

sA Door Hope (Hosea 2: 15; Joshua 7)

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March 24, 2019

Cornwall Ontario

I will... make the Valley of Achor a door of hope (RSV – NRSV – NIV)

I will ... make the Dale of Trouble a door of hope (Moffit)

A few weeks ago, I was honoured to receive a card with a hand-written note, *thanks for the peace!* I am not sure what I did or said to deserve this beautiful note, but I accepted it with pleasure, because I am encouraged to hear that there are those who find the peace of God within our weekly worship. I believe that we should also find during and within our worship time, the inspiration to wage a war against evil. It is my long-held belief that every Christian should love God and hate the devil, the hurt and the pain, and the turmoil that the devil unleashes upon God's people with great pleasure. Peace of mind is desperately needed, and it is a commodity that is all too often in short supply. Many live close to the edge of life, worried, fearful, raw nerves, fighting a battle in tough times. Even people who are struggling with their faith journey can get caught up in the furor of Beelzebub. Some become a kind of Christian who are very "me" oriented and think that they alone have the keys to the Kingdom and that everyone else is wrong. Frequently they are involved in evil conversations that seem to help God predetermine who is saved and who is demonic.

I will share three examples that are known to me: I know a lady *who found Jesus*, and from that time on everyone in her family was written off because they did not join her in her glossolalia. In fact, I believe that her behaviour closed the door to Christ for many of her family and friends. Another instance I experienced a lady who had been a very revered schoolteacher and church leader who quite suddenly and uncharacteristically refused to get out of bed, complaining she was too tired. Her family judged her as fat and lazy. True, she had been the matriarch of the family pulling all the strings, but now complaining from her bed they would have little to do with her. Finally, one night she persuaded her daughter to take her to the outpatient clinic at the nearby hospital. Her diagnosis was not quickly determined so the doctor admitted her overnight. The following day lab tests revealed that she was full of cancer and had only a short time to live. Another experience I had from a Christian, was a lady who became very angry with her husband when he became irritable and demanding. He had always been happy and quiet. Again, medical diagnosis came very slowly, and his wife declared that the Devil had taken over his mind and body and made him into a mean old man. A few days before he died, he was diagnosed to have a large tumor on his brain stem and there was no hope to even consider an operation. What I have described here is a lot of pain, hurt and evil.

The thought I want to share with you today is taken from the book that bears the name of one of the minor Prophets. The name, *Hosea*, is literally translated, *salvation*. The first three chapters deal with his marriage and the of his children are then followed by 10 chapters (4– 14) of discourse concerning the sins of Israel and their punishment, which is reluctantly inflicted by God. God is pictured as a God of love and mercy. In this sad tale, we quickly determine the nature of humanity and the state of humanity in general, during the period of Hosea. The text is a hard to read but I commend the whole book to you to be read in a private and quiet place. It is very graphic and speaks of the condition of humanity.

I will make the Valley of Achor, or, the Dale of Trouble... a door of hope. To connect with this text correctly, I commend you look at the historical background when you have a moment. You will find it mentioned in the seventh chapter of Joshua. It is not a pleasant story, the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: (Joshua 7:1). And then after Joshua (v 6) threw himself on the ground and cried to God, the Lord said, *Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully... (vv 10,11).* This is not a pleasant story. You have to read it understanding that it happened long ago and far away, according to the knowledge the people at that time possessed. A man named Achan, was discovered stealing from his country and was also judged to have stolen from God. He was a profiteer from the spoils of war. He turned a national victory into a selfish advantage. By unpatriotic and religious behaviour, it was felt that he had brought trouble to his nation. His punishment was death by stoning and the valley where it happened was called, Achor, or, the Trouble. Therefore, to this day the Scriptures declare, *the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor of (the) – Trouble.* It was a story which the Israelites could not forget. Centuries later Hosea, the prophet had to warn his people of the disasters that would come to them. He did this using a metaphor for that would immediately ring a bell in their minds. They were again to pass through the Valley of (the) Trouble. But the prophet was able to add this glorious promise of God: *I will make Valley of Achor or a door of hope.*

Here is an insight about trouble we need to consider with care. Our instinctive reaction to any kind of trouble is usually negative. The art of living, we often say, is the art of avoiding trouble. The ideal life is an untroubled life. But suppose we thought of trouble in a positive way, seeing it as a door of hope, opening out on newer, finer things than the trouble life could ever know? Emerson said, *trouble, far from being a mere nuisance or disaster can, by the grace of God and our courageous handling of it, become a constituent element in great living.* The Valley of Trouble may become a door of hope.

It may not be however, if we choose a negative, rebellious, self pitying attitude. What do we want trouble to be? A closed-door of frustration, or an open door of hope? Trouble may become a door of hope if it compels us to do some serious thinking. Socrates said, *the examined life is not worth living.* He wanted people to think. Bertrand Russell said, *people fear as they fear nothing else on earth.* When life is smooth, smiling, and content, we lead an unexamined life and skim over the surface of most things. A door of hope is open for us when we are forced to reflect upon some fundamental questions. *What am I living for? Is there a purpose in life beyond money making and my career? Love making? Home making etc.?* Then the big question: *is Jesus really the way, the truth and the life?* If we find ourselves in the Valley of Trouble indulging in some healthy introspection, then a door of hope is opening to us.

The Valley of Trouble may become a door of hope if it releases within us unsuspected powers. One of the Scottish Clans has the motto: *Sub Pondere Cresco – I grow under the burden.* When many people are asked to do something, even in church, many respond almost immediately without even giving the matter a second thought that they cannot do it because they either do not know how or, they do not have the ability etc. You have no idea what you can do

until you face a situation that demands from you more than has ever been called on you before, and so, you grow under the burden. Comfort, ease, popularity, are all very pleasant in moderation but it is in troublesome, struggling times, that adds dimension of depth to what we can handle and thus are able to do and then know we can do.

It is a fact that many people cannot reach their maximum potential because they are never fully stretched. When we respond to hard times, hard decisions, hard situations and trouble, powers we never suspected in ourselves emerge, character is enriched and developed. If our vocabulary did not have words in it like, *trouble, adversity, calamity, grief*, we would not have the possibility of having words like, *bravery, fortitude, patience, self-sacrifice*, to quote an unknown poet:

*He who knows no handicap will know no hardihood.
He who faces no calamity on need no courage.*

The Valley of Trouble may become a door of hope if it gives us a new revelation of the value of our friendships. We can make friends in the sunshine. But the severest test of friendship, the proof of its genuineness comes in the storm. The classic Biblical friendship of David and Jonathan began in the sunny carefree days of the King's court, but it reached its heights in the stormy days of danger and separation when Jonathan strengthened David's hand in God. Is this not a great door of hope, to experience what friendship means and does, and to grapple such friends to ourselves with hoops of steel? Paul wrote, *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we in turn may be able to comfort others in any trouble of theirs, and to share with them the consolation we ourselves receive from God.* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). When this happens, we have been good learners in bad times.

The Valley of Trouble may become a door of hope if it brings us face to face with God. When we are in the midst of good times, friendship, jobs, even great things here at church, our personal life is blessed with happiness, money, family, friends etc., there is no question about God being dead. In such circumstances we say we embrace God and surrender our all to Him. This is unfortunately not the case for many. For in strength and happiness many miss God because they feel they can manage well enough without Him. Some even boast of their own independence and self-sufficiency. To them He is dead and is irrelevant. For such people the door of hope opens in the Valley of Trouble if with all their vaunted defences down, they meet God. For He is most certainly there. The God of whom, we have to do is not an aloof God, above the mire of sin, that mist of doubt, the blight of love's decay. He is God, who in Jesus Christ, entered into the miry clay and the sins and miseries of this gone-wrong world. He is there in the Valley of Achor. A popular hymn invites us to share the words of Sarah Adams:

Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee,
Even though it be a cross
That raiseth me.

Though, like the wonderer,
The sun gone down,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God to Thee.

If it has to be a cross that brings us to God, so let it be. Dr. Fodstick wrote: **Finding God In Unlikely Places**. His text was: *And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God wants*. What a place to find God! And there are many who can testify that they didn't find Him in precisely the place where it seemed necessary to abandon all hope and fight a lone battle against indifference. We should not be surprised. The Word of God through the prophet Hosea is plain: *I will make the Valley of Trouble a Door of Hope*. It is open to everyone of us to verify that promise.

These are left after the tumult dies:
The friends who love us for ourselves alone,
A clearer vision – hearts grown strangely wise
From the heart and bitter testing we have known:
And no matter what else fails – God is the same,
Ready to answer as we call His name.

I believe in the Resurrection. I believe the Resurrection continues. I have shared a journey with you for over three years, a struggle that I know has challenged many of our congregation family including some of you who are present here. I believe God resurrects lives from the depths of the darkest veil. I believe that God will continue the work of resurrection here at St. John's under the leadership of the new minister who, if you will be open to discerning God's will and God's way.

All that Thou send'st to me,
In mercy given;
Angels to beckon me
Near my God, to Thee.

Then with my waking thoughts
Bright with Thy praise,
Out of my stony griefs
My church I'll raise;
So by our woes to be
Nearer, our God, my God, to Thee.

Let us pray. Amen.

