instances of "hope" in the gospels don't apply to Jesus, but instead apply to the Jewish traditions such as the law of Moses, in which people placed their hope.

The earliest followers of Jesus did not apply the word "hope" to Jesus — which is what Paul does repeatedly in his letters. It's an interesting dynamic evolution of a word.

I hypothesize that the early Christians didn't *have to* hope in Jesus — they could see him, they could experience him. We don't hope for the thing that we can touch, do we?

Paul never met Jesus himself, not physically, temporally. Paul met him on the road to Damascus — but that was in a vision, not in flesh and blood.

Paul operated from what he knew of Jesus from other sources — from scripture, from other believers — which is what we must do today. In this way, we are more like Paul than we are like the disciples and women who accompanied Jesus.

Paul knew what it meant to hope blindly. In fact, if you recall his story, his vision of Jesus first struck him with blindness. Maybe we need to accept the fact that our sight is sometimes limited. It's not a bad thing. It's a teaching tool.

Here's another quote that inspires me — from Richard Foster:

*We may not see the end from the beginning, but we keep doing what we know to do. We pray, we listen, we worship, we carry out the duty of the present moment. What we learned to do in the light of God's love, we also do in the dark of God's absence.*

Did you catch the verbs? We pray, we listen, we worship, we carry out the duty of the present moment

Let's hear it for duty and obligation! This is why we need to develop habits of faithfulness. When it's dark, we can rely on a well-formed habit. If today feels a bit dark, or if the undertow is powerful, we can trust that our sisters and brothers may be having a better day and we can lean on them. We can trust that tomorrow may have a bit of sun.

What is the inch God has put in front of us right now? How can we be faithful to it, together? This is the ever-present question of ministry.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.