

Preaching Hope in an Affluent Society

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This essay was entirely changed by a bicycle ride. I'd been trying to write for a week, but not very successfully. Finally what was blocking me became apparent: how could I write about hope while feeling so despondent about serious setbacks with my crippled leg and failing kidneys? Details of those handicaps aren't important here — all that matters is that I was having trouble finding hope myself.

Why? I am affluent — at least by the standards of the world. I have enough money for insurance, doctor bills, medicines, an expensive leg brace. But money can't stop increasing debilitation. Though knowing what I wanted to say in this article, I couldn't find the words to say it or get up the energy to try anymore. It was time for my daily bike ride.

At first a problem with my tire sent me back home (Providence perhaps?). When I'd started again on a different street, a woman carrying several bags stopped me to ask for directions. Continuing on my way, I sensed the nudging of the Holy Spirit: how tired she'd looked, how far away the street for which she'd asked. I turned around and pedalled back to carry her things in my bike basket, and thus began three days of arduous, and fruitless, attempts at intervention.

Let's call her Mary, with the prayer that she, too, can be delivered from demons. As we walked together, I asked questions in order to help her. No, Mary wasn't trying to catch a bus. No, she didn't really know where to go. Then she started pouring out remarks: she was awfully thirsty, her feet hurt horrendously, she had several medical disabilities, she was diabetic.

That last revelation raised the alarm bells. Stopping at my house for water, we discovered her blood sugar was near coma level. We finally persuaded her to go to the hospital, but learned the basis for her reluctance when the hospital discharged her at 11:30 p.m. with no place to go.

Consequently, for three days she stayed with us, and we with her — attending to her needs for food, prescriptions, medical regimens, warm clothes, sleep, and comfort, but failing to find any permanent place for her (since we had to leave town soon for one of my speaking engagements). Even though it not yet a cold season, all the shelters in our city and the whole region were filled to capacity.

Over time we noticed her many manipulative strategies to elicit sympathy and her unwillingness to take steps to care for herself. In one seemingly honest conversation, however, Mary admitted that to try to get disability coverage and other assistance seemed too overwhelming. She had no hope.

When she was called back by the hospital emergency department on the third evening, a doctor exposed the drug habits that she had repeatedly denied. Several hours later a very gracious nurse warned us that our care for Mary was actually enabling her to continue in destructive behavior patterns and that her body was so wasted she would most likely not live long. We had intervened in time, she said, to help Mary past an immediate health crisis, but her needs as an addict required skills and resources beyond our limitations. Three nurses concurred that we should bring her

things to the hospital and not see her again. It grieved us profoundly to take this action, but our inability to find a suitable place for Mary after continuous searching made it clear that we had no other choice.

Many Kinds of Hopelessness

Why are drugs so common in North America? Why are homeless shelters and agencies for the poor overwhelmed? Why is suicide a leading cause of death among young adults? Why do we so often hear, in casual conversations about various aspects of daily life, such phrases as “there’s no hope for it”? Why could I myself not find the hope about which I so frequently write and preach? Why are so many preachers demoralized, without hope for their work and the churches they serve?

These are very divergent cases, to be sure, but they illustrate a common woe in our technologized, commodified culture. As the great Christian sociologist/prophet Jacques Ellul recognized in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the greatest need of people in that time was for hope¹—and the need seems even greater today. In *Hope for the World*, Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall names despair as the primary sign of our times and the cardinal need to which the Church must respond in mission.² What exactly is hope—and why can’t we find it? What gets in the way?

Even more important, what is the hope of the Church—and how can we preach it? What gifts does the Church have for people who are over-stressed, too busy, poor, too rich, addicted, rootless, lonely, without hope?

Why Do We Not Have Hope?

Douglas John Hall distinguishes between the overt despair of those people, like Mary, whose hopeless situations drive them to crime, violence, substance abuse, or suicide and the covert despair of those, like myself, who suppress their hopelessness. The latter kind, he asserts,

...is well able to masquerade under a guise of well-being so persuasive as to deceive the wearers of the masks themselves. It can readily sublimate itself through the pursuit of activities that seem to emanate from highly positive attitudes toward life and the future. Human beings cannot live with a conscious, unrelieved sense of the “vanity” (Koheleth) of their lives and endeavors. If their gods die, if their optimism is dashed by events, if the habit of hope languishes in them, they will likely construct bogus hopes out of thin air and sheer determination.³

This is the despair that afflicts many of the people for whom we preach—and ourselves sometimes. In these days of economic confusions and violent politics, many are discovering that the profits or possessions, power or position they had pursued did not bring them genuine hope.

I would add to Hall’s description of the second type of despair, moreover, the aggravation of that despair by the training of our technological society, which leads us to think that our wealth and abilities can control things, so that we are stymied and crushed by events or handicaps out of our control. I always think that by the “sheer determination” with which I pursue the disciplines of my medical regimens I can delay kidney failure or save my crooked leg enough to walk. Similarly, pastors often think

that if we try a few more “methods” or glitzy programs, we can rescue our churches from the general decline of religious institutions in North America.

Two kinds of despair. The despair of those who have nothing. The despair of those who have everything, but easily forget — or don’t know — Jesus Christ as the hope of the world.

Technological Aggravations

Many of us who preach find ourselves overwhelmed. There is *so* much to know, *so many* e-mails to answer, *such huge needs* among congregation members, *so many* little interruptions or pesky matters deluging us. Moreover, so much of our society’s technological progress is coupled with a disconnection of means and ends, of supposed “communications” and action, of what we can do and the morality of doing it. We have all these tools, but why? We send all these e-mails; why don’t the congregation members respond? We can see anything on the web, but is it good for us?⁴

To make a statement like “Jesus Christ is the hope of the world” seems naive. Deep down, we add, “But the congregation needs money, more people involved, less grinchiness at business meetings, fewer misfits among the members” or “I need more time, less to do” or “Our society needs better morals” and “Why don’t Christians act on what they know?”

What do we Christians know anyway? Do we comprehend the biblical Wisdom that depends solely on God? (Or do we have to have a little money and technological savvy alongside?) Do we understand the faith of our forebears who knew, even in the moment of martyrdom, that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world? Have we been diverted from what really matters by all the possibilities available to us in our society? Of course I value the tools of our culture and times. But I recognize what a profound funk I had gotten into because last week I trusted medical technology and my own expertise and strong self-discipline instead of putting my whole trust in God. And I would guess that you do that, too.

I had forgotten the most important purpose of my life — to love God and love my neighbor. When Mary showed up on my street, the need to love her in her medical peril reminded me of my only true hope. That I was preaching the next day for the congregation in which I am a lay member was another (Providential) gift to reorient me.

Not the Sermon I’d Planned

As I sat with Mary in emergency rooms several hours after we’d met, I ran out of ways to comfort her in her pain. Needing to review what I’d planned for my sermon in less than twelve hours, I asked if she’d like to hear the text on which I would preach the next morning. (I didn’t really care if she wanted to or not, but I needed to practice the text memorized five days before.) I had reviewed only the first verse of John 6:35 and 41-51 when she interrupted me, “Oh, that’s so beautiful. Please say that again.” “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

“Tell me more about Jesus,” Mary said then and more than once again that first evening. Was that one of her strategies to keep me with her? I don’t know.

I do know she was frightened. She seemed to be telling the truth (because she always said it) that she had no family since her mother and grandmother had died

within a month of each other. It was also apparent that she had never been taught much biblical truth.

At one point, when she insisted that God couldn't love her, I began to sing this newly revised emergency-room-with-a-stranger version: "Jesus loves you — this I know! — for the Bible tells me so. Everyone to Him^s belongs. We are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves you." She'd never heard that song before, wanted it again, and began singing with me on the third time, so we changed it back to "Jesus loves me." I said, "You can sing that to yourself, Mary, when you're frightened and wonder if you're all alone. Jesus has promised to be with you always!" She began to cry and sang it a few more times.

Later she shouted, "Jesus hates me. He lets me be in all this pain. He let my mother die." With both of us crying, we talked about all the pain He suffered for her, about how He was crying with her now in her pain, about His presence with those who are dying — and with us all. That God was not judging her, but sharing her torments seemed to comfort her. "Jesus loves me"; do we *know* it?

Do we know, I asked the congregation the next morning, what Good News it is to a hungry soul that Jesus is the bread of life? Do we spend our own time chasing after such empty bread that we forget the only living bread that will satisfy? (My husband's homemade bread had caught fire in our oven in the confusions of Mary's arrival, so I had a convenient visual aid to contrast with the bread of the Eucharist.)

Why was I so fearfully seeking after deceptive bread — after all, health will fail someday; we all must die — and not feasting on the living Bread from heaven? The very strain of the seeking made matters worse.

How did Mary get hooked to the dangerous bread of the streets? Had the greed of a society endlessly seeking the bread of prosperity deprived her of all hope for a healthier existence?

Preaching Hope to the Hungry and to Those not Offended

The first evening with Mary taught me that the beginning verses of my text for the next day depicted two different sorts of hope. There is the strong, genuine hope of Jesus' promises to those with ears to hear. John's Gospel uses multiple negatives to underscore Christ's assurances of satisfaction. Literally (and put colloquially), Jesus says, "the one *coming* to me will *not no-how* hunger, and the one *believing* in me will *not no-how* thirst *never*." Double and triple Greek negatives make the promise emphatic. If we are experiencing inner restlessness and disquietude, we must be still trying to feed ourselves with other hopes.

But sometimes we demand bread from Jesus according to our specifications; we want a different sort of Christ, one who doesn't offend us by the kind of hope offered. Trying to help people ask better questions about the last war in Iraq and trying to find help for Mary both made me realize how little we like to believe that the Jesus who feeds us said such things as "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:44) or "For what will it profit [those who want to save themselves] to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mk. 8:36).

Do we fail to find true hope because we have eliminated whatever words of Jesus bother us? Do we miss hope's power because we really don't want to take up our cross to follow Jesus? Do we not know the fullness of God's love that frees us to undergo suffering for the sake of the kingdom? When we preach, do we always base the hope

we offer in the sure promises of God and not in human sources of confidence? And do we tell of the Trinity without softening God's wildness — not lessening the Lord's demands, but making it clear that grace is sufficient to empower us to respond to them?⁶

I have heard far too many sermons that merely say, "Jesus loves you," without recognizing the cost to God of such love. If we don't know the price the Trinity continues to pay to love us, we take grace for granted and shrivel its hope until its power for our lives evaporates.

The Only True Hope Is Eschatological

Jesus' response to the complaints of the religious leaders in John 6:44 showed me two other dimensions of hope that would have been missed if I had preached on the text before meeting Mary. Unfortunately, in its effort to avoid exclusive language, the New Revised Standard Version waters down the power of the Greek text by rendering "the Father draws" in the passive voice and making the object of Christ's future raising "that person." (Though the latter objection probably reflects only my own prejudice against the vague generality of "that person" and my preference for singular, more personal pronouns like *her*, *him*, and *you*, it is beyond dispute that the action of the Father is certainly weakened by making the first person of the Trinity the object of a preposition instead of the subject of the clause.)

The Father draws us (continuing verb); Jesus will raise us (a trustworthy promise). These are the two facets of eschatological hope. Our hope is rooted in the resurrection — of Jesus and of ourselves — and our confidence in the latter is based on the actuality of the former. The resurrection is evidence that this life is not all there is, that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to our future glory. But this hope is not a wistful fantasy; we experience it now as the Father draws us. Why do we so often resist God's tugs?

Mary showed me with glaring poignancy how much I take my blessings for granted, how often I reject grace in the forms it comes because I want my own versions — an easier life, no handicaps, everyone's approval, unquestioning audiences. Why do we close our eyes to the myriads of ways that the Father draws us, shows us Triune faithfulness, pours out gifts (especially the Holy Spirit) that produce faith?

Also, could my conversations with Mary be one means the Father might use to draw her as she reflects on them? Are we humbled enough to be available as agents of God's gentle or robust pulling in the lives of those who hear our sermons?

The "already but not yet" of eschatological hope is challenging to preach. Can we paint the kingdom of God, as it has broken into our world and as it will be culminated, with such vivid colors that those who hear our sermons can inhabit that kingdom and rejoice in its hope throughout the week?⁷

The Scriptures and Jesus as Witnesses to Hope

John 6:45-46 next presents two other aspects of preaching hope highlighted by Mary's questions. Jesus quotes Isaiah 54:13 (and hints at Jer. 31:34) and claims that the Hebrew Scriptures prepare those who heed them to believe in the Father's Son. Moreover, the Son, having been with the Father (and being one with the Father, as Jesus says elsewhere in John), provides the clearest glimpses of God's character.

This means, of course, not that we should read the First Testament only in terms

of its fulfillment in Jesus, but that the hope those Scriptures convey will be the same as that shone by the revelation of God in Christ. In both biblical testaments, the people find their hope in a rescuing God, who delivers them not by human machinations or military machinery, but by the LORD's mysterious interventions and hidden ways. For all God's people, hope lies solely in God.

The First Testament texts for the day after I met Mary — I Kings 19:4-8 and Ps. 34:1-8 — certainly underscored this point. Elijah is fed and nourished by the angel of the LORD. The psalmist calls us to magnify the LORD with him, for God has heard his cries and delivered him; the angel of the LORD always encamps around us as we take refuge in God. Our hope lies solely in God.

Furthermore, the day's Epistle lesson, Ephesians 4:25-5:2, accentuated the revelation of God in Jesus, who "loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:2). All the texts of the day extended the same good news to Mary and to the congregation; the Scriptures teach us that hope lies solely in God, and Jesus secured that hope through His work on earth. Jesus loves me; this I *know*, for the Bible (both testaments) tells me so.

When we preach, do we expose the futility of placing our trust in human skills and solutions? Do we display strongly enough the completely sufficient hope that is ours in Christ?

Repeated in John 6:47-48 are Jesus' promise of present eternal life for those who believe and his claim to be the bread of life. Can we find every week new ways to remind our listeners that hope lies solely in God? Even we who have devoted our lives to serving this Gospel find ourselves sometimes trusting instead the devices and commodities of our technologized and affluent society. Perhaps we need the presence of someone like Mary occasionally to remind us again how good the Good News is.

The Bread that Jesus Gives

The most important lesson that Mary indirectly taught me about preaching hope also received the strongest response to my sermon the next day. Earlier in the week I'd been wrestling with Jesus' problematic statement, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn. 6:51). Of course, these words raised an uproar among the people who surrounded Jesus and then among those who accused the early Christians of cannibalism.

Today the words cause tumult between denominations who advocate differing perspectives on whether we partake of bread and wine, or body and blood, or all four when we share the Lord's Supper. Some perhaps spend so much energy fighting about it that the larger point is missed: that Jesus gave His flesh for the life of the world. (The Anglicans solve the problem beautifully by praying, "Sanctify [these gifts of bread and wine] by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in Him. Sanctify us also..."⁷⁸)

Mary made me ask an unsuspected question. She was too near coma to manage her own blood tests, so several times each day for three days I assisted her with them and with her insulin injections. At times the thought nagged at me: to what illnesses am I exposing myself? I took every possible precaution, but my susceptibility to infections is heightened by my own inadequate immune system.

Repeating on Sunday morning Jesus' words, "and the bread that I will give for the

life of the world is my flesh” (Jn. 6:51), forced me to confess my failures to the congregation. Mary’s story had been interwoven in my sermon because experiences with her had opened the text in ways sketched here, but the congregation shouldn’t think too highly of my role in the events. Most pressing of all questions for me had been this: am I willing to die for Mary?

No, no way, no-how, never. But Jesus was willing, and did — for Mary, for me, for you!

On that Sunday, many of us in the congregation tasted the bread of the Supper as a powerful sign that God will still draw Mary, that hope can be sure and will be fulfilled because Jesus gave His flesh for the life of the world, that eternal life is freely and presently available for all who come with hungry hearts.

Hope Enables Us to Face the World

We learned many things as a congregation in this experience that I pray the community will continue to ponder — primarily that the situation of the homeless and needy in our community is desperate. There are not enough resources, and those are becoming scarcer as programs for the needy are slashed from government budgets. How do we find the courage to continue working to bring justice in such an unbalanced, wealthy society? How do we preachers announce and display genuine hope so that our communities can *be* Christian in a society filled with deceptive hopes, false bread?

Jacques Ellul and Gabriel Marcel on Hope

Ellul is mostly known for his almost strident critique (he names it *realism*) of the technological milieu and the power of money. His theological works, however, demonstrate that his bold analyses are possible only because of his firm belief in grace based on the fact of the resurrection, which enables Christians always to have a transcendent perspective.⁹

In the preface to *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, Ellul stresses that his own sociological and historical work had driven him despondently up against a wall, but that then hope

asserted itself.... [I]t could only be the power of the intervention of God, who remained the Wholly Other at the same time that he was the God of Jesus Christ. Hope became near, living and all-embracing. No longer was it a theological formula. It became also the response ... and the decision, at the same time that it was the gift freely given....¹⁰

Similarly, the philosopher Gabriel Marcel declares, “The truth is that there can strictly speaking be no hope except when the temptation to despair exists. Hope is the act by which this temptation is actively or victoriously overcome.”¹¹ We might not feel hopeful, but we receive hope’s gifts. We usually state our hopes in the form “I hope that...,” rather than “I hope,” which is an absolute statement (32). Do we hope *that* under certain conditions our situation could improve, or do we simply hope in God?

As Marcel insists, the *only* source from which “absolute hope springs” is the God Who is “infinite Being” (47). Unconquerable hope can arise in our affluent society only “from the ruins of all human and limited hopes” (48).

Only when our hope is thoroughly and solely Triune can we have the courage to take on the impossible tasks of justice in our society. But we can continue to serve against seemingly impossible odds because as Ellul affirms,

The hope of Jesus Christ is never a dash of pepper or a spoonful of mustard. It is bread and wine, the essential and basic food itself, without which there is only the delirium of knowledge and an illusion of action. It is essential that hope be the all. It has to commit us to those insane actions which alone are reasonable, to that critical knowledge which alone is constructive, to the relentless scouring of the real which is the only realism.¹²

We experience this hope only when we are realistic about the powers controlling the world, and we can be realistic only if we genuinely hope in God (275). Hope keeps the interpretation of reality “from being a lie, an illusion, a justification. More than that, it produces the power whereby we are not conquered by this reality” (279). Hope frees us to preach hope, with all the realism that exposing false hopes necessitates. It frees us to care for all the Marys who come down our streets, to give our best and trust the God of hope that our labor is not in vain. It frees me to know that escalating handicaps are not God’s last word to me, but that instead they draw me closer to God in the present and bring me nearer to seeing my only true hope fulfilled at the last.

For you, too, I pray: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).

Notes

¹Ellul’s book on the subject was translated into English already the next year after the French version appeared. See Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973).

²Douglas John Hall, “Despair as Pervasive Ailment,” *Hope for the World*, ed. Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 83.

³*Ibid.*, 86.

⁴For a larger collage of technological aggravations, see chapter 1, “Why Are Our Hopes So Fettered,” in Marva J. Dawn, *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 1-39.

⁵In my work I have returned to capitalizing pronouns for Jesus, to underscore the divine/human nature of the person to whom the pronoun refers. It seems to me that the lower case on pronouns has aggravated the tendency to reduce the words to gender designations.

⁶On the richness of biblical testimony to the power of God’s grace and love to free us from despair, see chapter 5, “How Can We Escape from Death and Despair?” in *Unfettered Hope*, 109-143.

⁷I remain always indebted to Walter Brueggemann for this vision of the preaching task, which he teaches in *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

⁸*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 363.

⁹See, for example, Jacques Ellul, “L’Empire du sens, pour moi, c’est la Bible,”

France Catholique-Ecclesia 1737 (28 Mar. 1980): 10-1, and “On Christian Pessimism” in Marva J. Dawn, trans. and ed., *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul that Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 92-112.

¹⁰Ellul, *Hope*, viii.

¹¹Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, reprinted (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith Publisher, 1996), 36. Page references to this book in the following paragraphs will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹²Ellul, *Hope*, 201. Page references to this book in the following paragraph will be given parenthetically in the text.