

HOPE  
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It is said, a preacher preaches on what he needs to hear. As the Quakers would say, he speaks to his condition. I want to speak about hope today, because I don't hear very much about hope anymore. There's very little in the headlines - even less in the news commentaries. Even the Church seems silent. Liberal pulpits tend to point to all the troubles and suffering in the world, and then, by way of consolation, point out that God suffers, too. Conservative preachers, especially some from the electronic church of the TV circuit, tend to focus on Armageddon and the end of the world, which prospect seems to fill them with a curious relish and satisfaction, but I would hardly call it hope.

But, if the Christian tradition is to be believed, we have a great deal to hope for. The Gospel is the good news of hope. And hope, along with faith and love, constitute the theological virtues. These are all spiritual qualities to be achieved. Faith, of course, is basic. In that famous thirteenth chapter in Corinthians Paul says, "the greatest of these is love." But in Romans he says, also (and this is our text for today),"we are saved by hope." So why don't we hear very much about hope these days?

Well, in a sense we do. We hear about it all the time in the phrase, "hopefully this", or "hopefully that". But notice that it doesn't contain very much of the spirit of real hope. We say, "Hopefully, the weather will improve", but you know Michigan in July. Or, "Hopefully, the Tigers' losing streak will end", but you know their talent for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Or, "Hopefully, Reaganomics will fix the deficit". No comment. The point is, that "hopefully" as a word represents such a washed-out meaning of the word "hope" that it has very little to do with hope any more - as well as being ungrammatical.

It is rather like the old saying, "rap on wood". Presumably, this originally meant a reference to the wood of the cross, — that by the power of the cross one could face whatever task or threat. Now, it is a tired superstition, like "cross your fingers" of similar origin, but which now tends to mean, "Hopefully, it won't happen". "Hopefully" really suggests little hope. Now why? Why the eclipse of hope in religion? Why the decline of hope in popular culture?

I have a theory about the collapse of hope in the word "hopefully". Now this is a relatively recent usage. I think I can remember about when The New Yorker's Notes and Comments first called attention to this latest assault on English usage. (It was quite some time before Edwin Newman noticed it.) And it was at the time of the collapse of the spirit of revolt of the 60's. Most of us can remember that troubled decade, that spirit committed to an end of the war in Viet Nam and to social justice at home. It was the hope of a new world of peace. "I have a dream", said Martin Luther King and others dreamed of hope for a new era.

But when increasing violence shattered the dream, and the cynicism of the 70's emerged, then "hopefully", that vacuous, fatuous term emerged as well. It was something like saying, "Have a nice day". Saying so might somehow make it so. There seemed no hope in doing it any other way.

But the eclipse of hope has a broader base than this. It reflects the disenchantment with a longer period of optimism than the 60's - that longer period of faith in progress of the 18th and 19th Centuries which peaked just before World War I. And this began with the promise of the new science of the Renaissance. Francis Bacon, that 17th Century genius, was the true prophet of the modern age. "Knowledge is power", he proclaimed. And in his "New Atlantis", that curious Utopia, he spelled out the goal of the new age as "knowledge of causes, and the secret motions of things, to the effecting of all things possible."

And so began the modern spirit of progress through science and knowledge. We have sought the knowledge of causes to the effecting of all things possible to achieve power. It is this which has supplied the hope for our secular culture. Somehow this suggested inevitable progress as if written in the very nature of reality. Everything was getting bigger and better. Of course, some sober historians saw little basis for this faith in progress. And some exceptional philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche saw no merit in the optimism of the age. In different terms they had the same criticism-man was gaining the world, but losing his soul, gaining material comfort, but losing his creative freedom. But the enormous popularity of a Herbert Spencer, with his optimistic evolutionary philosophy, carried the day. Perhaps this spirit reached its peak in the advice of the French psychotherapist Coue who advised us to tell ourselves "every day, in every way, we're getting better and better".

World War I, World War II, the succeeding minor wars and the threat of World War III, and a nuclear holocaust, show the emptiness of this kind of inane optimism. No wonder we lose hope.

But this has been our error-to confuse this kind of belief in inevitable progress with the Biblical doctrine of hope. The Biblical hope does not mean inevitable progress - it never did. Biblical hope is based on the possibility of renewal, of a new beginning. "Behold", says Isaiah in the name of God, "I create new heavens and a new earth." The theme is, "Behold, I make all things new." If the eschatological belief in the end of the world makes any sense, it is in its emphasis on new beginnings now. The message of the Scriptures from beginning to end is the possibility of new beginnings, of a new freedom, liberation, reconciliation, fullness of life - not inevitable progress, whatever that might mean.

Think of the great sweep of Biblical history and you cannot mistake the theme. God is in history effecting the liberation of man. Moses in Egypt leading the children of Israel from captivity, to freedom in the promised land, begins the promise echoed by a series of prophets who see a new era of liberation and peace. Micah: "They shall sit every man under his vine and his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." And Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Neither shall they learn war any more."

This was the promise of a new life of liberation. But it was contingent upon keeping the covenant of righteousness with God. Deuteronomy warns about forgetting that it was God who freed the people from Egypt, fed them in the wilderness, so that when their wealth becomes multiplied one is tempted to say “my power and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth”.

When the covenant goes and the law is forgotten and righteousness ceases, we hear the voices of the prophets inveighing against corruption and exploitation, pleading the cause of the widow and orphan and the oppressed. When the covenant is forgotten, then one trusts in horses and chariots—we’d say planes and tanks -force and political allies. Jeremiah’s Lamentations are, occasioned by such a failed trust and hope. Jerusalem had fallen to Babylonia and its people taken into captivity when corruption, not the covenant, ruled and Judah was swallowed up in power politics. But even here the prophet does not give up hope! God does not willingly afflict the children of men.

One thing emerges clearly from the Biblical teaching of liberation, from the Exodus to the Sermon on the Mount. God is always on the side of the oppressed. And this we should not forget. And we have an intuitive sense of this. We sympathize with the underdog.

Liberation is central to the whole new school of theology, liberation theology, which was earlier called the theology of hope. It has been the basis of conversations between Christians and Marxists in eastern Europe and it is growing in strength in Central and South America where the distinction between oppressed and oppressor and the basic meaning of liberation is not so ambiguous.

But there is an older formulation of liberation theology, a kind of Christian existentialism, that philosophically goes back to Hegel. The fundamental theme of history, says Hegel, is the dialectical development of freedom, as in Biblical history. The culmination of this, in the modern world, is Luther’s doctrine of freedom in the spirit, the freedom of man as man, — all men. This is the purpose of God and the meaning of history. From this point of view the lack of freedom is not so much physical oppression as spiritual alienation and estrangement. This means a sense of being cut off from possibilities—the possibility to develop one’s potentialities freely, to relate to others freely, to feel at home with ourselves, our fellows and our world. For Hegel the dialectic of history is a philosophical reading of God through His Son reconciling man to Himself in the ongoing form of the Holy Spirit infusing the whole society of man. It is the promise of a fullness of life. “I have come,” says Jesus, “that they might have life, and that they might have it abundantly.”

This is the freedom of the spirit which overcomes alienation and reconciles the oppositions which separate man from his potential, what he is from what he might be, man from his fellow men, and man from God. The reconciling power of God is the source of new beginnings for man, a new freedom, a new being.

But, all of this suggests some kind of response on the part of man. As in the old covenant, so in the new, man must somehow pledge himself to the moral purposes of God.

And this, I think, is where hope comes in. Hope is not a pious patience. Certainly not a vague feeling that things will get better automatically. Emily Dickinson has written, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul”-charming lines with good Biblical symbolism. But hope is more than this, I think. It is said that Aristotle called hope a waking dream. But hope is more than this, too. It is not wishful thinking. It is an active response to the new beginnings promised by God. It is a challenge to act. It is a decision for the shaping of the open future.

Kierkegaard writes: “God is that all things are possible, and that all things are possible is God; and only the one whose being has been so shaken that he became spirit by understanding that all things are possible, only he has had dealings with God.” Hope is this active conviction of an open future, a new beginning to be shaped, a liberation from the old, a new being in freedom. It is a defiance of defeatism and a decision for the future. As such it takes its place with faith and love as a commandment-not a passive pious wish-a commandment in response to a new covenant with God.

Can you command hope? Can one command love? or faith? Yet all are enjoined as a response to God’s creative love and liberation. Of course, hope is easier when things are going well, when “God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the world”. But hope is especially needed when God seems to be eclipsed and we seem abandoned. It may be that it is just then that we are commanded to hope. Victor Frankl who wrote “From Death Camp to Existentialism” makes precisely this point. Those who kept hope in that most hopeless situation of the Nazi death-camp were those most likely to survive. No matter how bad the situation, there is hope - not because of some inevitable amelioration-but because of the promise of God’s liberation and the possibility of a new being, a new beginning even in the gravest exigency.

Hope along with faith and love-these three are the theological virtues. Traditionally they are contrasted with the classical Greek virtues as taught by Plato and Aristotle: these are wisdom, courage, justice and temperance or obedience. The Greeks didn’t talk about faith, hope and love. Their virtues were wisdom, not faith, and courage not hope, and justice, not love. There was a fourth virtue as well, called temperance or obedience to reason.

It is standard procedure to contrast these two sets of virtues sharply. The contrast sets off the difference between our Biblical and Greek roots, between Athens and Jerusalem. But, we have combined those traditions in our culture and it can be argued that these sets of virtues are not so far apart after all.

Clearly temperance is shared by both worlds, but the Christian tendency to change temperance to abstinence Aristotle would deplore as excessive. Wisdom for both Plato and Aristotle suggested a transcendental point of commitment that many theologians had no difficulty in reconciling with faith in God. Justice seems at first distinct from love. We speak of Old Testament justice and New Testament love. But then there is the love of Hosea and words of judgment from Jesus. Yet, there is similarity: When one considers justice as righteousness and the Greek concern for distributive justice, a real concern for the individual emerges in both traditions and concern for the other is love. It should be noted, too, that the New Testament found a rich Greek vocabulary for love, if not for sin.

Finally, when we come to the virtue of courage, we have, I think, a proper parallel with Christian hope. Hope is spiritual courage, the clear-eyed confidence to face one's freedom in an open future because God is at work in that future to bring about that which is good. It is this triumphant note of courageous hope that shines through that marvelous confident scripture at the end of Romans 8. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God; in all things we are more than conquerors."

And if, as Paul says, we are saved by hope, this is clear: we must not fall prey to hopelessness and despair. There is always hope. Hope in God's love, no matter what-in new beginnings, in a future we help to forge in freedom. Let us, then, hope, for by hope we are saved.

O God, our hope in ages past, be thou our help in years to come.