

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
September 8, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Luke 14:25-33**

**Sermon: A Cliff-hanger Hope (Season of Creation)**

Perhaps you have been watching the news about Hurricane Dorian. You might find yourself thinking: “That storm sounds much more intense than storms and weather events ten years ago... I wonder if it has anything to do with climate change?” Or you saw the forest fires in the Amazon and wondered what the long term impact of that loss will be. Or maybe you are thinking back to the long heat wave we endured in July, and wondering if this is the sign of things to come? Is this the new normal? Or might things actually get even worse?

Well, you are not alone. Day by day the environmental news seems to get worse: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tells us we have about one decade left to head off catastrophic climate change. A United Nations’ study of Biodiversity led them to report last spring that, if we do not change our ways, we are likely dooming one million species to extinction, and that pace accelerates every week. The relentless tide of bad news is taking its toll – both on our mental health and our ability to stay engaged in the fight to reduce the danger.

Dr Susanne Moser is a scientist who studies human adaptation to the environment, she has particular interest in the ways we react to news about the climate crisis. She spends a lot of time researching the emotional and psychological demands on people when they are confronted by the reality of what is happening to this planet we call home. I started reading her research, however, because I heard that she had something really important to say about HOPE.

I think of HOPE as a theological word – not a scientific one. Most of the science of climate change seems to deal in strategies of fear: if only you scare the daylights out of everyone, THAT will motivate them to change their choices, their priorities, their expectations and values.

We in the church have our own version of those scare tactics – statistics that are probably meant to motivate us to make better choices, with all the best intentions, but they don’t offer us much hope. There are probably a thousand statistical studies out there telling us that organized religion is in decline. They draw line charts that demonstrate falling attendance and membership across almost every denomination – except the Orthodox churches, for some reason – they seem to be growing.

So it seems that all of us – even those of us who are in the business of hope – could learn something from someone who has actually studied hope – and how it affects us.

As someone who studies how people react to news about climate change, Susanne Moser agrees that fear is one way to motivate people, but it is not one that works in the

long-term. She says instead what is more influential is to remind people that there is still hope. There is time to change those terrifying statistics and free-falling charts and graphs. “We haven’t tried everything yet.” she said in an interview. “We could do so much more, so much better.”

Moser has discovered in her research something she calls “functional denial”. *Even if we believe what we hear about the planet dying*, she says, functional denial is people’s capacity to still get out of bed, still go to work or school, still pay our bills and do our laundry. Even if the planet is dying. We have not completely given up.

Functional denial is the ability to be aware of two significant truths at the same time: to know that the world (or in our case, the church) is at a critical place and time – but that we still need to keep going – so that we can still do something about it. Functional denial, says Moser, is a form of hope in action. It is recognizing the reality of loss and decline – but not giving in to it.

If that seems contradictory, she says. We, have very little literacy in the area of hope in modern Western culture. For most of us hope means wishing for a happy ending. The hope we usually express is that “everything is going to be okay.” Or that “things aren’t as bad as they look.” And I’m not sure churches are any different in this.

Moser says is that most of us would rather put our hope in certainty – in the good outcome or happy ending. But that is not really hope. Hope relies on our realization that the future may be uncertain, but we should not give up – we should not give ourselves over to despair.

First of all, Moser would say that we need a grounded or an authentic hope – the kind of hope where you get to work to try and bring about a positive outcome. It’s not based on any guarantee that this or that strategy is definitely going to work. It’s about being authentic to who YOU are. Its not being able to live with yourself if you do not do everything in your power to make things better, even incrementally.

Another hope we need is radical hope – a term that was coined by the anthropologist Jonathon Lear. In this hope, the means nor the ends may not be clear. However, Moser says you are able to maintain hope because you are willing to reinvent yourself - in an authentic way – in order to find your place in the future, whatever that future might be.

Radical hope is a tough sell - it’s not easy to tell people that the future is going to be different, and that there will be losses to what we are used to. It’s not popular to tell people that we are going to be changed, especially when we value what we have today.

But that is the reality of transformation. When people acknowledge the uncertainty of hope, and make a commitment to transformation, then they have to let go of their attachment to a particular outcome. Then they can embrace the opportunity to do and be something new.

Here's a quote from Moser, speaking about what we need to do about climate change – but also applicable to where we find ourselves as church in this place and time. She says: “You cannot transform if you stay the same. It sounds trite, but if you hold on to the way it always has been, you're going to be stuck.

So you have to let go of the cliff, and - you're going to look like a fool, you're going to make a lot of mistakes – my god, you're going to go scratching down the cliff. It's not going to look pretty, but it's the only way you have a chance of actually changing and rediscovering real hope.”

The prophet Jeremiah would have agreed with Susanne Moser, I think. He had watched his people Israel sink deeper into corruption, and drift farther and farther away from their Creator's priorities.

So he told anyone who would listen: “We need to remake ourselves! Throw ourselves down on the Potter's wheel and let God create something completely new out of us. We need to keep ourselves flexible, and not bake ourselves into something hard that must be shattered when it no longer works.”

For Jeremiah, hope was letting themselves fall into God's hands, and embracing the coming transformation.

But the king in Jerusalem at that time – he didn't listen. His advisors called Jeremiah a crackpot. They kept doing things the way they had always done them and denying that their enemy Nebuchadnezzar would ever come to their door. Their hope was not really hope at all – it was just plain denial and a refusal to change in order to meet the changing times around them.

The prophet Jeremiah offered radical and authentic hope instead. Be faithful in your everyday life, he told the people of God, but be ready to be transformed for a new world, and a new way of being. Don't just call yourself God's nation, learn to be God's people.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus might have shocked you with the intensity of his imagery about the cost of discipleship. Did he really use the the word “hate” to describe family relationships? Did he say we should all carry the cross? Did he say we should surrendering in battle? Those seem like extreme measures to us.

Perhaps, though, Jesus was talking about that same elusive cliff-hanging hope that Suzanne Moser re-discovered. The kind of hope that we need to embrace in the face of climate change – it works for followers of Jesus too.

Don't be afraid to live boldly, both Jesus and Jeremiah said. If God is the potter and we are the clay, we need to trust God to shape us.

We may talk a lot of about Hope in the church, but we don't necessarily do very well at living it out.

As I said before there are a thousand statistical studies out there telling us that organized religion is in decline. And if we go on doing things the way we have always done them, the numbers will probably just continue to plummet.

But in the face of all that, perhaps what we really need is some cliff-hanger hope. The United Church of Canada had to do it, and we are living within that reality in the wider church. Rideau Park has had to do it – we have chosen to move to a new model of governance and leadership. We have no guarantees it will work – only hope - and commitment.

We also have the authentic faith that we would not be followers of Jesus if we gave up our chance to play a part in the future of this planet. We have the radical hope that God wants us to be part of the future, even if we must be changed. Because we know we do it with God's blessing, with Jesus' infinite love, and with the Spirit's power to transform us and others.

In case you were thinking this is a hope only for 21<sup>st</sup> century problems, I want to close with words from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the early Christian writer Irenaeus:

*"It is not you who shape God; it is God that shapes you.*

*If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the Artist who does all things in due season. Offer the potter your heart, soft and tractable; and keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned you. Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of the Potter's fingers.*

Thanks be to God, for every new beginning. Amen.