PREACHING & TEACHING

Sermon on Hope

Preaching notes on hope, built on the distinction between hope and optimism that makes the difference between a sermon that helps a congregation in a hard season and one that asks them to cheer up.

topic notes · 4 segments

Topic notes. The Romans 5 sequence in movement four runs the opposite way to how we normally describe it, which is the sermon.

BEFORE YOU RECORD

- Preach this when the congregation is in something, not when things are going well. A hope sermon in a comfortable season is an abstraction; in a hard one it is the most useful thing you will say that year.
- Do not promise outcomes. A preacher who says it will be all right, meaning circumstances, will be remembered by whoever it was not all right for.

01. Three texts, three costs

choose one

[Lamentations if the congregation is actually in it]

Romans 5:1-5. Suffering produces endurance, endurance character, character hope. Compact and it makes hope an output rather than a starting condition.

Romans 8:18-25. Hope that is seen is not hope. The passage defines hope as necessarily unresolved, which is uncomfortable and true.

Lamentations 3:19-24. Mercies new every morning, written in the middle of a book about a destroyed city, by a man who watched it happen. Costs you the cheerfulness and buys you credibility with anyone grieving.

02. Hope is not optimism

the distinction

[the whole sermon, in most rooms]

Optimism is a forecast: a judgement that things will probably turn out well. It is falsifiable and it collapses when the news is bad.

Hope makes no forecast. It is a way of continuing to act when the forecast is bad. Which is why scripture keeps putting it in the mouths of people in exile, in prison and in ruins, rather than in the mouths of people doing well.

03. The trap

avoid this

[reassurance dressed as theology]

A hope sermon that functions as reassurance asks the congregation to feel better by Sunday lunch. It works on nobody who is genuinely in trouble, and it quietly tells them this church is not a place to bring the trouble.

04. The sequence, read backwards

the angle

[Romans 5 runs the opposite way to how we describe it]

We usually speak as if hope carries people through suffering. Paul says suffering produces hope, at the end of a chain, not at the start of one.

That reordering is worth an entire sermon. It means the person who has nothing to draw on yet is not failing, they are early in a sequence, and it means hope is something that arrives in people who have been through things rather than something issued in advance.

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