

Growing in Unshakeable Hope

Michelle Karen D'Silva

Peace of Christ, dear friends, and welcome to the Pray More Lenten retreat. My name is Michelle Karen D'Silva and I'm joining you from Qatar, and I'm so excited to be with you in this Lenten journey. Friends, we've all had different experiences of Lent. For some of you, perhaps you're excited, because of your fruitful experiences of Lent in the past. For some of you perhaps Lent uncovers some deep areas of renewal, and so Lent is always hard and heavy. Perhaps for some of you, you sense a distance from God, because you've slipped into the same habits since again and so you just desire an opportunity to begin again. Or perhaps you're here just out of curiosity. You've heard about these wonderful retreats, you've heard wonderful reports and testimonies of people, and you wonder if this could be you. Regardless of your reason and regardless of where you are on your journey, I welcome you. And I want to encourage you and tell you that God desires so much more for you in this Lenten journey. God desires to pour His love into your hearts. God desires to reignite your faith, and God desires to give you a renewed sense of hope in this Lenten season.

Hope in this Lenten Season

Today, I want to talk to you about this hope, and as we begin I encourage you, friends, right where you are to just open your hands as a sign of surrender. And let's bring to our lips those simple, yet profound and powerful words our church fathers taught us, those simple words that say, come Holy Spirit, come Holy Spirit. *veni santo spiritus*

Opening Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, I need thee. Come Holy Spirit, I pray, come in thy strength and thy power. Come in thy own gentle way. Come in this moment, come with your peace. Come with a hope that we so desperately desire. Come Holy Spirit, bring rest, bring healing to our soul. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.

Finding Hope in the Cross

You know, friends prior to the pandemic, a friend from church invited me to minister to about 80 domestic runaway helpers here in Qatar. These are women who had run away from their sponsors. They had paid large sums of money to agents back in their home countries, only to arrive here and find out that they were cheated of all that was promised. Many of them bore scars of physical abuse, some of them rape, yet others were holding little infants in their bosom, soothing them to sleep. Many of them had not seen their families or their children for years. And with their passports withheld, the possibility of returning home seemed hopeless. And as I stood there in the midst of that staggering sight, I was so tempted to utter under my breath, "Where do we begin to look for hope in the face of such suffering?" And what kind of hope can we expect for those who cheated them? Yet something powerful happened the moment I said, "Sisters, shall we pray?" Immediately their right hand moved upwards to make the sign of the cross. Now, whether they understood that fully or not, I don't know. Whether they'd ever been in the church

before, I don't know. But this, I know: their memory as little girls was marked by the cross. And that evening as we worshiped, hands were raised and tears began to flow. And suddenly they were not alone, because before them stood a crucifix, with a man hanging there between life and death who had first suffered for their sake.

There was a sister after the service who came to me and said to me, "You know, I've cried before, but those were tears of anger towards God. But these, these are tears of hope. Jesus is my hope." Friends, I think the closer we get to suffering, the more the idea of hope begins to appear as just that, just an idea, fleeting like vapor that comes in and quickly evaporates. No wonder we tend to equate hope with wishful thinking. We say, "I wish my problems would go away. I wish I had a better job. I hope the doctor's reports will be positive. I hope I will see my children someday." But you see this wishful thinking, it's human hope. This hope is conditional. This hope is circumstantial. I don't think we can walk through life with all its chaos with a hope that's conditional, because we live in a fallen world. We need a hope to point us to a reality greater than our own. We need a hope to ground us in an unshakeable kingdom that will never end. And this hope is found in no other place than the cross of Jesus Christ. Friends, our gospel is a gospel of hope. Themes of hope resound in scripture, especially in the New Testament epistles.

The Symbol of Hope

We see how the apostles testify of this hope, even in the midst of great tribulation. But the theme of hope is never more poignant than when hope is brought in the context of the cross. The cross, this symbol that is found, a commonplace in our lives, especially in this culture. But in the ancient days, if they saw us gathering around the cross, they think we lost our minds, because the cross was hellish punishment reserved for the vilest of sinners. The Romans would not give you the luxury of death. And so criminals died slowly in the most dehumanizing way. Is there any wonder then why the disciples of Jesus who walked with him and fellowshiped with him and who witnessed all his miracles fled from the cross, because they knew what the cross meant?

But something powerful happens at Pentecost. The very symbol of fear and shame becomes a symbol of hope and courage. The very place of defeat becomes the place of victory. The very desire to hold onto life is so transformed that the apostles are willing to lay down their lives. The message of the cross, Paul said to the church of Corinth is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who believe in the Lord, who received His spirit, it is the very power and the wisdom of God. Who would've thought that God's plan for redemption would come through a crucified Messiah? No one, not even us. Not apart from the Holy Spirit. Apart from grace, friends, we too are tempted to see the cross as weakness. We too are tempted to prefer a God who is only powerful enough to save us, not the weak crucified savior of the cross. And so today, in a time where there is a crisis of hope, we need the Holy Spirit to bring us a personal revelation of the cross in our lives. It is a Holy Spirit who enables us to see that the cross is not just an execution; it is an answer to the deepest cry of the human heart.

An Invitation of Lent

I don't know where you are at this moment, if you've come out of a challenging situation or if you are in a place of overwhelm. The cross, my dear friends, this is where we turn to. This is where we return to time and time again to remind us that God who is so powerful didn't remove Himself from a human misery. He entered a broken human history. He immersed Himself in our darkness, so that the very place we think God is absent is a very place for which He came and died. That is the Christian hope. That when we come to the end of ourselves, even death does not have the final word: God's love does. That is the Christian hope and that is what Lent invites us into. It invites us to draw near a God who loves us with an everlasting love. It invites us to declutter our lives, to get away from the noise, and turn to silent prayer and the sacrament, so we can hear the whisper of hope in our soul. God desires to pour His love into our hearts, because it is this love through which we encounter a hope that will never disappoint us.

Michelle Karen's Conversion Story

Friends, for those of you who don't know my story, I had my conversion experience in Qatar in 2009. Prior to that, I lived as an atheist. I grew up Catholic, but you know, we didn't really practice our faith. When I was about 11 or 12 years old, my home was marked with a lot of pain and turbulence. And the only way I knew how to cope with that pain was rebellion. But as I grew older, that pain manifested in a lifestyle of addictions and promiscuity. By the time I was 18 years old, I was addicted to alcohol and I was a self-professing atheist. But there came a point in my life where I couldn't cope anymore and I decided to end my life. And I remember that day so well. I looked at myself in the mirror, and all that I saw was emptiness. Every glimmer of hope, extinguished by the lie that God didn't exist.

And as I was about to gulp down those pills, the door, which I remember locking, miraculously opened and my grandmother walked in and my life was spared. That was a powerful intervention of God in my life. My grandmother was very dear to me and my sister; she was like a mother to us at a time when our home was very turbulent. But one day she suffered a stroke, and was paralyzed and bedridden. The only safe refuge I had was now reduced to a lifeless body, covered with sores. The only thing that moved for her eyes. And I remember every time I would walk into the room, her eyes would light up and tears would stream down the face.

And even a hardhearted atheist like me knew that there had to be more to life than what was going on in my life at that moment. And one day as her condition worsened, I remember screaming out loud in that afternoon and I held my fist upwards and I said, "Well, I don't believe there is a God, but if there's something out there, why don't you take her away? Why don't you take the pain and that's suffering that she's experiencing at this moment?" Very early morning the next day, my grandmother passed away, but I never connected the dots.

Not until a few years after my conversion. One day in an ordinary moment of prayer, I had a vision, an image of myself next to my grandmother's bedside. And I saw God's light all over her. And then I saw it. God's light was all over me. And I realized God was always present. And that afternoon I heard Jesus whisper to my heart and he said to me, "My beloved daughter, even when you couldn't see, my footprints were all over your life." You see, my dear friends, with pain, with

suffering, we can remove the crucifixes out of our homes, but we can never erase the cross from our hearts, because it is the very revelation, the very imprint of God's love upon our soul. I love what Pope Francis says. He says, "God on the cross, he doesn't give us platitudes." As if to say, I'm so sorry, I hope it gets better for you. No, God on the cross accompanies us in our suffering. The cross is hope, because the words of Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you, forsaken me?" These are not just words of Jesus. This is also your voice. This is the voice of the suffering church. On the cross, Jesus represents you. In His humiliation, He represents you who are humiliated. In His betrayal, He represents you who have been betrayed by trusted friends. In His rejection, He represents you, who are rejected. Jesus on the cross gives voice to the tears of that sister who hadn't seen her children for years. Jesus on the cross represents people like me who saw or who see suicide as the only option. Regardless of where you are on your journey right now, Jesus on the cross represents you.

Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa says it so accurately. He says, "The greatest man in history was one of you." And that, my dear friends, is Christian hope. We may not always have the answers, but we will always have hope. And because of hope, the church will always, always move forward.

Friends, I don't know where you are in this season. Perhaps you are suffering and there's pain in your life or there's loss in your life. Maybe you've, you've seen the suffering of your loved ones for a really long time with no respite. Maybe you are in a place where your marriage is on crossfire, or as parents, you are grieving your children, their waywardness and their loss of faith. Maybe you are in a place where you are oppressed at your job. Maybe you're working somewhere where there's absolutely no breakthroughs. Maybe it's depression, maybe it's loss of dreams. And so often in our lives, disappointments and discouragement can tempt us to opt for quick fixes and shortcuts, and rely on human hope rather than the hope God gives.

Sometimes we tend to focus on our human misery so much that we are only tending to focus on self, and we become indifferent to our world suffering around us. And so the word of God reminds us today, right where you are, in Isaiah 40:29-31, the word of God convicts us and reminds us that our human resources and our human hopes, they have limitations. It says, "Even youth will grow tired and weary, and young men will stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like the Eagles. They will run and never be tired. They will walk and never be faint." Friends, we are not spared of life's burdens and tribulations, but we can face them only because we have this great hope that will never disappoint us. And so we live in a time where hope is urgent. There is a world perishing without this hope around us. We have people in our life that are perishing without this hope. And so it's so important that we understand that it's not enough to just receive this hope.

Become an Advocate of Hope

We must become advocates and channels. and as Pope Francis says, witnesses of hope. And how do we do that? We do that by stepping out of our comfort zones and getting out and comforting those who are grieving. We share stories of our conversion. We take off the attention from ourself and we focus onto those who are voiceless and defenseless, those who are poor and are

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marginalized. We give up. We really intentionally give up useless chatter and we intentionally learn to listen. We offer a therapy of hope to people in our communities, people in our neighborhood, people that we know. We become a people of hope. It is in sewing these seeds of hope daily that we realize that the Christian hope is anything but wishful thinking. It is an expectant leap. It is an expectant leap to the empty tomb. And so my dear friends, where do you need hope today? At this moment, we asked the Holy Spirit to tenderly, tenderly touch those areas where we are wounded. Perhaps those places where we think God is absent.

And so this moment we invite the Holy Spirit, as we cry out, come Holy Spirit. He's here. He's a God of all comfort. And so, Lord, we ask you at this moment to come into those deep places of our hearts, those fractured places of our well where we are suffering silently. Maybe we made agreement with those lies where we've said God will not come through. God can give hope to everyone else, but me because I'm such a sinner or I've done so many things in my life. And just Lord, we ask you in this moment in your precious name to refute any lie and to reinstate and restore our identity as a son, as a daughter so we can receive this hope, this hope of the resurrection. Thank you that you have been raised for our sake, so we can rise to all things new. And Lord, we ask you at this moment to come right now where we are, come and flood our hearts with light, with hope. Put within us that seed of hope for that is so desperately desire.

And maybe friends, you are praying for someone. Maybe there's a person in life who desperately needs hope. Either they're suffering or they're just become so skeptical of faith. And so we pray this moment for those we know who are perishing without hope. And Lord, I pray this moment that you will use my brothers and sisters watching this that you will use them as witnesses of hope, of channels of hope, that you bring divine connections that you bring divine appointments, that you intercept their heart, Lord, with a seed of hope. And so come Holy Spirit, bring your anointing, fall of fresh upon us, move in and through us. Bring your fire, Lord, your fire that burns and purges and sanctifies and makes holy, your fire that reignites hope. In your precious name we pray, Amen.

Hail Mary

Let's dedicate a Hail Mary for all those needing hope at this moment. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and the hour of our death. Amen. Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you.