

Hope endured: We're right on track.

Genesis 12.1-3

Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church

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Introduction

We don't often think of *hope* as a thing to be *endured*.

Received, maybe. You can *receive* hope from the hands of an encourager.

Exercised, yes, I can see that. You can rise up on your hind legs in the midst of difficulty and *exercise* hope even when circumstances aren't making much of a contribution to fostering it.

But *endured*? Is hope really a thing to be *endured*.

Well, somehow, *hope endured* has come to be the title of our Missions Emphasis month here at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church in this Year of Covid-19. Although it's the first half of this sermon's title, I didn't invent the phrase ... *hope endured*. Pastor Scott tells me he had nothing to do with it either. Frankly, I don't know where it comes from. Yet *hope endured* fits what God has laid on my heart for this morning. It fits like a glove.

When I saw it I thought to myself that *It's a Festivus miracle*, as some of you old Seinfelders might also be tempted to intone.

And, in fact, I think it *is* a small but precious miracle. Because, as one of your missionaries and maybe even on behalf of others of us, I want to talk to you about *hope that we endure*.

I'm not talking about hope that is always happy hope ... not mindless optimism. But rather an empowering, resilient hope that brings with it a whole package of pain, brings with it the challenge to endure what our Maker is doing when we might have preferred a different path, hope that unmakes us and then recreates us as we submit to it. *Hope endured*.

It may or may not surprise you that there are not many missionaries in the story I want us to consider this morning. On a Missions Emphasis month, with a missionary speaker, aren't there supposed to be lots of missionaries? Well, we're in this story, but it's not a story about us.

Yet there is a *mission*. It's not *our* mission. It's what many today are capturing with the expression *the mission of God*. Or if you want to dress it up a little, you might call it, as some do, the *missio Dei*. The mission of God.

Transition

Now, to be specific, I want to talk this morning about three things under the umbrella of *hope endured*:

First of all, I want to talk about our Creator's end game: God *blesses*. That might sound like bumper-sticker frothiness, but I have in mind something much more sober and purposeful and redemptive than that.

Second, we'll see where a human being is for the first time drawn explicitly into the mission of God to *bless all nations* in spite of the chaos that reigned even in his remote moment in the ancient world. At the beginning of the twelfth chapter of the book of Genesis—the Bible's very first book—a total nothingburger of a man named Abram is called to initiate humankind's conscious participation in the mission of God. We know that man as Abraham, and it's right to think of him as our father.

Finally, I want to make what might sound to you like the *absurd* claim that history—even the tiny fragment of it we call '2020'—is right on track ... that the *mission of God* is right on track. That's a case that won't be easy for me to make.

In all of this, I hope that we'll end up with a clarified vision of *hope endured*. And be prepared to lean into that hope, no matter the personal cost it might ask of us.

The Creator's End Game: God Blesses

Do you understand that God is on a mission to see all the peoples of the earth enjoy the deep blessing that comes from knowing and serving him ... from living gratefully under his care? The Bible has a word for that ... it calls that blessing *shalom*. It's a word that prods at the joy and satisfaction that human beings experience when things are as they should be, when everyone has enough, when people live transparently in life-giving relationship with God and with each other, when hands cannot keep themselves from lifting up in gratitude for all that has been received.

God *will have* that outcome. *He'll have* that shalom for all nations. He'll never sacrifice that divine purpose.

He has a name, this God. He invites us to call him Yahweh, which means ‘the One who makes himself powerfully present’ or, more informally, ‘the One who keeps showing up’.

Before we even know his name, we find him in the Bible’s account of beginnings, of first things.

I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about this, but those early chapters of our book of Genesis, where we learn about beginnings ... the *why* and the *who* and the *what for* of them in particular... were not written in a vacuum. No, those first pages of our Bible were inked in a time when all peoples had their own stories of beginnings.

In those stories, the gods create in order to *exploit* ... in order to *employ* ... in order to *use* ... in order to *abuse*. In a context like that, the Bible’s story of beginnings is *a minority report*. It is a version of events that is best described in a phrase I’ll borrow from my late father, who would sometimes say: ‘Them’s fightin’ words’.

The Bible’s account of beginnings gets up in the face of those existing tales of how the world came to be and says to the custodians of all other origins stories, ‘No, that’s just *wrong!*’ For starters, there is only *one* God. He made everything noble and good and beautiful, if you want to know more.

And you know what he does as soon as he *makes* ... as soon as he *creates*?

He *blesses!*

Gen. 1:20 And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹ So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² *And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”*

Gen. 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Gen. 1:28 And God *blessed* them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Gen. 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So *God blessed the seventh day* and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

This is the *first thing* the Bible teaches us about the God it labors to present to us. And this determination to *bless* lines up with everything else we learn about him in its pages. This is who he is! The other gods, this Genesis story cries out, are not like this God. When they act, they do so for their own selfish and corrupt reasons. When this God creates, he *does so in order to bless*.

That’s a whole different universe.

Them’s fightin’ words ... They’re a way of declaring that the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not like other gods. He is good and generous and purposeful. *He blesses*. This is the first thing we learn about God in Scripture. It may be the most important thing we can know about him.

Genesis rumbles on, as you know, and soon we learn that ...

God is on a mission ... and so are we.

But as we learn this, we also learn that blessing is never easy. Nor is the hope that believes and insists and proclaims that God is like this. Hope, which in a shattered world leads to eventual blessing, is always something to be *endured*.

The Lord’s intention to bless eventually drew his gaze to this Abram guy, who would in the most outrageous way imaginable become the father of all who would put their trust in Yahweh, in *the God who showed up* when Abram had no reason to expect Him.

In those first verses of Genesis 12, Yahweh brings Abraham into his own mission to bless the nations. Yahweh asks Abraham to abandon *all that he knew* and *all that he was* and to follow the direction of Yahweh's invasion of his life into a place and a future and a mission that would only become clear in time:

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Do you see how the Lord's command peels the layers of Abram's identity as though peeling an onion? ESV: *your country ... your kindred ... your father's house*. These are the three primary loyalties... primal identify markers of a man in the ancient world. You didn't carry a passport back then. But you knew where you *belonged*.

It's an order that some of us who have been called to be *missionaries* can understand *a little bit from the inside*.

More importantly, and for all of us, it was for Abraham and it is for all his sons and daughters a blessing to be *endured*.

Don't miss the effect that Abraham's obedience will have on the world as he joins himself to the mission of God:

3. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Scholars puzzle over that last phrase ... *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. They ask themselves, how is that to happen? What is the role of those families who find blessing in Abraham?

The best of them, in my judgment, see in this promise the active and conscious identification of those families of the earth with Abraham and his offspring. That is, these families of the earth *opt in* to Abraham's chosenness in some way. They join with Abraham in participating in what Yahweh is doing in his world and so find the Lord's *blessing*.

In this first book of the Bible, we begin to glimpse a Creator who is passionately committed to

blessing his world. In fact, *blessing his world is the God of the Bible's end game*. The Bible begins on this note. If you know the New Testament book of Revelation, you know that it ends on this note as well.

Simply put, it is the Creator's end game.

And, at the same time, this God who keeps showing up is mysteriously committed to the fact that the spread of such blessing will require sacrifice ... trust ... a measure of pain ... and supernatural *endurance*. The hope of this blessing is in fact *a hope to be endured*.

Think about Jesus.

Jesus is the person in whom we see the face of our Maker most clearly. It is in Jesus that the God of Abraham, intent on blessing all nations, becomes one of us and invites us to come closer than human beings have ever been allowed to approach a Holy God.

Yet Jesus instructs us that 'in this world you will have lots of tribulation'. He himself dies the most shameful imaginable death before being raised as the one who has overcome death and gives us the sure hope of accomplishing the same.

Jesus invites us to walk with him in *the path of a hope endured*.

We're right on track.

Now this is where I'll lose some of you. Especially because it's 2020...

That's understandable. We who have for several generations grown accustomed to a life that is safe and reasonably secure have been yanked in with the rest of humanity to a place where things do not feel safe. Life does not seem secure.

In the shock of it all, we've not only been rattled. *We've become pessimists*.

We lose our grip on a hope that is to be endured. This is natural, I think, when an historical moment goes a little thin on the reasons for hope that it's offering up. Natural, perhaps. But not *necessary*. And not *obedient*.

To become a pessimist about God's purpose with his world is one way of abandoning the faith. It's the most common way that self-defined 'practical people' say 'I'm done.'

I think our problem is one of timing. The mission of God rolls along its path on a different schedule than the one we follow in our short, little, fragile lives. A thousand years for us is for

the mission of God a mere moment. Its stately pace feels to us like a total stall. Or a failed project. Or a pious dream that once animated us, but now not so much.

You see, no single generation, no lifetime, no portion of our customary timetable lasts long enough for us to gain accurate perspective on what is really happening.

Let me put it a different way: if our Maker had not disclosed to us orientation ... instruction that flows from a different time frame, we'd have no idea of what is actually going on. We'd see little evidence of God's determination to bless. We'd hunker down. We'd act as if this moment is the most important moment, the only moment, the determinative moment. We'd take our clues exclusively *from right now*. We'd conclude that the sky is falling. In our despair, we'd turn against each other over matters that are important, but not of first importance. We'd divide.

We'd be like a family on a long camping trip that pitches one of those big, sturdy, family tents to spend the night. In the middle of that night, a windstorm come ups and buffets that tent with what feels like unendurable violence.

In the panic of the moment, some would yell 'Lean right!' while others would scream 'No, lean left!'. Some would order, 'Everybody out of the tent!', Others would say 'Every stay right where you are!', while others would run around in circles crying 'We're all gonna' die!'

We'd have no perspective and very little way of knowing who was right and who was wrong and what is happening to us.

You see, we're stuck in a dilemma: Without orientation, without instruction, no generation, no lifetime lasts long enough to get us up to a vantage point where we can see the whole story ... the entire woods beyond the trees ... the big picture.

So may I ask you for a special favor this morning?

Will you lower your defenses this morning and allow me to speak to you from the heart as a missionary whose particular calling has been to spend most of his growed-up years (again, as my Dad would have put it) in places where life has not been safe and not been secure...

May I?

May I not talk *about* missionaries today, opting instead to speak to you *as one of your missionaries*?

This is where we are. We're stuck in that tent in this windstorm that has come upon us. And, you know what? This particular storm may give way to a beautiful, bright, calm, life-giving dawn. Or it may end very, very badly.

I don't know.

But, like you, I have access to orientation from outside this moment ... from outside this disturbing bubble in which we find ourselves. That orientation ... that instruction ... tells me that *hope is to be endured*. It informs me that the God who made this world and loves it more than we do is on a mission. It assures me that he will bring that mission to its conclusion in the blessing of all nations ... *all the families of the earth*.

And, as one of your missionaries, I have a map inside my head. It spread itself out in there many years ago and it won't go away. I see that map nearly every day. I can't help myself.

It's one of those maps that walks you through history in a visual way.

I see Abraham under his little tree, unpromising as any man or woman who ever lived ('Our father worshiped idols beyond the river...' [Joshua 24.2]). I see Israel on its little sliver of land, promised ... then occupied ... then lost ... then restored ... then lost...

I see a little knot of Jesus-followers, mostly confined to an otherwise unimportant city called Jerusalem. They are meaningless, almost too few to count.

But I also see the spreading boundaries of their hope as it invades and eventually conquers the empire in which their hope was born. Because I am a child *of the Western world*, I see the blessing of the gospel they carry—their apostles carry it, their merchants bear it, their refugees encourage each other with the truth of it as they go—I see that blessing spread up through pagan Europe and into the British Isles.

As it goes—and, to be candid, *it goes very slowly*—it not only brings people into joyous relationship with their Maker. It also undermines and then reconstructs pagan societies into nations where the widow, the orphan, the slave, the poor, the sick have some hope of rescue and restoration. Places where there are hospitals and schools, places where infanticide becomes frowned on, places where the aged are not sent out into the cold to die alone, places where human beings are considered to manifest the very image and likeness of God and so not be expendable when they're no longer economic producers.

My map keeps speaking to me. It shows me this blessing spreading across the Atlantic to this land that has given many of us birth and which all of us love. It is not an unmixed blessing. In the process, Native Americans lose their land and cotton fields become filled with African-born slaves.

But somehow hope endures, and even those slaves sing of Zion. They give us their *negro spirituals* and teach us that hope endures longer than the slaveowner's whip.

My map won't stop.

I entered a Zoom teleconference the Thursday before last, one in which I'd been asked to speak about the mission of God in and from the Old Testament. As I obediently logged on as I'd been instructed a quarter of an hour before our start time, my screen filled with fifteen faces of my Colombian students whose lives the blessing of God has joined to my own. They represent the leadership of something called the Medellín Ministerial Institute, a service of our Seminary to Christian leaders across our South American city of four million souls. Then, as the top of the hour approached, dozens and dozens of Latin American participants—all of them agents of God's blessing in a country that has known unending political violence—clicked on to spend the evening savoring the wisdom of the God of Israel, known to us in Jesus Christ.

I thought to myself, that map still in my head, still speaking...

- *This is a scene of blessing endured.*
- This is a scene about which Israel's prophets could only dream and Israel's worshippers could only sing in hope.

This is the evidence that God remains on mission, determined to bless all nations and to bring history to its climax not in ashes but in glory.

None of this is easy. My beloved Colombian friends will likely not in their lifetimes see the end of the widow's cry or the murder of the innocent by power-hungry men and women. Yet they will endure. They will be participants in the mission of God. The Lord's blessing, through them, will triumph. Andrés Bedoya, one of my favorite students, was five years old when the paramilitaries who ruled his neighborhood murdered his father in front of the Seminary and threw his body against its gates to demonstrate what happens when uppity pastors instruct their people to follow God's ways rather than man's. Now Andrés is one of those pastors.

My map won't stop speaking.

I see you this morning, bringing your fears and your grief and your troubled spirits and your hope into this place to learn, as the ancient prophets said that we non-Jews would, from the word of Israel's God. This is all impossible unless God has done it, you see. There is no other explanation for why a little tribe of Hebrews and their crucified messiah should still command our attention today, still capture our hearts, still welcome us—like grafted-in branches—into their life under God.

This is insurmountable evidence that God has been here ... still is here ... abides with us and we with him.

It is evidence of hope endured.

It's also testimony to another reality, one that I think is impossible to deny: The mission of God is right on track, his determination to bless undiminished, his presence among us as powerful

and life-giving as ever, even in this awful year when we struggle to see beyond our fears of what is happening to us with COVID and with political differences that shout that they are more basic, more fundamental, more defining than our shared identity in Christ.

I hope that you can see that I'm not making some mindless, utopian claim here that things cannot lurch in horrible directions in any given historical moment. Indeed, they can. And they may.

Rather, as a missionary sent *to Colombia from this church* and a handful of others like it, I want to speak *to you*, our sending church, in Jesus' name and by the authority of his gospel:

Take courage. Be at peace. Dare to find your primal identity in Christ. Taste and see that the Lord is good. No matter what happens to us in this unsettling moment of time in which it is our calling to live, find his grace to be sufficient.

Then love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength ... and your neighbor as yourself.

Endure in hope.

May it be so. Amen.