

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, March 18, 2007
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: John 19: 16b-30

Hebrews 6:13-20

Sermon Title: “The Cross of Jesus: Our Anchor of Hope”

Sermon Text: Hebrews 6:19-20: We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

About this time of the year twenty-one years ago Rachel and I were meeting with the Pulpit Nominating Committee at the Little Chapel on the Boardwalk at Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. The church itself is located one block from the Atlantic Ocean and since 1959 the church has owned a manse on Banks Channel which is on the other end of the block from the church. As we met with that committee in that location surrounded by water we shared with them the fact that neither of us nor our son, Micol, had any great desire either to be in or on the water. They said that that was all right with them because that might mean they would probably get more work out of me than out of some of the other people who had sent them their Personal Information Forms with a note that they felt God could really call them to Wrightsville Beach.

Over the following eighteen years that I served as pastor of that congregation my love and that of my family for the water did not increase. In fact as we sat on our front porch at the manse and looked out at the dock attached to the front of the house and so saw many people enjoying boating on Banks Channel we often said that the whole location and its access to the water was lost on people like ourselves. Our lack of love of the water means that unlike many of our friends at Wrightsville Beach, and even many of you here, I have not had the experience of dropping an anchor into the water. My general knowledge, though, of the function of the anchor in holding a boat firm and steady means that I can appreciate something of what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is saying in those words which we have just heard. We do not know exactly who wrote this letter so that while we know that some of the first disciples were fishermen and would, therefore, be very familiar with anchors, we do not know if this was also the case with this writer. Clearly though as he uses this image of the hope that we have in God as being a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul he feels that he is using an image with which his first readers would be familiar even if, like myself, they had never dropped an anchor. The picture of the anchor cross on the front of our bulletin also reminds us, as we will see further on Tuesday at our Lenten luncheon, that such a cross shape became one of the first cross symbols of the Christian Church.

In speaking of the hope that his first readers, and each of us as Christian men and women still have today, as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul he is reminding them, and each of us, of the fact that our hope is not based in ourselves, in our own thoughts and moods and actions that can vary and change, but in promises of God. That hope is sure and steadfast because it depends upon the unshakable reliability of God to fulfill the promises God has made. The writer sees these promises and their fulfillment beginning with God's promises to

Abraham and continuing and being seen most significantly in God's work in Jesus Christ. We will see the continued influence of his thinking on our own Presbyterian faith still today in the words of the recent Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that we will use today as our Affirmation of Faith.

The picture the writer uses of Jesus would have been far more familiar to his first readers than it is to us today as he speaks of Jesus as being the high priest who has entered the inner shrine behind the curtain. The immediate picture that would have come to the minds of his first readers is that of the Temple in Jerusalem where only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, which symbolized the presence of God, and which was separated from the view of all the people by a curtain. As the high priest as the representative of the people went in to the Holy of Holies he did so in order to seek God's forgiveness for himself and for all of the people. Now the writer is saying we have an even greater hope than those people had because we know that Jesus who has died for us on the cross to assure us that our sins are forgiven has now entered into the very presence of God as the clear sign that all that he said and all that he did truly was God's work and will. As we see him even as he suffered all of the pain and agony of death on the cross showing such love and compassion for his mother, so we can be assured that he still has such love and compassion for each one of us. It is because Jesus has entered into the presence of God that we can know that all that he said and all of the promises he has made to us can be trusted. It is in this assurance that we can seize the hope that he wants to give us as a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls in the midst of whatever storms or dangers life may throw at us. It is as we claim that hope that we can sing with Maltbie Davenport Babcock, "This is my Father's world: Oh, let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is

the Ruler yet. This is my Father's world: The battle is not done. Jesus who died shall be satisfied and earth and heaven be one.”

In our newsletter this past week we listed the top twelve hymns about the cross or the death of Jesus chosen over the past few weeks by this congregation. Last Wednesday night at our covered dish supper we sang part of each one of those twelve hymns. Over the six weeks of our Lenten luncheons on Tuesdays we will also sing all twelve of these hymns. That is why we have the top twelve rather than the top ten so we can have two to sing each week! We are also singing most of them during one of our Worship Services through this season of Lent. At our covered dish supper on Wednesday, March 28 I will be inviting people to share why a particular hymn may be a favorite or any particular story or experience that they might associate with it. One of the hymns in our top twelve is the hymn of assurance, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” It is indeed a most appropriate hymn to sing as we think about the hope that we have as Christian men and women as a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls. I will be interested to hear any stories people may have as to why this hymn has made it to the top twelve list. For me there is no way in which I can ever sing that hymn without my mind going back to Friday, October 21, 1966. I was a second year student at Cardiff University and the South Wales Baptist College in Cardiff in South Wales. As we gathered for lunch that day so we all became more and more aware of the tragedy that had occurred just about twenty miles away that morning in the town of Aberfan. At 9:15 that morning after a period of rain the waste tip containing unwanted rock from the local coal mine had slid down the mountain side. As it did, it destroyed twenty houses and a farm before going on to demolish virtually all of Pantglas Junior School. In total 144 people were killed. This total included five teachers and 116 children from the school, most of them between the ages of seven and ten. As we gathered for lunch at the South Wales Baptist College that day we did not know the

exact extent of the fatalities, but that day became the only occasion in the six years that I was a student there that I remember our principal, the Rev. Dr. J. Ithel Jones, inviting any of the student body who wished to do so to join him in the College Chapel immediately after lunch for a prayer service. At that service he invited us to sing this hymn, “O love that wilt not let me go.” Before we sang it though he shared something of the life of George Matheson, the blind minister from Scotland who had written the hymn. Certainly I do not claim to remember back over forty years to exactly what Ithel Jones said on that occasion. Clearly, though, his message was that this hymn was not written at a time of pleasure and joy but rather in the midst of a time of distress and of loss. Over the years I have come to learn what George Matheson himself said of this hymn when he wrote, “My hymn was composed in the manse of Innellan on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882. I was at that time alone. It was the day of my sister’s marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high. I have never been able to gain once more the same fervor in verse.” (*Singing with Understanding* by Kenneth W, Osbeck, Kregel Publications, 1979, page 224)

Although he makes no reference to it himself many have suggested that his mental stress at the wedding of his sister was caused by the reminder of his own great disappointment that he himself had known when as a University student he become engaged to a fellow student. When he told her of his impending blindness

she broke the engagement, returned his ring, and exclaimed, “I do not want to be the wife of a blind man.” (*Great Hymn Stories*, Ambassador, 1998, page 105) His distress may also have been intensified because the sister who was getting married had been his housekeeper and close companion. She herself had learned Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in order to aid him in his theological studies. She had been his faithful co-worker and helper throughout his life, assisting in his calling and other pastoral duties. (*The Nation’s Favorite Hymns* by Andrew Barr, Lion Book, 2002, page 67)

Certainly the message of the hymn speaks so eloquently against such a background. In the light of experiencing the rejection of human love and now the human love that would have to be shared in a far different way with his sister who was getting married he consoled himself in thinking of God’s love which is never limited, never conditional, never withdrawn, and never uncertain. This is the love seen most clearly in the cross, when even a death points us to a love that is stronger than death. It is this love that will not let us go that also brings light and joy to our lives, even in the midst of whatever dark storms we might face.

The circumstances in which we sang that hymn of George Matheson on Friday, October 21, 1966 were very different from those in which he first wrote it. Yet his sharing of his own personal experience of distress and the comfort and assurance he found in the midst of it has meant that his hymn has brought comfort and assurance and hope to so many in many very different circumstances of distress and tragedy and anxiety in their lives. The hope, the comfort and the assurance has come only as people have been able to look, like George Matheson, even in the midst of their sense of loss to that love which they can never lose. This is the love of God seen in the faithful promises of God, even though we may not deserve it. This is the hope and the sure and steadfast anchor for our souls in all the changing

circumstances of our lives. Let us claim the assurance of that love and that hope for our own lives once again as we first of all affirm our faith using the words of affirmation printed in the bulletin and then as we sing the hymn of George Matheson. Let us stand and affirm our faith together ...

Affirmation of Faith

from the Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.

In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God's condemnation.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.

Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home. God is faithful still.

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Hymn of Assurance in God's Love No. 384

St. Margaret

“O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go”