

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Irene Pak Lee
January 16, 2022

Rejoice, Be Patient, Persevere

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. This verse from Romans 12 is in the signature of one of my e-mail accounts. It's been that way for years and so I almost forgot it was there until this past summer when I was invited to speak for a national Presbyterian Women virtual gathering that centered on that very verse and theme, "Rejoice in hope."

As I prepared the message and reflected on that verse, I kept thinking to myself, "Rejoice in hope. Rejoice in hope ... that is SO VAGUE. What else can I say? What do people need to hear right now?"

And already between then and now, the wave of this pandemic that we are living in has shifted again and so any glimmer of hope we had been feeling as vaccines were rolling out and as COVID numbers were dwindling down in those summer months has brought us back on another rollercoaster ride as we are back worshiping on Zoom only for a few weeks. And I'm tired. I know I'm not the only one. It is so hard to make decisions about anything right now and nothing feels like the right decision. Rejoice in hope?

And then on this weekend where we are to take the time to remember the life and prophetic ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., what can I add to what's already been said and heard from our biblical and modern day prophets? And how in the midst of everything that is happening in our personal lives, in the world, in creation, do we rejoice in hope?

And yet, and yet, we are being called to rejoice ... **in hope**. And usually, when we hope for something, it is for something yet to be seen or fully known. As scripture tells us, we don't hope for that which is seen, we hope for that which is unseen, for who hopes in what is already seen? So this call from Paul to rejoice in hope...to rejoice in something that we have not yet quite seen or known becomes more complex and is not as easy to embrace or talk about. As I prepared that talk for that Presbyterian Women's gathering around the theme of rejoicing in hope, I remembered the full verse. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer.

Those three things held together feels different to me because the implication is not only that I have to remain joyous or optimistic in that which is unseen or unknown that I hope for in this life, but that second part, be patient in

suffering, means that there IS suffering. It's okay to acknowledge that and perhaps even more important to name that ... and that third part, to persevere in prayer means that sometimes it is hard to pray.

And so the question I wrestled with and a question I want you to think about is, what is the hope that you hold right now? What in your life, in your community, in this world is still unknown or unseen that we are being called to rejoice into even as we hold patience in suffering and persevere in prayer? As we have heard these voices of Biblical to modern day prophets, what is it that they are saying to us? What is their call?

Because if we take these three phrases at face value, Paul is not *asking* us to do these things. He's not saying "maybe" or "only if you want to do it" but they are commands, statements for us to consider and actually act upon.

If we could list the hope of every person who is here right now, the list would be long.

Fair wages. Equity in education for children of all races and class. An end to hunger. Housing security. Affordable health care and mental health care reform. Prison reform. Racial justice and equity. A cure for cancer. Voting rights. The list goes on and on. These are big things and as we list these big hopes of things yet unseen, we could easily get swallowed into a depth of hopelessness. But my goal here today is not to drive us into despair.

So let me reframe or ask again with the call to rejoice ... what is yet unknown or to be fully seen that we are being called to **rejoice** into even as we hold the realities of patience in suffering and persevering in prayer? (repeat)

Many of you know that our daughter Eden was born in the summer of 2020, a few months after the country and state had gone into a quarantine stay at home mode of living. You all, she is turning 19 months old tomorrow already. Time has been slow and time has been so fast. So much was still unknown at the time she was born to the point that we were not even sure if Marion would be able to join me at the hospital while I was giving birth. Thankfully she's the second child so I felt like if I needed to do it alone, I could because I had done it once before. I was mentally preparing for this reality. Thankfully Marion ended up being able to be there.

I could lament and name all of the hard things about having a newborn in the midst of a pandemic, but if I am honest, she was the unifying grace in our family that year. I'm not going to lie, it was *hard* to not have community in the

tangible ways in which we needed, but having a new baby in our midst while injustices and plague swirled in the world all around us, it helped center us into remembering what we were doing and who we were doing it all for.

Eden was and is our joy. One of the major differences we noticed about her as she continued to grow and change month to month is that unlike Ezra, who smiled big at everyone he met, she was super skeptical of everyone she saw. You might think it's because of the masks people wore, but even as mask mandates were lifted and she could see the actual smiles and expressions of folks, she always furrowed her brow and would not crack a smile for anyone. You could be dancing, making funny noises, playing peekaboo, and she would stare you down. It was pretty hilarious to me. She was just not amused by other people she didn't know.

I kind of loved this about her. Because I sensed that part of her personality was a no nonsense, you cannot just appease me or fool me type of personality. After many more months into toddlerhood now, I can confirm that this is still generally true about her. And I love this because I am not like this. As a daughter of immigrants born and raised in Utah, and as part of my own personality, I have been taught and trained to cater to the needs of those around me. To appease, to blend in, to translate, to adapt immediately. It's taken me over 40 years to live more authentically into who I fully am and to speak and find my voice in ways unafraid.

The day before Eden turned 9 months old, you'll remember that news broke out of 8 people who were killed in Atlanta, Georgia, almost all of whom were Asian American women. The surge of anti-Asian violence had finally been making the news, especially here in the Bay Area and suddenly this mass shooting seemed to catch the attention of a nation that was not quite believing this violence was real. I was grieving and angry and did not have words to express all of the raw emotions I was feeling in light of that incident and *all* of the acts of hate and violence against people of color.

That next morning in her ninth month of life, Eden woke up, looked at me, puffed up her cheeks and blew out a long slow puff of air. I started laughing because it caught me so off guard, and then she started laughing because I was laughing. And in that moment, looking at her face, in the midst of my own grief, I saw hope. Hope worth rejoicing into. Hope of things yet unseen. She is a third generation Asian American and so far has lived a life where we have been able to shelter her and make her feel only safe in this world. But there are other truths that cling to that identity as she grows. That unless we address and acknowledge white supremacy and seek to dismantle racism and

how it plays out in all of our lives, she will grow up and at some point be told to go back to where she came from. She will be violently pushed, shoved, and have things thrown at her, while having “ching chong” noises verbally assaulting her. She will be stereotyped as submissive, subservient, polite, good at math, and “good, honest, and hardworking” as a way to pit her against other people of color. She will have people try and relate to her solely through the fact that they also eat kimchi. She will be told “I don’t see you as Asian.” I know because these things still happen to me.

But friends, here is the difference that I hope for her and that I can already see in the generation that is coming up.

That even if these things happen to her, that instead of politely smiling or shrugging it off or being stunned into silence, I hope that my beloved child who stares people down will feel so secure and known as beloved by her God and her community, that she will speak with pride and state clearly, “I want you to see me as I am. You will not belittle me with your words and insecurity and you will not pit me against my neighbor.”

Friends, that is the hope of things yet unseen that I can name and rejoice into this day.

Because you see, I have noticed that there is a generation coming up that is unafraid to be who they fully are. They own their identities and place in the world and have no interest in being silent at the injustices they see around them. And it’s not too late for us either. We might have to practice more, but we can do this too. For ourselves, for our neighbor, for our global family.

And so friends, may we rejoice in that kind of hope today ... the kind that goes hand in hand with the need to be patient in suffering and persevering in prayer. As Townsend said in her charge, “run for the hills.” Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, may you discover what that hope for you is this day, and may we find space to rejoice in it. Amen.