

Keeping Hope Alive

A Message from Luke 24

Advent I, December 1, 2019

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The choir's anthem this morning is a song of hope that comes to us from Argentina, which reminds us that hope is a word that takes on flesh in people around the world.

And that fact might make us wonder today about how our way of life in this country might obstruct the hope that is embodied in the lives of people in other parts of the world. Do our hopes make the rest of the world feel hopeless?

Let me clarify why it is that the lesson for today is from Luke 24. Unless you are one of *those* kind of people who read the last chapter of a book first, you might wonder why we are reading the last chapter of Luke on the first Sunday of Advent.

That's simple. It's about hope. And it may give us clues about how we read "hope" in the whole of the Christmas story.

In Luke 24, after the execution of Jesus, two disciples – one named, Cleopas – were walking home to Emmaus when a stranger joins them. The stranger wants to know what the two of them are talking about. And Cleopas, with all the irritation of someone who can't believe that anyone could be so clueless, says: "What? Are you the only one who does not know about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of God and all the people who was condemned to death and crucified?"

"Besides," Cleopas says, "*we had hoped* he was the One who would set Israel free ... and now, some of our women, are saying that they have seen Jesus alive."

And then something odd happens. This clueless stranger begins to teach them "all the prophets have announced, beginning with Moses" about that coming One.

When they get to Emmaus they are so engrossed in the conversation they don't want the stranger to leave. When it looks like the stranger is going on further, the disciples say: "Stay with us – abide with us – it's nearly evening and the day is practically over."

So he stayed with them and "sitting down," the story says, "the stranger took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them ... And their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, who immediately vanished out of their sight."

Maybe you have been in a situation like that. You have this flash of understanding and you recognize some truth that you can quite get a hold of and, if you aren't careful, it might slip through your fingers. Perhaps you are left with just an impression of some truth that seems so ephemeral.

One of the things I am learning about the kind of hope that takes on flesh and lives for a while among us is that there is a dynamic quality to it. Hope isn't static. It's not fixed. It moves around. It appears and it vanishes.

Hope that is static becomes hardened into expectations that might eventually leave us hopeless along the way. Like those two disciples on the way to Emmaus whose hopes were dashed when their expectations about Jesus were disappointed. Like parents whose hopes crumble when their children don't live up to their expectations. Or when leaders fail us after we have entrusted our hope in them. Or when we don't live up to our own expectations and we lose hope of ever getting anywhere in our lives.

The stranger offers them something more. He offers them another way of seeing.

When I asked one of our very own wise women, Cherry Johnson, about Luke 24 and hope, especially as it relates to the work she has done in the HIV/AIDS crisis (today being World AIDS Day), she says: *I am struck by the un-seeing that is going on [in Luke 24], which is so reminiscent of not only the early years of the AIDS, crisis, but still today. We didn't want to see that the disease existed because it was only impacting gay men (we thought) – a class of people we did not value. We didn't want to see that it was not as easily communicable as we first thought, which stopped us from serving. We didn't want to see that it was an equal-opportunity virus – not a gay one. We didn't want to see that women were impacted and that the research (being focused on men) left them with more ineffective treatment options. We didn't want to see that people of color were and are today disproportionately infected, affected, and dying. We didn't want to see that homeless IV drug users contracting the disease deserved our compassion and commitment every bit as much as “those nice gay men” we had come to care about. WE DIDN'T WANT TO SEE. And now we think it's over. Though our eyes were opened for a time, we find it so easy to close them again.*

Hope is about being willing to see what is. It's not looking at the world through rose-colored glasses that gloss over the way things are. It is not un-seeing. It is being willing to see, as those disciples did, “all the things that happened in Jerusalem” – the betrayal and the injustice and the death of what they had hoped.

Sometimes I think my hope is just an extension of my privilege. I've been trained to feel immune to disaster and absolute loss and ruin from which I could never recover. Of course, it's going to all be ok.

But I have come to trust that the most compelling testimonies of hope come from people who shouldn't have any.

At staff meeting this week, Pastor Anita read a reflection from a new Advent series. What she read for us was this:

Both Advent and peacemaking are experiences of hope, and hope is the stuff of survival. It's little wonder people who live in places of suffering are often filled with great hope and joy. As one Palestinian friend said to me, “What choice do we have but to hope? The alternative is death.” We hope that something more beautiful is coming because we must, because the alternative is unbearable.

Hope is seeing what is and imagining what could be.

Honestly, what I know about hope comes directly out of my experience of the AIDS crisis. And my hope has a name. Brad.

Brad was a person living with AIDS in the church I served in Chicago back in the late 80s and early 90s. Brad is the one who taught me to ride rollercoasters as a spiritual practice. But that's another story.

One of Brad's friends, who also came to church, had been an activist with Act Up – a group that often took extreme action to force us to see what we did not want to see.

I was too timid at the time to take part in those protests. But I did learn something from Brad and his friend: Hope takes action. It "acts up."

Cherry reminded me of words by the young climate activist, Greta Thunberg: "Of course we need hope," she says. "But the one thing we need more than hope is action. Because once we start to act, hope is everywhere."

Sometimes I fail to act because I don't see any possibility of winning or, for that matter, making any kind of difference in the world. And then Cherry reminds me of Diane Rizzetto's words that hope is "the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands the chance to succeed." Brad was convinced that our little church needed to do a service about HIV/AIDS. And, when I waivered, he offered to plan it.

That made me nervous. Brad was funny and faithful but in an irreverent, earthy kind of way. I had no idea what to expect – or if anyone would show up. The Church (big "C") didn't have a very good track record dealing with the crisis. If anything, it made things worse.

"Forget worrying about how many people will show up," Brad would tell me, "just act; just do it; just make the service happen and see where it goes."

So we did.

And that was the second thing Brad taught me about hope. Hope takes a village. It's almost impossible to do on your own. John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker say that "hope requires a home, a sustaining structure of community."

And so Brad knew that for hope to take on flesh, it had to have a home, a community, a gathering of people who were willing to see.

Part of the plan was that Brad would speak. That was a whole other cause for anxiety. But, when the day came, Brad stood up and through tears and great sobs, Brad kept saying: "Never lose hope; never lose hope."

At the time I was dumbfounded. Wasn't it irresponsible to talk about hope under these circumstances? Let's talk about peace or comfort or reconciliation or even anger!

But no. Brad wanted to spend one of his last days on earth talking about hope.

I understand now that hope isn't blind to the realities of fear and death. It's the reason that one of my favorite Christmas carols is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It's because of that one line: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Perhaps it's good to remember now that this season we are entering is the place where hopes and fears meet.

At some point, there was a movement to create a city-wide service to remember those living and dying with HIV/AIDS. A larger group of us put that service together. And it was packed. All kinds of people came. They were grieving and suffering and no doubt afraid. In that service, we invited folks to come forward and sign the names of those they had lost on long white banners. People came. And they came. And they kept coming.

That's where I learned the song that will forever be linked to Brad and AIDS and hope. As people kept coming, we kept singing:

*Healer of our ev'ry ill; light of each tomorrow;
Give us peace beyond our fear and hope beyond our sorrow.*

Brad died in August 1990. I wrote his name on one of those banners as we sang.

In the background I could still hear him saying "never lose hope, never lose hope," as my own tears fell and I feared for my own future.

Since then, in whatever big or small disappointments; in whatever dashed expectations or fears of failure; in whatever lost causes I commit myself to; I can still hear Brad say: "Never lose hope, never lose hope!"

And, today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The anthem, "Song of Hope," is an Argentinian folk song arranged by Hal Hopson. Cherry Johnson sent reflections to me along with resources about hope from the Women's Retreat. Paul Rogat Loeb says: "hope is a way of looking at the world," in *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: a citizen's guide to hope in a time of fear* (Basic Books, 2004), p.5. The reflection shared by Pastor Anita is from *Keep Watch With Me: An Advent Reader for Peacemakers*, Claire Brown & Michael T. McRay (Abingdon Press, 2019) p.15. John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker collaborate in *A House for Hope* (Beacon Press, 2010), p.xxiii. "Healer of our Ev'ry Ill" is by Marty Haugen.