

Hope embodied: Lory Hornung

Isaiah 2:1-5

November 28, 2010

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we have lit the candle of hope, and, on coming Sundays, we will light in turn candles symbolizing peace and love and joy. Hope and peace and love and joy ... mean nothing unless they are embodied!

As ideas, as valued ideals we might wish for, hope and peace and love and joy remain no more than that -- nice wishes. Until hope becomes embodied, until peace becomes a self-conscious way of life, until love shows itself in practical acts of selflessness and generosity, until joy sings in the midst of real hardship and real loss, these things mean nothing.

That's why we are Christians, because we believe that Jesus embodied these very things, because we believe that in Jesus, the man of Nazareth, God became incarnated, embodied. In Jesus, hope and peace and love and joy became visible, accessible, palpable, real. We are Christians because we believe Jesus is the way to what our hearts most desire, the way to what our world most needs.

And as Christians, as followers of Jesus, as members of the body of Christ, we believe it is our calling to embody these things, too. It is our duty, and our privilege, not just to sing about joy or pray for peace or preach love or light candles of hope, but to live these things, just as Jesus did.

This will be our theme for Advent this year: remembering Jesus who was born into our world embodying hope and peace and love and joy, and remembering people -- people I know, people you know -- who embodied these things too.

Lory Hornung and I had a great deal in common, so we enjoyed a natural friendship from the start. We were the same age. She was just a few months older than me. We grew up children of the sixties, our world view and political values shaped by those years of heady idealism and social upheaval.

We shared an eagerness for Bible study and a fascination with hard questions. She had two children and I, three, all of similar age, and we often commiserated about the struggles and the heartaches ... and the joys of parenting. And when we both became grandparents, we assured each other there was no better station in life!

But there the similarities end. Lory was tall; I am short. Lory had a great sense of humor; I am hopelessly serious. And I was not diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) before the age of forty, as she was.

Lory died last December at the Bickford Cottages. Some of you never knew Lory because she had not been able to be out and about for many years and couldn't get here to church. But many of you did know Lory and will remember that six years ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, I showed a movie featuring Lory and Jane Kerbey and Mitzi Makinster talking about the meaning of hope.

I chose Lory then and I choose Lory now because I believe Lory Hornung embodied hope. If you want to learn how to live in hope, follow Lory's example.

So how do you do it? How do you live in hope? What is hope? What was the hope Lory embodied?

It's easier to say first what hope isn't. Hope isn't an expectation that God will radically change the circumstances of our lives and make everything work out just right. Lory wasn't waiting for a miracle cure. She expected nothing else than what did happen -- the slow and steady erosion of her mobility and strength.

Hope doesn't count on God to take away all the difficulty and hardship, and hope, as a virtue, isn't primarily about investing ourselves, body and soul, in what God will do for us, one day. Both of these "hopes" are really forms of despair: a lethal unhappiness with things as they are, a wishing away, a wishing to get away, from life as it is.

Hope, true hope, is an affirmation of life, as it is. Lory lived her life, as it was, as best she could, as fully as she could, and, yes, with happiness. She embraced her life, as it was, welcoming each day with expectation and ending each day with gratitude.

I said before that hope is a virtue. To say that hope is a virtue means that we aren't born with hope or come by hope naturally. Hope is a virtue that must be carefully and consistently cultivated until it becomes strong and durable in us. Indeed, it would be hard for a person in Lory's circumstances to be naturally hopeful.

Lory cultivated hope through a discipline of thanksgiving. She related in her video interview that every night she prayed, thanking God each night for five specific things in that day for which she was grateful. Sometimes, she said, it might be a good cup of coffee, and sometimes it might be a visit from a friend.

But it was that discipline of prayerful thanksgiving that kept her focussed on what was good, what was indeed good, in her life. So even as her body wasted away and she could do less and less of what she once did, less and less of what she surely must have wanted to do, she found reason to live each and every day gladly, to live each and every day with expectation and gratitude, to live each and every day with hope.

And God did not disappoint her!

What is a greater treasure than friendship? Lory had friends, good friends, faithful friends.

What is more dear than children who love you back? Lory had a son and a daughter who loved her back and loved her well.

And what blessing is greater than the blessing of seeing and holding a grandchild? Lory was able to see Klara and hold Klara on her lap and love Klara.

Lory was blessed by God. God gave her gifts, many good gifts, and over and above all these gifts God gave her himself. That was more enough for Lory to live in hope, to embody hope, to show in her own body that hope is real and that hope makes a real difference.

Lory embodied the hope the prophet Isaiah spoke of:

In days to come the mountain where the Temple stands will be the highest one of all, towering above all the hills ...

Isaiah speaks of days to come, of a time when Jerusalem and its Temple and its God will command the attention of all the nations of the world.

Isaiah speaks of days to come when all the world will listen and pay heed to the wisdom of Israel's God.

Isaiah speaks of days to come when nations will never again go to war -- never again go to war! --days to come when peace will have come at last to all the world.

This is Isaiah's vision of what will be, Isaiah's vision of what God will do, in days to come. But that hope becomes real only as it is embodied. God will keep his promise in days to come, but hope is forged by how God's people live now!

Isaiah exclaims:

Now ... let us walk in the light which the Lord give us!

Let us walk in the light which the Lord gives ... now! In expectation of the peace God will make, let us walk in peace now! With faith that God's way will one day prevail, let us walk in God's way now!

What matters is how we live ... now! Hope doesn't mean anything until it is embodied in this present moment, until it changes the way we live right now.

As people of hope, we look forward to what God will do. We put our trust in what God will do. I certainly do. I do not believe the fate of this world hangs in the balance. I am not worried either about my own fate. I firmly believe that God will bring things, all things, to the end God intends. I do not fear the future.

Lory's faith was much the same. When I asked her to define hope, she answered:

I have an intrinsic feeling that God's will will be done.

What God wants, what God intends, will be done.

But that faith, that hope, in Lory or in me, or in you, means little if it is not embodied. Lory showed us how to embody hope. She gave powerful witness to the reality of God's good gifts still to come by embracing fully the good gifts God has already given us right here, right now. May we do the same!