

Hope-Holders: Notes and Reflections on Preaching Hope in Advent

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“Sometimes all you can do is hold hope for someone until they can take it and hold it for themselves.” A young colleague made this remark as we spoke over lunch about hope. The phrase “hope-holders” struck home to me. Isn’t that what followers of Christ are supposed to be? I think of Peter’s admonition: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

I picture Paul, sailing to Rome when the ship is caught in a violent storm and near foundering. After every possible measure is taken and the storm still rages, Luke records “all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” Then Paul stands up and tells them not a life would be lost, for an angel had come telling him not to fear, that he would indeed live to stand before the emperor. “So keep up your courage,” he says, “for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island” (Acts 27:20-26). Paul was no preacher of positive thinking or a prosperity gospel. Danger and death would still come. But with his trust in the word of God, he was a true hope-holder. And what more could we hope to be as preachers of hope this Advent?

What have I learned about hope?

Across the decades of my life, what have I learned about Advent and hope that could be fresh, substantial, hopeful? Christmas I remember well. Customers crowded my parents’ jewelry store in Chatham, Ontario. But Advent did not make an impression on me at First Presbyterian Church. Our minister, Scott Fulton, was tall, genial, with a warm smile, but if he expounded Advent I do not recall. Our worship in the rather austere Scots Presbyterian style did not pay much attention to the liturgical year.

And hope? What if anything (beyond presents under the tree) did I hope for? I hoped in those war years that we would beat Hitler, although that war was a wide ocean away. I hoped the Toronto Maple Leafs would win hockey’s Stanley Cup. And they did, fairly often. I hoped my parents would stop fighting and arguing, at least over Christmas. They didn’t. I hoped, when I led our fledgling Youth for Christ rallies, that most of the kids in my high school would come to Jesus. Some did. Most didn’t care.

What happened to those hopes? Hitler died, but there’s hardly been a year since without war in some part of the world. The Maple Leafs have been pretty much a lost hope for the past forty years. My parents separated when I went off to college. And, although I later preached evangelistically across my native land, fewer Canadians go to church now than then. My birth city, Toronto the Good (and the gray), is now one of the most secular cities in the world.

Two Advents and a Year of Loss

Ironically, the two most recent Advent seasons sandwiched a year of loss for me. Advent always comes at a bittersweet time for Jeanie and me, as we remember our twenty-one year old son Sandy who died thirty years ago during heart surgery the day after Thanksgiving. For some reason, in November of 2009, that dark abyss seemed to crack open, as if a world were crumbling under me again. The sense of loss soon had other faces. Over the next year three men very close to me died with cancer – a long-time colleague, my spiritual director, and one of the first young leaders I mentored. Our doctor son-in-law had a serious accident. A case of shingles occurred. I had to forego attending a major world conference that I had looked forward to. A younger family member was struggling with depression and addiction. All that happened from Advent of one year through the next.

Those losses seem to have been foreshadowed when I got lost hiking in the North Carolina mountains in the summer of 2009. I had missed a sign for a fork in the road, had no map, darkness was closing in, and no one knew where I was. I wondered if I would be spending the night in the company of bears! Just before my cell phone powered down, I managed to call the manager of a local lodge who told me I was headed 180 degrees in the wrong direction. “Start walking the other way,” he said. “It’s a long walk, but I’ll send someone to get you.” An hour later I heard a welcome shout from a security guy in his pickup. A voice had come with promise and a new direction. Early and late, I have been learning that hope and loss, tragically, are bound together, that like Abraham I am always “hoping against hope,” and that for hoping, I need a voice beyond my own.

The Character of Hope

“What can I hope for?” The philosopher Immanuel Kant posed that as one of the three main questions we humans must ask. The answer to Kant’s question seems as slippery, as elusive, as Emily Dickinson’s depiction of hope as a “thing with feathers that perches in the soul.” So I turn to theologians and writers who have tried to describe hope.

Hope as Wishful Thinking?

In Frederick Buechner’s book of theological ABCs, I find this: “Hope (See Wishful Thinking).” Turning to *Wishful Thinking*, I am startled to read that “Christianity is mainly wishful thinking.” Does Buechner really think that hope is the fanciful belief that somewhere, somehow – “over the rainbow” – our dreams will all come true? But with a typical wry play on words, Buechner continues, “Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-ups is wishful thinking. Interplanetary thinking is wishful thinking. Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.”¹ Perhaps this is more than clever. Perhaps it is profoundly wise. From where does hope arise if not from the deepest wishes and longings of our lives?

But then Henri Nouwen, reflecting on “waiting” in Luke’s advent account, observes that Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were filled not with wishes but with hope. Hope, he says, is open-ended, fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. “I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It is only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something re-

ally new, something beyond my own expectations, could happen to me.”² Hope may connect with our deepest wishes, but must it not connect with something more?

Hope as Human Resilience?

This year we have witnessed some heart-warming examples of human resilience amid great loss. One thinks of the citizens of Joplin and Tuscaloosa rebuilding after the tornadoes or of Lou Zamperini, whose story is told in the best-selling *Unbroken*. Zamperini survived forty-seven days on a raft after his B-24 crashed in the Pacific during World War II, followed by years in brutal Japanese POW camps. He had no strong faith until much later (after hearing Billy Graham preach), but something inside kept him enduring the unimaginable. Is hope then a characteristic that humans have? A “hope” gene, perhaps, stronger in some than others?

On NPR’s *Speaking of Faith*, British physicist/ theologian John Polkinghorne expressed his conviction that there is a “very deep human intuition of hope, the strangeness and bitterness of the world notwithstanding.” Asked if his conviction of a destiny beyond death was not an article of faith, he replied that it was, but one guaranteed in history by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this “deep intuition of hope” provides an entrée for our preaching of Advent hope. The resilience we see in Joplin, Tuscaloosa, or Lou Zamperini, the “hopes” that keep us going, may not fully express biblical hope, but they do point to the God of hope.

A Theology of Hope and Promise

For a long time Kant’s third question – *What may I hope for?* – was largely absent from philosophical and theological agendas. Then it surfaced after the crucible of World War II. A philosophy of hope was espoused by an eighty-one year old East German Jewish-Marxist atheist, Ernst Bloch. German theologians Moltmann and Pannenberg championed a “theology of hope.”³

In 1968 *The Christian Century* carried a series on this “theology of hope.” One contributor, the Anabaptist scholar Vern Eller, was deeply concerned about the direction he saw this heading. “Stop the train!” he wrote, fearing theology could be switched “to a dead-end siding.” It was not the theology of hope as such that Eller was challenging. He simply thought it was the wrong name. It should, he said, be called the “theology of promise.” He was concerned lest the “hope” line take us to a dead-end with theology as an analysis of human capability instead of God’s faithfulness. “It is because God has promised ... that man has even the possibility of hoping. It is the case that promise creates hope, not that man’s need for hope creates the idea of a promising God.”⁴ Strong and salutary words. They make me pause and think about what I have already written.

Should I take back what I recounted about my own teen-age hopes? Or my year of loss? The resilience humans show? I think not. Those are attention-getters that God may use. But they do make a red warning light go off. I can speak too glibly about hope or tell stories to imply that God is our Leading Optimist.

Eller makes me reckon again with Paul’s description of what it means to be strangers to the covenant, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12) – grim words, yet in the context of God’s abounding riches and eternal purpose in Christ. This biblical hope does not promise easy answers to hard questions. As the light of the risen Christ blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, the daybreak of hope

is also a light which for a while blinds us. We still wonder, hurt, and grieve, but not as those who have no hope. We still trust the God of promises who leads us on to the future. Thus faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 1:1). Where then is the voice I need to hear? The promise I need to trust?

The Character Of Hope – In Person

It surprised me to learn that the word we translate as “hope” (*elpis*) seldom appears in the gospels--the noun not at all, and the verb only five times, with one significant use in the past tense, “We had hoped” (Luke 24:21).⁵ Many of the Psalms overflow with “hope,” and so do some of the prophets. The epistles seem to be crammed with “hope.” Why so rare in the gospels?

That seemed strange until I realized: of course! Why would the writers need the word for “hope”? Hope was present – in person. They had seen hope – walking, talking, eating, speaking, healing among them. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:22). God was keeping his promise of a coming kingdom—in person!

Of all the gospels, Luke may offer the text of choice for Advent preaching on hope. And not only because of his traditional Nativity account, but because of his focus on a waiting people, waiting with a sense of promise and surprised by the hope that comes to them. “Nobody has to teach the theology of hope to Luke,” writes Vern Eller. “He was preaching it long before our modern theologians got around to inventing it.”⁶

Luke begins his “orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Note that word “fulfilled.”) with the narrative of three annunciations (to Zechariah the priest, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the shepherds), two conceptions and two births (John and Jesus), three hymns (Mary’s song, and Zechariah’s, and Simeon’s), a revelation (to the aged Simeon), and a witness (by Anna the prophet) about the child “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). His first three chapters are packed with themes we could lift up as a series in our Advent preaching on hope.

The Angels of Advent. Hope comes as a word from God through angels to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds. We might say they were the first “evangelists” – *ev-angel-ists*! These stories are “thick with angels” (Eller), and if we are preaching on them we better have our “angelology” straight. It might even be wise to ask some Majority World believers to tutor our rational Western minds. They seem to know more about angels than we do.

The Emotions of Advent. Hope comes so surprisingly that it creates strong emotions, fear, terror in fact, and perplexity (1:12, 1:29,30, 1:65, 2:9), but emotions quickly transformed into joy (1:14, 1:46, 2:10) and peace (1:79, 2:14, 2:29). Imagine how tangled confusion and hope must have been for Mary and Joseph over the nine months of her pregnancy.

The Spirit of Advent. Hope announced by angels is also the gift of the Holy Spirit. John will be filled with the Spirit before his birth (1:15). The Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation overshadows Mary as the new creation begins with her child the holy Son of God (1:35). Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, cries out with joy as the

baby leaps in her womb (1:41-2). Before he died, Simeon was guided by the Spirit to see the Lord's Messiah (2:26-7). Why not freshly acquaint our hearers with the "Spirit of hope" during Advent?

The Hope of Advent. Jesus Saves! So said the angels. Saving hope comes in stages. It comes personally to Zechariah in the birth of John, to Mary in her son Jesus, to the shepherds in the baby in the manger. But hope also comes for all creation — the promise of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist will be a forerunner of Jesus and of the rule of God (1:17). Mary's child will reign over a kingdom with no end (1:33). The good news to the shepherds is for all, with peace among those God favors (2:10, 14). How wide and deep is the hope of salvation. Not only is it hope for our heavenly destiny. My own personal experience of salvation is a promissory note, a foretaste of God's promise to make all things new.

The Comings of Advent. Jesus was hope present in person. He is also our hope in his coming again. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again," we say in our liturgy. Do Presbyterians believe this: that Jesus is coming again? Why leave his second coming to the crazies or the date-setters? As N. T. Wright puts it, "People who believe that Jesus is already Lord and that he will appear again as judge of the world are called and equipped (to put it mildly) to think and act quite differently in the world from those who don't."⁷

Whatever text we may choose (or that chooses us), we desire Advent to become more than a solemn season before Christmas, but indeed the theme of our lives. In Eller's words, "The world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ.... The proper stance toward Christmas is not to look back toward Bethlehem, but (to) look through the stable into the Kingdom of God." (op cit.) We are still, and always, a waiting people, who confess

Christ has come.

Christ is coming.

Christ will come again!

The Character Hope Produces

Luke begins his gospel with a waiting people. He ends with a disappointed people — two disciples on the way to Emmaus who tell the stranger who questions them, "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21).

But they had hope wrong. They thought when Messiah came, God would raise up a remnant force to defeat their pagan foes. But the stranger opens the Scriptures and shows them how the Messiah had "first to suffer, then enter his glory." The thread of God's saving purposes ran through the suffering and vindication of his people — and finally his Servant-Son. Jesus' death was not the end. Death did not destroy his messianic mission. It confirmed it. This is how the exile was to end and the kingdom to come — hope leading through suffering, into glory. As the scriptures are opened, so are the eyes of two men walking to Emmaus. All are "surprised by hope" as Jesus appears once more and tells them to wait until he sends "what the Father has promised" — power from on high (Luke 24:36ff). When the Holy Spirit comes, they become a transformed and hope-filled people, a missionary people, living, telling resurrection hope until he would appear again.

Luke passes his chronicle of hope on to the apostles and disciples, and especially to Paul the apostle of hope, in his testimony before King Agrippa, arguing that he stands

trial “on account of my hope in the promises of God made to our ancestors” (Acts 26:6); in his words of hope on that storm-lashed ship; in his writings; and especially in his letter to the Romans. (Paul uses “hope” more than any other New Testament writer, 17 times in Romans alone.)

We miss the point of Romans unless we read it as a great missionary manifesto. Paul writes that we receive grace “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name” (Romans 1:4-5). Paul’s theology is missiology – a call to God’s people to live, suffer, and proclaim the risen Jesus as Lord to the nations. Hope is about much more than my personal wishes; it is about belonging to a community of hope-holders.

“Character produces hope” (Romans 5:4). In Romans also we find plenty of material for Advent preaching. All the themes from Luke (except angels) appear again – waiting, expectation, promise, suffering, joy, salvation, the Spirit of hope. *Here we see the character of faith* – Abraham “hoping against hope,” convinced that God was able to do what he promised (Romans 5:18, 21), knowing that we will be saved by Christ’s death and his life (Romans 5:10). *Here we see character shaped by suffering* – which produces endurance, and character, and hope – all from God’s love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5). *Here we see the character of waiting expectantly*, all creation, groaning now, but “saved in hope,” knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:18-25, 38-39). *And here we see the character of a missionary people*, encouraged in hope by the Scriptures, the promises, the power of the Holy Spirit, praising the Lord among the nations so they too shall hope (Romans 15:4-13). So we take on the character of the angels – evangelists, hope-holders to the world!

What then is hope? And what difference does hope make in how we live?

Hope is a strong and confident trust, given by the Holy Spirit and nurtured in life experience, that God, who has promised good to us and all creation, makes good on his promises through Jesus’ coming and coming again.

Hope deepens our longings – turning our wishes into a desire for what is truly good, beautiful, and eternal.

Hope trusts our longings into God’s merciful hands, knowing that he is wiser than we, and able to do above what we can ask or even think.

Hope expands our horizons setting our desires into a wider and longer picture. Like stone masons fitting stones for a cathedral, we see only the small section assigned to us, yet know ours is part of a great purpose.

Hope reframes our losses. “Reframe,” a psychological term, describes the power of hope to give a new perspective and open new possibilities. As we “hold hope” for others we pray they may also be given grace to see how God can bring gain out of terrible loss.

Hope binds our own future to that of Jesus Christ. Whatever storms come we can know with comforting certainty “that I, body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but long belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ” (*Heidelberg Catechism*).

Hope Holder Sidepieces
A Piece of the Berlin Wall

A 17-year old North Korean woman who spoke at the CapeTown 2010 congress on world evangelization told how her father has been missing for four years, presumably imprisoned for his faith. Her one ambition: some day to speak for Christ in her country. A Salvation Army officer present from the old East Germany met her with a gift, explaining, "I brought with me a piece of the Berlin Wall, and I want to give it to her as a sign of what God can do in seemingly impossible places."

Lazarus in Haiti

On a visit to Haiti, Rich Stearns, president of World Vision, visited a crude church made of UN tarps and scrap lumber. There he saw Demosi, a mother who lost two limbs in the earthquake, leading the choir, standing on her prosthesis and lifting her one hand high in praise. Rich asked what he could tell people back home. "Tell them you have seen Lazarus, and she is back from the dead." Demosi believes she was saved to raise her girls and serve God a few more years. "God has given me a second chance."

The Surfer Who Reframed Her Loss

The hit movie *Soul Surfer* is the story of Bethany Hamilton, a teen-age surfing champion who lost an arm in a shark attack in Hawaii. "What do I do now?" she plaintively asks her father, who tells her, "Wait. Listen. Follow your instinct." On a mission to tsunami victims to Thailand, she finds children withdrawn and terrorized by the ocean. But she finds, by letting them watch her surf with her one arm, she can bring new hope to them.

Hoping for Hope in Japan

Michael, youthful president of a seminary, says young Japanese "hope for hope, not only from the disasters, but so many are victims of the sex trade." And how is hope held for them? "In our city, at the Heart and Soul Café, we offer a safe place, coffee and tea, music, counseling and tutoring, and hope in Christ."

Not Rude to the Holy Spirit

Hester is an 87-year old widow and retired missionary in England. "Hope," she says, "is very practical for me. I am alone so much of the time. I wish I could actually see Jesus, have him sit with me. Then I remember that he said if he did not go, the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, would not come. So I do not want to be rude to the Holy Spirit!"

Kingdom Hope among Students in Nigeria

Femi, a leader in ministry to university students says, "What our country is most hoping for is leadership with new direction, and new integrity. I see hope in young Christians, with a passion for Jesus and an irrepressible desire to witness for him, with kingdom values that can transform our country."

I do not have a long wish list for this Advent Season. I hope it may not be as

traumatic as some past ones. But I do have this Advent wish: to be so grasped by the promises of God, that my preaching, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will lead those who hear to say: "There is our future. Christ is our future. He is our hope."

Notes

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking. A Theological ABC* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1973).

2 Henri Nouwen, "A Spirituality of Waiting." (Weavings (January/February 1987).

3 Carl Braaten, *Toward a Theology of Hope. Theology Today*, 1967. 24:208. His evaluation of theology of hope and its implications is still relevant and well worth reading. Braaten saw this "new" theological vision as filling a vacuum, taking up the question of "what it means for man to hope at all, whether to be human is to have hope." The biblical message is like a powerful electrical generator needing a place to "plug in" with modern people, and that plug in is the longing for hope. Without the eschatology of the Bible, "there is nothing that remains that deserves to be called the biblical message." Hope is born from contradiction; the resurrection contradicts the cross. Hope contradicts our present experience. The mission of hope is to face the contradictions of our world – between righteousness and sin, joy and suffering, peace and war – while looking to what we may expect "if the God of hope is faithful to his promises."

4 For Vern Eller's article, go to the website www.hccentral.com. *The Vernard Eller Collection*. He includes a football analogy: every call a good quarterback makes is eschatological, made with an eye to the final score. Yet the quarterback remembers each previous play, is planning the next play, and can somehow do all this as tacklers go for him! By Advent football is in full swing – so this may offer a helpful analogy..

5 For an excellent short summary of "hope" in the Old and New Testaments see *Hope* in Colin Brown ed, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Volume 2. (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan: 1976).

6 Vern Eller. "Christmas and Luke's Theology of Hope," in *The Christian Century* December 18, 1968. Eller's exposition from Luke's early chapters provides excellent material for preaching. To access go to www.hccentral.com *House Church Central. The Vernard Eller Collection*.

7 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins , 2008, 144). If I were preaching an Advent message on the "second coming" I would delve into Wright's discussion of eschatology. He takes on both the secular humanist apostles of progress, and the extreme preachers of doom. A video series with Wright available from Zondervan could be helpful for an Advent study group.