

WHERE THERE'S HOPE, THERE'S LIFE
Thornville United Church of Christ, Thornville, OH
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Jeremiah 29:1-14; I Peter 3:8-9, 13-16a

The story is told of a landlubber who was taking a cruise on a storm-tossed sea. Glued to the railing, she had already lost most of her lunch and was in a miserable condition. The ship's doctor happened by and said, in a cheery voice, "Don't worry, my dear. Nobody ever died of sea-sicknesses." To which the poor wretch heaved back a weary reply, "Don't say that, Doc. It's only the hope of dying that's keeping me alive!"

Where there's hope, there's life! Hope is an essential ingredient of life. It helps us keep on keeping on, even when there is little to be hopeful about. The last time I told that story in a sermon, it was the older folks in the congregation who seemed to appreciate it the most. Hope is not a measure of our future prospects, it is the prospect by which we measure the future. If we are hopeful, then the future remains alive with possibilities for us.

Hope is one of the three Christian virtues, along with faith and love. It is a disposition, an orientation toward life and the world, toward the future, that sustains us in the present. Back in the mid-1970s, about the time I was finishing my theological studies and preparing to enter the parish ministry, hope was fast becoming a popular theme in Christian theology. Theologians who had come of age a generation before me, who had lived through the devastations of World War II and the Holocaust, were trying to make their case for Christian hope.

It was about this same time that there was lots of talk that "God is dead," and my guess is that the theologians of hope were attempting to provide a rejoinder to all the talk about the death of God. Colin Morris, general secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society of England and pastor London's Wesley Chapel at the time, came out with a little book that opened with these words of introduction:

God is not dead--though so far as millions of people in our society are concerned, [God] might just as well be; but that is a different issue. . . .

The church is not dead, though it could be argued that it is mortally sick. It is hope that has died; not dramatically, not with an audible death rattle, but imperceptibly as though some malevolent force had slowly but surely turned down the wick of the lamp of faith.

So this is a book about hope. [p. 7]

Morris went on to observe,

There was a time when it was the cynic's task to challenge the status quo. Now cynics *are* the status quo, and anyone who dares to raise his voice against the fashionable pessimism of our day is likely to be accused of whistling in the dark to keep his spirits up, or else have quoted at him that dog-eared parody of Kipling's verse, "If you can keep you head while all about you are losing theirs--you just don't understand the situation." [p. 14]

Well, the situation today seems rather different. Hardly anybody these days talks about God being dead. If anything, God-talk seems to be more popular than ever before. Cynicism hardly seems to be the order of the day. On the other hand, I don't hear very much being said about hope these days, and I hear a lot being said about fear. Perhaps Morris was right after all: God isn't dead, but the church is deathly sick, and we now live in a world that has been largely divested of hope.

The strange thing is that we also live in a world that struggles valiantly to deny the fact of finitude, the reality of death. We live in a world where hundreds of species are dying off every year, global warming is a scientifically incontrovertible fact, oil reserves are fast being depleted, population growth is outpacing the carrying capacity of the planet, and one half of all children live in such poverty that they lack adequate resources for daily living—and yet you'd think from what our political leaders have to say that we can go on living as we do forever, in fact, that further progress and improvement is almost a given. Whatever problems we have are seen as soluble, what challenges surmountable, whatever crises and set-backs (say Katrina), are opportunities for making things better than before.

I'm no apostle of gloom and doom, nor do I think that things can only get worse instead of better. But I am wedded to the proposition that reality should not be denied. And it seems to me that a lot of reality is being denied these days. The way I see it, we are least inclined to face reality when we are most reluctant to relinquish control, to open ourselves to change, to allow for possibilities beyond the reach of our own powers. It is especially hard to face reality when we are lacking in hope.

What I'm saying is that we seem to live now in a part of the world that is filled with false hopes, with wishful thinking, with reality-denying that is symptomatic of the absence of genuine hope. The war in Iraq is an obvious and most poignant example. This was never a hopeful venture. It was rooted in fear, promoted by false hopes, wishful thinking, outright deception, and who knows what-all political and economic motivations. It has been one of the largest and most costly exercises in reality-denying in my lifetime, perhaps exceeded only by the Vietnam War. I am not suggesting that Iraq was a benign country, or that there were no good intentions behind the war effort, but that the resort to preemptive war was an act motivated far more by fear, desperation, arrogance, and greed than by anything resembling genuine hope. In all too many ways, this war is emblematic of the general state of affairs affecting all life on this planet.

Scott Sanders, who teaches English at Indiana University, wrote a book a few years ago titled HUNTING FOR HOPE. What is most striking, and perhaps most memorable, about the book is the way it begins. Sanders tells of conversations with his two children, a daughter and a son, as well as questions that have been put to him by his students:

Suppose your daughter is engaged to be married and she asks whether you think she ought to have children, given the sorry state of the world. Suppose your own son is starting college and he asks what you think he should study, or why he should study at all, when the future looks so bleak. Or suppose you are a teacher and one student after

another comes to ask you how to deal with despair. What should you tell them? [p. 1]

What should you tell them? Behind that question lies another: What can you tell them? What can you say in the face of a world that seems to be in deep trouble and dire straits?

Anyone who looks honestly at the human prospect realizes that we face enormous challenges: population growth, environmental degradation, extinction of species, ethnic and racial strife, doomsday weapons, epidemic disease, drugs, poverty, hunger and crime, to mention only a few [ibid., 185].

The question that becomes the focal point of Sanders' book is not the question of what to do about this state of affairs, however. It is the question of whether anything can be done, of whether anything matters, of whether there is any reason for hope.

As Sanders tells it, the question was put to him most forcefully by his teenage son while they were on a camping trip together, and the tensions between them were rising. Finally, after wrangling about their differences regarding music and cars and a whole lot of other things, Sanders' son comes to the heart of his protest against his father:

You look at any car, and all you think is pollution, traffic, roadside crap. You say fast food's poisoning our bodies and TV's poisoning our minds. You think the Internet is just another scam for selling stuff. . . Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out. You make me feel the planet's dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it. There's no room for hope. Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can't. I've got a lot of living still to do. I have to believe there's a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise, what's the point? Why study, why work--why do anything if it's all going to hell? [p. 9]

Usually it has been the task of youth to rage against the world as they have found it, to rebel, to call for change. And it has been the task of their elders, their parents, the society at large, to try to assure them that things are not as bad as they seem. But what happens when the elders, the mothers and fathers, share the rage of their children?--and perhaps possess an even greater rage, an even greater sense of urgency, an even greater uncertainty about the future? Then the question of hope arises with a special poignancy. Then it becomes clear that we cannot go on without hope. Then it becomes clear that without hope the resources for rage and for change may be depleted, and all that will be left is despair.

"Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can't," says Sanders' son. But can any of us get by without hope? Sanders reminds us that children need their parents to have hope. They need their parents to possess a confidence that things can be changed, that study and work can make a difference, that there is a future worth struggling for. We must ask ourselves whether "there are reasons to live in hope not only for ourselves but for our children and our grandchildren" [65]. Children also need their parents to possess a confidence in them, their children, as bearers of the future. Ironically, however, we who are parents also need our children to have hope. Our children are the bearers of the future. If the future seems bleak and hopeless to them, how can it seem otherwise to us as well?

In truth, none of us can get by without hope. In truth, Sanders has an abundance of hope. How else could he have the resources to care about the world, or to rage against its degradations; how else believe in the possibilities for change; what other reason for going on? So the question is not one of creating or manufacturing hope that is not there, but of finding it, of calling it to mind, of bringing it to light. The task is one of speaking of hope, of giving an account of it, of pointing to the grounds for hope.

Hope, as any well-trained preacher will tell you, is not the same thing as optimism. At one point in his book Sanders writes, "In order to live in hope we needn't believe that everything will turn out well. We need only believe that we are on the right path" [187]. Perhaps this is another way of saying that it is good and right to have hope.

The seasoned clergywoman had recently retired. Most of her sermons had dealt with the blessings of charity and she had constantly urged the wealthy members of his congregation to share their worldly goods with the less fortunate. At a reception in honor of her retirement, someone commented upon this and asked, "Do you think you've had any success?" With a trace of a smile she replied, "Oh, yes indeed. As a matter of fact I think I reached the halfway point to my goal. I urged the rich to give to the poor--and the poor, for their part, have agreed to accept. Now all that's left is to convince the rich."

Hope, as they say, springs eternal! Hope shows up in all kinds of ways. Every time I preside at a wedding, I think about those marriage vows that I ask the couple to make. Despite what we know about the marriage and divorce statistics, no couple in my memory has ever protested that they do not want to promise "so long as we both shall live." There is no way they can know whether they will be able to keep their promise, but the promise reminds us that the very possibility of such a commitment lies in hope. So also those promises that are made with every baptism, with every service of dedication, with every ordination.

Sometimes it seems that hope is all we have to go on. Sometimes it hardly seems enough. Sometimes the best we can seem to do is wait in hope. But waiting is also a form of action when it is waiting in hope.

Over 2500 years ago, an ancient Hebrew prophet named Jeremiah witnessed the military conquest of Israel and the deportation of many of the Jews to Babylon. A second deportation was yet to come, when the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem and her temple. Jeremiah declares that, for the foreseeable future, there is no way out for the people of Judah. They are going into exile and the center of their religious and cultural existence will lie in ruins. So what does Jeremiah tell them to do. He tells them to forget about any sudden, dramatic divine intervention that will rescue them from the inevitable. Forget about any miraculous deliverance or quick release. Set aside false hopes and wishful thinking. This exile is God's doing, and they must make the best of it. But this is no counsel of resignation.

In short, Jeremiah counsels the people who are going into exile to "build houses and live in them;

plant gardens and eat their produce. . . . [H]ave sons and daughters . . . Seek the welfare of the city to which you are going." They are to go on with life in their new, strange environment. They are to make for themselves homes away from home. Perhaps none of them will see Judah or Jerusalem again. It will be seventy years--a lifetime--before they can hope to return. And, of course, that means it will not be they, but their children and their children's children, who will return. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says Yahweh, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" [29:11]. It is a wonderful promise. Jeremiah holds out hope for them, but the promise is for the future; it will have to be claimed by their descendants. To live out of this promise they must carry on, make homes, plant gardens, have children, act in hope.

Hope can rescue us from despair, from apathy, from resignation to evils we deplore. It can keep us from turning inward upon ourselves, setting up walls and barriers to protect our little space, declining to act upon the good that we know. Hope can redeem us from the meanness and incivility, the pettiness and bitterness, the stubborn pride and anxious fear, that harden our hearts in the face of a world filled with violence, greed, and callous disregard for the truth. The important thing about hope is that it sustains us and keeps us going even when there are little grounds for hope.

Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim tells the true story of an American emigrant to Israel whose arrival came at a time when public demands for services far exceeded the available resources to meet them. This emigrant needed a telephone for his business, so he went to the phone office to inquire, "When can I get a phone?" "In ten months, maybe two years," he was told.

"Ten months! I need it right away."

"Impossible," came the reply.

"Then I don't have any hope," the man responded.

"Don't say that!" he was chided. "A Jew always has hope. You don't have chance, but you always have hope."

To hope is to cherish future possibilities in spite of present realities. To hope is to resist the temptation to resignation, to cynicism, to the conclusion that it no longer matters whether or how we live. In the words of Martin Luther, "Everything that is done in the world is done by hope" [TABLE TALK].

Hope has to do with that which lies beyond present vision and calculation. It is born of confidence in God and God's future for us. Hope draws us out of the present to a future yet unknown. In hope we can affirm the significance of present actions. In hope we can throw our lot with what is good and right. In hope we can be faithful to what God may accomplish despite the failures of this present age. Hope is sustained by the inexhaustible richness of that Mystery in whom we live and more and have our being. May you always abound in such hope. AMEN.

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