Sunday, November 13, 1983
THERE IS HOPE!
Romans 5:1-5; John 3:16-17

This morning I want to speak to you about Christian hope. I do so because I encounter so much despair these days, especially among young people.

This despair has a number of roots. Recently, most of us have been reading about the "Greenhouse" effect - the fact that the earth's temperature is gradually rising and that this could have severe consequences for the human race and all living things.

Added to this is the prediction by some economists that the financial structures of much of the world will in the near future completely collapse.

Then, too, there is the ever-present threat of terrorism illustrated most recently by the death of hundreds of United States Marines in Lebanon, plus many members of the French Armed Forces and then the Israeli Armed Forces.

And right here in Lincoln, there is despair over the failure of a financial institution.

But all of this is pale in comparison to the despair that many feel because of the ever-present possibility of nuclear destruction. Albert Camus has written that "the 17th century was the century of mathematics, the 18th that of the physical sciences, and the 19th that of biology. Our 20th century is the century of fear."

Since the first combat use of an atomic weapon at Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945, the peoples of the world have lived with the fears of the Nuclear Age. Deadly weapons loom over humanity like great clenched fists, shaping the character of nations and troubling international diplomacy. The threat of annihilation through nuclear war has influenced — consciously and unconsciously - entire generations, coloring their attitudes towards the future, family, marriage, work, time leisure, and death. For 38 years people have asked, "What will happen to us if there is a nuclear way?"

Research conducted under the auspices of the American Psychiatric Association reveals that at least 40% of American children have heard about nuclear weapons before age 12. Studies also report that many of these young people are deeply worried about the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Next Sunday night, November 20, a special television program will be shown across the country called "The Day After..." It will depict the effects of a nuclear strike on Kansas City and the surrounding area. It is not the purpose of that television program to bring us to more despair, nor is it my purpose this morning to add to our despair. Rather it is my purpose through our Christian faith to speak words of hope so that we can deal creatively with out despair. But hope cannot come to us unless we at first face our despair, rather than attempt to cover it up.

Someone has written that of all the dangers facing us — nuclear oppression — the greatest danger lies in our denial of them. This denial, evident in our dogged addiction to life as usual, stems not from indifference, but from dread. The more we repress this dread, the more it cripples our capacity to respond and the more it blocks hope.

I begin this morning with the assumption that everyone is opposed to nuclear war. Everyone wants to prevent death, destruction, chaos, and the environmental havoc that a nuclear confrontation would bring to the earth. But rather than talk about their nuclear anxieties, many adults try to avoid the subject altogether — especially around children. Yet the fear of nuclear war so dominates our times that we must face the issue.

How can talking about such issues openly help us? How can facing such issues lead to hope?

I believe that deep down we are connected with each other. Our Christian faith underscores this. In fact, everything in creation is interconnected, and all is related to God. But we have so much difficulty understanding this.

In a science fiction work, Rule Golden, Damon Knight wipes violence from the face of the earth by having every agent feel in his or her own body any physical blow he or she delivers: kick a dog and feel the boot in your own rib; commit murder and die yourself. Similarly, stroking another in love results in the physical feeling of being lovingly stroked. This kind of action and reaction would certainly teach us how interconnected we are in this world.

The fact is that when we harm others, we at the same time harm ourselves, but the effect is not experienced as suddenly as in the science fiction story. And now, of course, the new fact is that if one country uses nuclear weapons, it will affect us, as well as everyone. We are interconnected in a way we never thought possible. We are interconnected for destruction.

When we begin to talk with one another and care for others, we act out this connection in a positive way, and then hope begins to grow. Hope is not singular but grows out of our relationships with one another and with God.

So, when we begin openly and honestly talking about our fears and our despair with one another, we create the conditions under which hope can grow.

With this in mind, let's look more closely at what is the ground of our hope.

1. First of all, note that hope has nothing whatsoever to do with optimism. In fact, the person who said, "I used to be an incurable optimist, but now I'm cured" — that individual is ready for hope. For hope is what's still there when all our worst fears have been realized and faced.

That's what the Apostle Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans. He begins by contradicting our prevalent impression that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. Yet that's a common impression — that our hopefulness is like a thermometer: things are hopeful, so we are hopeful; things look bad, so we lose our hope. But Paul, at the very point where things look bad, begins his road to hope.

Listen again to part of what he said: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

Paul begins with suffering or trouble; from that we learn endurance; out of that we build character; and from that we win hope.

All of us know that we do not learn endurance from facing easy situations, but in adversity. So, when we meet adverse conditions with endurance, we build character and become the kind of people who confront hopefully even desperate circumstances. Thus, our Christian faith does not define hope as a mood, caught from the favorable aspect of external affairs, but a quality of character called out when most needed.

Perhaps there is not much hope today among many people because of a misunderstanding of the nature of hope and its source. Popular moods in our country change like a weathervane, veering with every change in the wind — now over-optimistic, now over-gloomy. “We’re in a recession!” “We’re in a recovery.” Almost daily people listen to the news and then decide whether to be hopeful or not.

The daily stock market averages show this dramatically. Any upset in the political scene or the economic realm or a prediction of bad news can cause the market to plunge suddenly or rise suddenly. But Christian hope begins when we begin to act out our caring for one another. It does not depend on other outward circumstances.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah showed the people of Israel what hope is all about. The enemy was at the gate of Jerusalem. The city was about to fall. The people were hungry and sick. Jeremiah himself was in jail. Yet under these conditions, Jeremiah bought a field as a sign of his confidence that this people, this world, had a future under God. Jeremiah took some action. He lived out his hope. Every significant thing that ever has been done on this earth was once a hope, and it was a hope that inspired action.

We can fill our time with despair or superficial optimism, but that is not enough. Despair by itself can ruin us, and superficial optimism collapses. I worry about people who retreat into themselves and say nothing can be done about the problems that face us. I worry equally about those who say not to worry and refuse to deal with such issues as finding new ways to live in peace, those who refuse to take any action.

2. This leads us to our second main point about hope. Jeremiah could take such action because he believed this is God’s world and that, being so, it is never hopeless. The Gospel of John puts it plainly: not only is this God’s world, but “God so loved the world that God gave his Son.” St. Paul put it another way in our text by saying, “Hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.”

We believe that God wants people willingly to do the divine will, but we also believe even more strongly that over the long stretch of history, God’s will will be done — if not by us, then in spite of us. The world of such a God can never be hopeless.

But also remember that having hope in God and in our working with God to create a better world means we need to drop our trust in false gods. To make room for God, we have to be rid of all illusions that we can save ourselves or anyone else in this world with our own power.

In other words, if we place all our trust in military power or weapons of destruction to save our world, our hope will be grounded on a false foundation. On the other hand, if our hope is in God, then we know that we don’t have to suffer history; we can make history. We don’t have to be destroyed by the predictable future; we can create a preferable one. But only if we fall to our knees out of a sense of no other place to go.

There is hope! An old saying goes this way: “Where there is life, there is hope.” However, a deeper truth emerges when we reverse that statement: “While there is hope, there is life.” An old Jewish tradition held that God would save a certain city if only 10 righteous people could be found in it.

I believe today that the world can be saved if there are some of us who have hope and base that hope on God and on learning to care for one another, and that caring has to include those we view as our enemies, as well as our friends. Amen.