

A Meditation On Hope

I Timothy 4:10

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*“For to this end we toil and strive,
because we have our hope set on the living God,
who is the Savior of all,
especially of those who believe.”*

I.

Befuddlement. Of all the things one might feel the week before Christmas, a sense of befuddlement is a most unexpected visitor; particularly, and especially, as a preacher preparing a meditation for the service of Lessons and Carols. In looking ahead to today, I knew the topic upon which I was intent on speaking to you: hope. However, when I commenced an exploration of what we might use to get a toe-hold on the topic, what I found, instead, was befuddlement.

II.

I began with what I imagined to be an easy place to start; namely, the songs which are so integral to our experience of Christmas. In my mind I began to comb through any songs, religious hymns or secular carols, that I could recall mentioning the word “hope.” I could not recollect even a one (can you?).

I turned to the internet; no luck. Finally, I opened up every single Christmas hymn and carol I have on my computer and did a search for the word “hope” and found but four:

Beautiful Star of Bethlehem: “O beautiful star, the hope of life,
guiding the pilgrims through the night”

O Holy Night: “A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices”

O Little Town of Bethlehem: “The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

O Christmas Tree, (3rd verse, who sings that?): “Your leaves will teach me
also, that hope and love and faithfulness are precious things I can possess.”

III.

I found this dearth of references to hope somewhat surprising, and none too disappointing. While they spoke *about* the idea of hope, they didn't but didn't speak *to* hope. It was at this point my befuddlement began. Undeterred, I decided to cut to the chase and turned to scripture. With no mention of hope in any of the Nativity narratives, I decided to cast the widest possible net and searched the entirety of the Bible. Depending on the translation, the word "hope" appears anywhere from a low of 143 verses in the KJV to a high of 201 verses in the NRSV. That there is such a difference between the two certainly raises some interesting questions about how hope, as a concept, is identified and expressed.

Curious, and because I couldn't begin to venture a guess, I did some research to find there are 31,102 verses in the Bible; 23,145 in the Hebrew Scriptures and 7,957 in the New Testament. This means, mathematically, Hope is mentioned in the Bible a mere .65% of the time. My befuddlement deepened.

IV.

Left wanting in terms of quantity, I turned my gaze towards quality. Was there a certain verse, particularly in the New Testament, that really hit the nail on the head when it comes to understanding Hope? Unfortunately, the answer is no; at least in my estimation. Again, these verses mostly reference "hope" as an idea with the assumption that the reader or listener understands the concept and no further explanation is required.

One of the best examples is Romans 8:24-25: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." However, this doesn't really articulate what is, exactly, the nature of this "hope" in which we are saved. At this point, my befuddlement morphed from an external perspective to one that was internal, as I asked myself, "Well, what does it mean to have hope, and what does such a hope look like?"

V.

My guess is, if I ask this morning if you understand the meaning of hope almost all of us would say, “Yes, of course,” But, do we? Really? The Apostle Paul famously wrote, “Now faith, hope and love, abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” It would seem the first question we might ask is how does hope differ from faith? Does faith require hope? Is it possible to have hope without faith; how about faith without hope? Is hope a thing in and of itself, or is hope inescapably tied to that which one hopes *for*, or to that which one places their hope *in*? I spend the entire week considering these things and finally had to admit that hope is something which has me greatly befuddled. At any other time of year, such a befuddlement might be easily ignored. However, here in the season of Advent, and with Christmas just one week away, I could hardly turn a blind eye.

VI.

I had to confess that though I understand the birth of baby in a manger to be the Savior of the world as an act of love, and our belief in such a birth as the core of our faith, I was somewhat at a loss (befuddled, if you will) to understand where hope fits into Christmas. My sense though, is that it would be quite helpful if we could make the connection between the two.

The dictionary defines hope in this way: “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen; or, the grounds for believing that something good may happen.” It would seem that one of the ways hope is connected to Christmas, at least in our culture, is it serves as an introductory course to children in the exercise of the patience that hope requires, and provides an initial experience of what hope actually *feels* like. Christmas teaches kids that good things *will* happen. This in form of a jolly, chubby, old elf arriving by way of the chimney to leave presents in their stocking.

VII.

Christmas allows kids to flex their “hope muscles” which are never more limber, resilient and strong as they are in our childhood years. This may also help to understand the difference between faith and hope. Kids don’t have faith *in* Santa Claus, they have hope *for* Santa who will come and visit them on one very special night each year.

However, as we adults can surely attest, the capacity for hope shrinks with age. Our “hope muscles” contract, grow frail and weaken over time. In response to this, we begin a life-long process of seeking out, fostering and developing our faith; and the further we move from the hope born of childhood, the stronger our faith must become as adults. This isn’t to say, however, that there is some ratio of faith to hope, but our understanding and experience of hope as an adult is quite different than the hope which we harbor as children.

VIII.

Even in its current form, with all the commercialization and bustle, Christmas teaches kids it is ok to hope; while, at the same time, it reminds adults of the kind of hope we once had. Which is probably why we adults go to such great lengths to give our kids the experience of Christmas, as it really is the experience of hope. Now, I don’t know about you, but I don’t mind saying I sure do appreciate having any small semblance of such an experience of hope in my own life; if only once a year. Which is exactly the gift I think all of us were given last Sunday the Church School Christmas Pageant.

For many people, though, it is at this point that the value we derive from Christmas reaches an endpoint; as the toil and striving it requires subjugates us to the law of diminishing returns. Frankly, I know very few adults, parents in particular, who are not both thrilled and relieved when Christmas is over; the tree and decorations come down, and life resumes a more normal pitch and pace.

IX.

However, for those of us who believe, especially, Christmas need not be just about all of *that*. Instead, it can become so much more; both in this season of Advent and, more importantly, beyond it. In today’s scripture passage from I Timothy, Paul reminds us we have our hope set on a *living* God. While it is an ancient one, the Christmas story is also one which is unfolding still. These past few weeks, and in the coming days leading up to Christmas morning, *all* of you have a hand in writing the next chapter of Christmas, and the hope it brings to the world; as you have brought that hope to the very door steps of so many homes here in the North Country through our church’s under-the-radar Christmas Giving Program. And while it is no small thing to provide over \$8k this year (and counting) to hard working folks who aren’t looking for help but

sure could use it, the greater gift you give is the gold, frankincense and myrrh of hope, friendship and compassion.

X.

Christmas is the celebration of hope coming into the world in the form of a babe born in a manger. The lessons that the Christmas story teaches is that while hope is heroic, hope is also hard and hope is most certainly humbling. Hope is a beautiful star that guides us, pilgrims, through the night. Hope is what thrills us and causes a weary world to rejoice. Each year at this time, Christmas teaches us that hope and love and faithfulness are precious things that we can possess.

More importantly, they are things that we can share; as you have shared with so many in this season of Advent and, also, throughout the year. For it is to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of *all*, (but) *especially* of those who believe.” It is in *this* hope we are saved, and there is absolutely nothing befuddling about that. Amen.