

Called to Hope

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The Celebration of the Reign of Christ
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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

If you've ever had a dog or a cat, you know what hope looks like. All you have to do, if you have a dog, is pick up the leash, put your hand on the doorknob, and say, "Walk?" and, with rare exceptions, you will see on that animal's face one of the purest forms of hope found in nature.

Food works, too. The most hopeful creature in my house is my cat, Bo. Every time he hears me go down the basement stairs, where his food dish is, he follows me. He can be sound asleep on my bed two stories away and I can tip-toe down the stairs, and yet he comes thundering down the stairs after me, usually arriving at the bottom ahead of me, with that look of hopeful expectation that it is supper time, yet again.

That is hope of a kind. It's the kind of hope St. Thomas Aquinas described as the passion of hope. We might call it instinctual or conditioned hope, but it's hope all the same. It's born of experience and it's largely unbidden and uncontrolled and it's tied to the individual wants and desires of the organism. That's why Aquinas called it a passion, and if you want to see the passion of hope full force, go to any sports arena or gambling casino. I'm no fan of gambling, but even a vinegar-faced old Puritan like me has to acknowledge that casinos are temples to the passion of hope, and Las Vegas is its new Jerusalem.

It may surprise some of you who know me well to know that once upon a time, I was something of a sports fan. In Tell City, Indiana, where I grew up, basketball was the winter passion, and I can still remember being in the stands near the end of a close ballgame, with one of our players poised on the free-throw line, ready to make the shot that would either end the game or bring us to a tie and give us a few more minutes of life on the court. For those breathless seconds, everything in the universe, it seemed, was delicately balanced on that young man's shoulders, and at the end of that swift arc from his fingers to the rim of the basket hope either exploded into joy or crashed to the floor in pieces. To say that hope was in the air doesn't begin to describe the atmosphere.

So we know what hope, of an ordinary, passionate variety, is. That's the hope of circumstances, the hope of history.

There is another kind of hope, and that's the hope of which the writer of the book of Ephesians wrote in this morning's text: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. . . ."

Most of us don't think that God calls us to hope. We think that God calls us to service or to obedience or to faithfulness or to other sorts of church-y things, but hope, for most of us, is something that just happens under certain circumstances. We're outside an operating room, and we hope. We're waiting for test results, and we hope. We're waiting for a child to get home from a dance or athletic event or college, and we

hope. We are introduced to a young woman or a young man by someone we love, and we hope.

That's the functional hope we live with in the daily grind. And the hope to which God calls us includes all of those hopes – those “hopes and fears” about which we sing in the famous carol – but God's hope, the hope of the Christian, is grounded in something other than the vagaries of health and the vicissitudes of travel.

Christian hope – the theological virtue of hope, as our tradition classically calls it – is grounded in God, specifically, the God who brought again from the dead our Lord, Jesus Christ. The hope of the Christian is not rooted in history, as secular hope is, because Christians take a squint-eyed view of history. We know history for what it is -- “nasty, brutish, and short” in Locke's words – and we know that history is a notoriously weak reed on which to rest the precious cargo of hope.

Those of us old enough to remember the Camelot of the Kennedy years know how meanly history can treat historically-rooted hope. John and Jacqueline Kennedy represented for so many people a new day, a new opportunity, a new chance to get so many things right that we had, as a nation, been getting wrong – and it all ended literally in an instant. Not since the death of Abraham Lincoln had Americans had their hope crushed so cruelly and seen the course of their history turn so abruptly.

Christian hope does not depend on a John Kennedy or a Ronald Reagan or a Barak Obama or a Congress of Democrats or Republicans or a Supreme Court of conservatives or liberals. The hope to which we are called depends on none of these things. It depends, rather, entirely on God.

On the God who has brought creation out of nothing, just because. On the God who loves that creation and us with it, just because. On the God who seeks, in holy love, as we say in our Statement of Faith, “to save all people from aimlessness and sin,” just because.

Just because God is who God is: pure, unbounded love, as Wesley put it. The hope to which we Christians are called is rooted and grounded in that God, in that love. We hope, as Paul says, for that which is not seen not because of the evidence, but because of the love. We hope for a better world not because of our plans and schemes, which are always tainted with self-pursuit, but because of the ever-widening scope of love's vision. And we work for justice and peace not apart from our hope, but precisely because of it. And we believe that we do not labor in vain.

On this last Sunday of the church year, when we celebrate the reign of Christ, we celebrate not Christian chauvinism, but rather Christian hope. We believe, as we used to sing around the campfire, that God's “got the whole world in his hands,” and those hands, we believe, bear the marks of nails. Crucifixion and resurrection – that is the pattern, we believe, of salvation. The God who loves and gives and dies and rises to love and give again – that is the God who was there before we got here and that is the God who will be there long after we're gone. That is the God whose presence sustains us and whose reign fills us with hope.