

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church
Sunday 2 March 2025
Sermon by Ken Rodgers
“Sins of Omission and the Journey of Pursuing Peace”

SONG – “Hope” by Jason Robert Brown

I come to sing a song about hope
I'm not inspired much right now, but even so
I came out here to sing a song, so here I go
I guess I think
That if I tinker long enough, one might appear
And look! It's here
One verse is done
The work's begun

I come to sing a song about hope
In spite of everything ridiculous and sad
Though I'm beyond belief depressed, confused, and mad
Well, I got dressed
And so today—
When life is crazy and impossible to bear—
It must be there
Fear never wins
That's what I hope
See? I said "hope"
The work begins

This is part of a song by Jason Robert Brown which I discovered in the midst of the COVID shutdown. And Friday night it popped up in my listening queue. I hope this morning has already given you to reason to hope. It requires work, but God gives us reason to hope.

SLIDE 1 - HOUSE

My sharing this morning starts on a farm halfway between here and Hesston.

I am the youngest of five siblings. My father was an only child of an only child whose parents came from Germany in search of farmland. My great-grandfather Homesteaded land for his five sons and it is on one of those farms where I grew up.

SLIDE 2 - PASTURE

It was a place ripe for a child's imagination. I remember dreaming about “Indians” and even being helped by my parents to build a tee-pee and a kind of wigwam which the Wichita people would have lived in.

SLIDE 3 – PASTURE WITH PEOPLE

A few years ago, Brian Stucky joined some family members and friends to search out possible Kaw hunting trails which probably ran through the center of our pasture. It is here that I want to acknowledge that long before Europeans laid claim to the land on which I grew up on and where most of us live and where this church sits, the land was inhabited by other people. The Kanza/Kaw, Osage, Kiowa, Wichita, Comanche, Ute, and Ochethi Sakowin peoples lived, hunted, and buried their family members here.

And it is the story of why we are here and they are not which I would like to dig into today. This past year and during this year we have been reasons to commemorate and celebrate our heritage, with the 150th anniversary of many of your ancestors coming to this land, and the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, we must also acknowledge the fact that history is not always perfect or without fault.

SLIDE 4 – DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

About 75 years before the birth of Anabaptism, the church put forth a framework for how to conquer the lands which European explorers were beginning to “discover.”

The **Doctrine of Discovery** is a theological, philosophical and legal framework established by the Christian Church that gave European governments moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous peoples.

SLIDE 5 – DECREE

“We grant you [Kings of Spain and Portugal] by this edict, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free power to **invade, search out, capture, and subjugate** the ... **pagans** and any other **unbelievers and enemies of Christ** wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, counties, principalities, and other property ... and to **reduce their persons into perpetual slavery** and to apply and appropriate realms, duchies, royal palaces, principalities and other dominions, possessions and goods of this kind to you and your use and your successors.”

June 18, 1452

(Pope Nicholas V)

By the time the Colonies in what is now the United States of America were becoming established, this had been accepted as a doctrine for over 200 years.

SLIDE 6 – PAINTING

This painting by John Gast from 1872 titled “American Progress,” depicts the American idea of Manifest Destiny. Notice how an angel is moving from east to west, from light to dark and holding a book in one hand and a telegraph wire in the other. A Native American travois can be seen exiting the picture on the far left as wagons and the railroad enter from the far right.

This is the year both my German Lutheran and Swiss Mennonite ancestors came to McPherson County, Kansas. One part of the family establishing the Emmanuel Lutheran Church and the

other the Spring Valley Mennonite Church. This is the same year the Kaw were removed from Kansas and placed on a reservation in Oklahoma.

SLIDE 7 – ALLEGAWAHO PART (OBELISK ON HILL)

The Kaw nation at one point counted nearly two-thirds of present day Kansas as their hunting grounds. By the 1872 they had been restricted to a section of land near Council Grove, Kansas which is now called Allegawaho Park, named after the last Kaw Chief before their eviction.

“You treat my people like a flock of turkeys. You come into our dwelling place and scare us out. We fly over and alight on another stream, but...you come along and drive us farther and farther. In time we shall find ourselves across the great mountains, and landing in the bottomless ocean.”

Chief Allegawaho Kaw chief.

By the time they arrived in Oklahoma, only 553 tribe members were alive.

SLIDE 8 – MARTYR’S MIRROR PRINTS

In the church library of my home congregation was a copy of the Martrys Mirror, the largest book I had ever scene. It contains the stories of over 4,000 persons who endured persecution and often death because of their Christian faith. The stories start with the stoning of Stephen and end in 1660. At its core are stories of Anabaptist Martyrs accompanied by woodcut illustrations of the some of the stories.

I was entranced by this book and would often go to the library to search for the illustrations of these heroes of the faith. Stories of people like Jan Smit of Monnickendam in the Netherlands. Captured while worshipping on a boat with other believers, he was taken to Amsterdam. There he was sentenced to row a ship destined to attack the Spanish troops stationed near Haarlem. He refused to row because he stated that as a follower of Jesus Christ, he had no enemies. Because of this, he was taken to Haarlem and there hung upside down on the gallows on the city square until he died. This is one of the less gruesome stories. In the background of the illustration one can see the Bavo Church, still the central focal point of the town.

With heroes of faith like these, it isn’t any wonder that when Psalm 137 was read, I imagined myself and our people as the Israelites, the chosen, faithful remnant persecuted by the evil Babylon.

SLIDE 9 – HARPS IN THE WILLOWS PRINT

The children of Israel are in captivity in Babylon. Stuck in slavery and in a foreign land, they are told to sing the songs of Zion for their enslavers. Worse yet, their tormentors want a song of mirth. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” they ask. So they hung their harps on the willows and wept.

In all this pain, they also remembered Zion, the city of God. Verse six:

“Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Seeking the city of God provided hope in the depths of deep despair.

But the pain of slavery naturally created anger. They cry out of God for the destruction of Babylon. Verses 8 – 9

“O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

This anger, this rage, makes most of us uncomfortable. I hope it makes all of us uncomfortable! Not only does the writer of this Psalm want to return to Jerusalem, but they want their captors to pay for the evil they have done. And not only their captors, but the next generations. Really, for the end of their line. The hymn we sang puts it slightly less graphically, “May your seed be smashed. Vengeance shall come from God our Lord.”

What are we to make of this Psalm not only of lament, but of vengeance? For most of us, it is impossible to imagine the pain of being forcibly taken from our homes and put into slavery in a land in which we do know the language or customs or religion. I’m sure the anger expressed here would be much more understandable were we in that position. So what are we to do with this Psalm? Simply ignore it? Stop at verse six?

This takes me back to the Martyrs Mirror. Growing up, it provided an identity, which may not have been all that healthy. I was part of a small, persecuted minority. The Catholics, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, were all trying to stamp out the small, faithful flock. While I continue to find inspiration in the stories of the early Anabaptists, I am more and more convicted with what it means to be faithful TODAY. What does it mean when I am more apt to be part of the persecutors and not the persecuted?

I use to feel proud that my family history did not include slaves. Then my brother-in-law discovered one of my ancestors in Maryland in which the census included a slave in the household. And I realized that not only was I part of the historical problem, but that really, all of us benefit by living in a country in which the early wealth and strength came on the backs of enslaved Africans.

And I am unsure of how to come to grips with the Doctrine of Discovery, which allowed Europeans to simply drive Native Americans off of the land, the land on which we live and worship.

How do we view Psalm 137 when WE are Babylon?

Psalm 137 gives permission, and actually authorizes the powerless who have been brutalized to vent their indignation and turn to God for justice. As theologian Walter Brueggemann states, “It is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously.” Does that mean that we will be on the receiving end of God’s vengeance?

Perhaps the answer is in the next two scriptures we read today.

Hebrews 11 recounts the heroes of faith in the Old Testament and then in chapter 12 reminds us of the example of Jesus.

Now faith is the assurance^[a] of things hoped for, the conviction^[b] of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith^[c] our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible

I think it is important to remember the faith and faithfulness of our ancestors. They are examples for us of how to live faithful lives.

But is it also important to remember what Hebrews 12 says.

¹⁴ Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble and through it many become defiled.

What gives me hope is that we do not have to live either in the captivity of sin and destruction, or as the captors persecuting the downtrodden, but as people working toward building the kingdom of God. How do we seek the city of God? Or another way to ask it, what does it mean to work toward the Kingdom and reign of God?

SLIDE 10 – FAMILY PHOTO

After my mother passed away in 2017, the last of the land our family lived on was sold. My oldest sister, Florence Schloneger, and I began to investigate which people might have lived in this area. And we wondered what it would mean to find ways of reconciling with them or perhaps make restitution or a reparations donation.

Mennonite Central Committee, Central States in North Newton connected my sister with Pauline Sharp, a Kaw woman who lives in Wichita and had just started the Kanza Heritage Society. An organization to preserve Kaw culture and to help develop the Allegawaho Park near Council Grove, their last home before removal.

SLIDE 11 – KAW POWWOW

Both my sister and I made donations to this fund, and it has connected us in powerful ways to the Kanza people and their story. Here you can see my sister and Pauline dancing at a Kaw Pow-wow.

SLIDE 12 – KEN BLANET

The blanket you see is one which was given to me on behalf of the Kaw people. On it is a turtle, the Native symbol for the earth.

For me, this was a small way of giving back some of what I inherited through the mere fact of the family I was born into.

In the Anglican mass, I am always struck by the time of confession in which the following is prayed:

“...we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone. “

At other times I have heard prayers confessing our sins, known and unknown.
How often have we fallen short of working for God's rule on earth by what we have not done?
Or by not recognizing the systemic sins we are part of? Lord forgive us.

For myself, part of that journey or reconciliation has been with the work of trying to dismantle the sin the Doctrine of Discovery. For you, it might be something else. What is the work God is laying on your heart to do?

SLIDE 13 – DYCK ABORETUM QUOTE

“When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” – Aldo Leopold

SLIDE 14 – BLACK

Story of dreams.

Because in the end, we rise from the water...and the work begins.