# SERMON SERIES: A HOPE AND A FUTURE

**“Think”**

## *Philippians 4:8*

 This morning marks the end of our sermon series “A Hope And A Future.” Yesterday we wrapped up our weekend event with Eddie Hammett. We’ve had the opportunity to hear his thoughts and ideas. We’ve had discussions with one another. We’ve prayed; we’ve fellowshipped; we’ve started the search for answers about how we might move forward as a church.

 Let’s turn to our Scripture reading for today, Philippians 4:8. As we do that I’d like to thank the members of our planning team that helped make this weekend happen: Sid & Vivian Parrott, Cindy Cunnyngham, Felicia Kingrea, Shelia Nelson, Mitch Weber, Daisy Mulkey, and Angie Carson. I’d also like to express my appreciation to everyone who assisted this team in getting everything ready and making sure the weekend went smoothly. I appreciate your willingness to volunteer in every way that you did.

 Our Scripture reading comes from Paul’s letter to the Philippian churches. It’s a short letter but it’s packed with joy, even though Paul composed it while he was in prison. Look at 4:8: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*

 As he closed this letter, Paul encouraged the Christians in Philippi to keep their thoughts focused on positive things. There’s always negativity in the world. There’re always trials, tribulations, grief and pain. But for those who’ve placed their lives in Christ’s hands, there’s always something *excellent or praiseworthy* to celebrate. Even during times of deepest darkness or mind-numbing horror, Paul says the Christian thinks about and remembers what we have gained—who we know—who we belong to—where we will one day go. So I’d like to take Paul’s imperative to *think about such things* and apply it to our experiences this weekend.

 To begin with, if you participated in our “A Hope And A Future” weekend with Eddie, think about what challenged you the most. **ASK: What did you hear or experience that challenged you the most? What pushed you outside your comfort zone?** Now this is interactive, so speak up and share your thoughts. That’s what our time together this morning is for.

 **ASK: What was the most hopeful thing you heard or experienced this weekend? What made your heart beat faster with excitement or hope?**

 **ASK: What’s one thing you heard or discussed in your table groups that left an impression on you?** Maybe it was something you said or something someone else said. Regardless of where it came from, it was something that has kept you thinking. **What came up in your table discussions that really made you think?**

 Now I’m going to ask you to do a little thought exercise with me. I’m going to separate you into three groups—and no, you don’t have to move around this time! You can stay right where you are.

 Let’s begin with the middle section. ***Everyone in this section: I’d like for you to imagine that you are a person who has never set foot in a church before. The weddings you’ve gone to have been in some outdoor setting. The funerals you’ve attended have been at the funeral home or graveside. You do not consider yourself a Christian and have never been inside a church.***

 Now the right section: ***I’d like for everyone in this section to imagine that you are a person who’s been in church before, but only on Christmas Eve and Easter. You may’ve attended a wedding or funeral in a church, but that’s it. In any given year, you’re probably inside a church two, maybe three times, at most. You consider yourself a Christian but you enter a church building only for special events.***

 And for the left section: ***I’d like for everyone in this section to imagine that you’re what we call a “dechurched” person. You’ve been in church before. Maybe you used to attend regularly. But something happened and you quit going. Someone made you angry. The church spent money in some way you disagreed with. Someone spread gossip or rumors about you. Whatever it was, you stopped going to church years ago and haven’t been back since. You might go for a wedding or funeral, but other than that you have nothing to do with churches. You consider yourself a Christian but are not connected to any church.***

 Now, with the parameters I’ve given you, think about what you’d be doing on a Sunday morning. What would your Sunday morning look like if you don’t consider yourself a Christian? If you consider yourself a Christian but only go two or three times a year? If you consider yourself a Christian but have been turned off to church? **ASK: What would you be doing right now?**

 Now let me ask you this:

**ASK: Is it difficult for you to think in the terms I assigned to you? Why?**

If we’re honest, it’s hard for us to think as if we weren’t Christians, or if we only attended church two times a year, or if we didn’t attend at all. It’s hard to wrap our minds around such a viewpoint—because we’re accustomed to going to church! We’re used to being here; participating in the life of the church is natural for us. So it’s understandable that we struggle to imagine being someone who has minimal or no church contact.

Now I’m going to shock you: ***the way we feel about imagining ourselves not being here regularly, is exactly the way the unchurched and dechurched feel about us.*** They have a hard time imagining why we do this week in and week out. They can’t imagine doing the same thing week after week on Sunday mornings. They question why we do it. Just as we have a hard time thinking like a non-Christian or a dechurched person, they have a hard time thinking like a Christian or churched person.

Now let me hit you with something a little harder. Keep thinking in the parameters I gave you: non-Christian, “C&E” Christians (Christmas and Easter), dechurched Christians. Try to put yourself back into those shoes and perspectives.

Are you ready?

**ASK: What is it that Soddy United Methodist Church does here on Sunday mornings that would make you get up out of bed and be here?**

I know this is challenging, especially on the heels of our time with Eddie. But it’s important that we try to understand those we would reach. That’s why we’ve spent the past two weeks looking closely at the different generations in our world today, and the shift from a modern to a postmodern worldview. We cannot reach people if we do not know or understand who they are and where they’re coming from.

What is it that Soddy United Methodist Church does here on Sunday mornings that would make a non-Christian, a nominal Christian or a dechurched Christian invest the time and energy for?

 **[Solicit responses. Repeat each response and ask a different section of the congregation—non-Christian, nominal Christian, dechurched—how they would answer that response. Try to help each section stay “in character” when they offer their replies/excuses/reasons]**

 Now please understand: I’m not trying to be mean. I’m not trying to make you feel terrible. And I’m in no way criticizing or condemning. All I want to do is help us see how those outside the church generally tend to think and act. There are exceptions, of course. But non-Christians—and the majority of nominal Christians—don’t really give much (if any) thought to being here.

 Now here’s the million dollar question: **ASK: How do we change that?**

 How do we reach the non-Christians with the love, mercy and hospitality of Jesus Christ? How do we reach the nominal Christians and show them that this congregation is different than any they’ve been attached to in the past? How do we offer something that makes them say “I’m getting up tomorrow morning and going there”? It’s hard to think about, isn’t it? It’s not easy. It’s challenging and uncomfortable. It’s so very different from anything we’ve done before.

 Decades ago, in the 1940s and 1950s, churches didn’t have to think like this. Christianity was the dominant belief system in our nation. Stores were closed on Sundays. Most people agreed on the Judeo-Christian elements that helped form the foundation of our society. Now we live in a very different age—but it’s still the world that this church is called, empowered and sent to minister to. And with God’s help, we shall.

 ***I’d like to ask everyone who is able and willing to come forward and kneel here at the altar. If there isn’t room for you to kneel or it isn’t comfortable for you to kneel, please stand or sit on the first pew.***

 ***If you can join hands with those around you, please do so. If you can’t join hands, place your hands on the shoulders of the people around you.***

 Let us pray:

 *Heavenly Father, Noah was told to build an ark when it wasn’t raining, and it took him decades to finish it. What did he think about during those long, dark nights and dry days? David courageously entered the battlefield without armor, and armed only with a sling and some stones. What did he think as he watched Goliath walking toward him? Jesus told his closest friends and most faithful followers that he would be arrested by the authorities, treated with contempt, tortured, and put to death. What did those disciples think about as they watched Jesus dragging his cross to the hill of the Skull? Saul was a hyper-enthusiastic enemy of the early church, arresting and imprisoning those who followed Jesus, giving tacit approval to their murders. What did he think about when Jesus called him into a new life as a missionary, church planter, and vessel for the gospel?*

 *I would hasten to guess, Lord, that many of their thoughts were similar to the ones we have right now: what do I do now? What will it cost me? Why me? What if I fail? What if I succeed? How long will it take? What if I’m wrong? What if I’m laughed at? What if I’m rejected? What happens if I don’t like it? What happens if I like it too much?*

 *So here we are, Lord—your church. Different generations, different worldviews, different thoughts, different ideas. We kneel, stand or sit in your presence because we don’t know how to proceed. We humble ourselves beneath your hand; we submit our wills to yours. We await your anointing.*

 *We thank you for Eddie Hammett, his teachings and leadership, and for how you have used him this weekend. Now we desperately need your Holy Spirit to show us the next step to take. Lead us, just as you led Miss Holland and those who launched this church, just as you led Moses and Joshua, Deborah and Daniel, Mary and Matthew. Show us a new way of thinking, of new ways of acting, of new ways of being your body in this community.*

 *Thank you for those around us, and for the invisible cloud of witnesses that surround us: angels and archangels, the spirits of George Varner and John Wesley, of Earl Lee & Almeda Frazier and Terry Inwood, of Ruth Elliott and Dr. Caldwell. Around us now are the encouraging spirits of those who made this church their home, and who even now add their spiritual hands to ours. They say to us “Go forward in faith! Trust in the Lord! Change this community and this world for the glory of God!”*

 *Men and women of the family of God, arise and go knowing that you are supremely loved, supernaturally empowered, and never, ever alone. Amen.*