

With Head Held High: Preaching Hope in a Noisy Time

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“There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for ongoing life, for building anew, for the coming generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹

“Put not your trust in princes...” Psalm 146:3.

I

Of all the tasks to which the church is called to undertake, the one that makes the least obvious sense is to hope. Faith may well be the conviction of things hoped for, but convictions are surprisingly easy to summon up, and many if not most can be held with “passionate intensity.” Love may well be the “greatest of these,” but this virtue also has the advantage of engaging concretely with the beloved or even the beloved enemy. Hope, on the other hand, seems a poor thing, often inarticulate in the face of real adversity, and even more often dismissed as pious wishing or impossibly vague. Yet of these three virtues, hope is the most public, the most courageous, and the most engaged with the future. It is also the easiest to lose.

What makes hope strange and strangely elusive is that it comes to us, as it did to those discouraged disciples on the way to Emmaus, when we have given it up, and just so, its presence in our midst unerringly reveals our emptiness. Hope comes to us when we have grown used to and even prefer our quiet resignation or comfortable disbelief to the rigors of feeding again on some word of promise. The famine of the word of which Amos speaks (8:11) is something we have shown a remarkable ability to manage. There are other sources of nourishment upon which we can feed and even stuff ourselves. We work hard not to be hungry. And the emptiness we feed upon, whatever else it is, is rarely silent but instead quite noisy. It is filled with the hopelessness of political rhetoric, with those hawking the salvific blessings of affluence, with those promoting the spiritual consolations of self-exploration, anything to keep us from hearing this word of hope.

So why is something so elusive so threatening to us? If hope is so poor and weak and beside the point, why do we flee from it so instinctively? Perhaps because we suspect, rightly, that hope is another name for God’s intrusive presence in our world, and we fear, again rightly, that that presence will disturb us, revealing the inadequacy of all our efforts to feed ourselves and creating in us a hunger we cannot satisfy. Worse, it may well take us to places we have had no intention of going. Scripture is full of such instances (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, Ananias,

Israel). Indeed, disciples shaped by a hope that takes them where they did not intend to go seem to be the only kind of disciples there are. Hope is the way God bothers us, even seduces us, into becoming disciples and seeing the impossible extent of the kingdom that is coming into our midst. Sanctification, that is, to be grasped by hope, does not conduce to faintness of heart or timidity of spirit.

II

Still, we have ways of dealing with that. And nearly all of these ways reduce hope to something more manageable. Amidst the noisy emptiness that constitutes so much of our public life, we often seek to insulate ourselves from the intrusions of hope by reducing it to something more strategic. The political option is, perhaps, the most compelling of all our contrivances, especially today, because it feeds on the polity of the kingdom that hope reveals, and it seeks to address manifest evils that are deeply corrupting of the body politic and the human spirit. This effort to derive the meaning of our lives from a politicization of hope has been taken up by many in the 20th century (e.g., in Russian, Germany, China, and elsewhere) whose aims, always inspired by the most righteous of visions, have resulted in untold misery and massive loss of life.² The danger, of course, is that in such a context, we will find hope merely useful. That is, trusting in our own self-righteousness and in the stupidity and viciousness of those “others,” we will soon enough turn away from hope’s humbling contradictions and settle for something more clear-cut, like our victories and their losses. We will preside over our own end, the goal of every form of self-justification. Just so does our hope become even more passionately hopeless and the presence of the kingdom something quite false indeed.³

Yet even here, hope refuses to retire. That is the thing about hope: it is not something we “have” so much as it is something that intrudes upon us, even claims and directs us.⁴ We hope because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. That event is the source and substance of all hope. And we had nothing to do with that. And in truth, if Jesus had remained in the tomb, we would never be bothered with something as intrusive and unrelenting and comprehensive as hope. But his resurrection, his triumph over death, disturbs our settled certainties about “the way things are” and breathes life into discouraged disciples, enabling them to preach with the same confidence of that prophet of old whose words rattled dry bones together into a living people. Just so does hope, as the work of the Spirit, create its own polity, seeping through our tightly-knit structures with the mysterious gift of life. Such a gift cannot be extinguished by gulags, death-camps, or even American political campaigns. Hope can even thrive in such frightening circumstances. Indeed, poverty, lack, not-having, losing—none of these things are hindrances to the work of hope.

Affluence, however, often is such a hindrance and at times seems more prevalent if not more powerful than the various ideologies of hope. Having much can be a real threat to the church’s preaching. The message of hope begins to sound hollow when we who preach it lack so little and have so much. Our self-sufficiency serves to insulate us from the radical needs of others and prevents us from perceiving our true solidarity with them precisely in those needs. So do we gradually lose hope, particularly for this world, and settle instead for charity, occasional good works, and various forms of spiritual consolation. Losing hope is not particularly painful. There is a kind of pleasant American form of nihilism, often resembling a domesticated

Christianity, that is quite comfortable in its hopelessness.

There is also more than one kind of “prosperity gospel,” but the hopelessness that pervades its preaching is always the same. Affluence, it is claimed, or the prospect of same, is what gives meaning to a life and is in fact what God intends for those who are blessed. This counterfeit is actually very good. To hope in Jesus Christ *is* to grasp a vision of the abundant life. It is a vision of human flourishing. Those desiring such are not to be belittled or despised, especially by others who have much of the world’s material goods themselves. Still, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not about having, and the abundance which he promises, whatever it contains, is not a means of shielding us either from the limits of our own humanity or the cost of his discipleship. Rather, precisely in those limits and in the company of other disciples does the abundant life begin to reveal itself. Just as hope can be politicized, so can it be materialized into something less, something that resembles the real thing but before long is indistinguishable from hopelessness.

Looking toward politics or wealth to give our lives meaning may be obvious forms of hopelessness, but there is a more pernicious and painful source of our malaise today which is just as hopeless and in some ways much more daunting. Loneliness is a characteristic of “the way we live now,” a much-documented feature of modern life.⁵ One might think that loneliness is more a symptom of hopelessness than a counterfeit or cause. But the kind of loneliness that modernity engenders is not that of being stranded on a deserted island or sent abroad to a foreign country so much as it is an aloneness that resembles a lostness, an aimlessness, disconnected and unrelated to others. To some extent, the affluence we enjoy can make this loneliness not only bearable but for many, preferable, persuading us that just so we will avoid many of the hurts and betrayals intimacy and friendship so often bring. However, another side of this feature of modern life is the quiet despair that pervades our conversations and manners and often renders our preaching timid. We come not to expect much. Our loneliness has taught us a kind of comfortable hopelessness that narrows our vision and settles for less than the fullness that the hope of the gospel intends.

But the loneliness of modern life has more insidious effects, many of which ironically shed light on the communal nature of Christian hope. The French revolutionaries were right to hunger not only for liberty and equality but also for fraternity, something much more difficult to achieve. Already in the 18th century, the loss of common life was perceptible and the longing for some form of life together palpable. Today, that longing emerges from a deracinated sense of loneliness and has given rise to tribal groups of various sorts: gangs, terrorist groups, racist movements, even political factions. Loneliness like this is the seedbed of resentment, with which our culture is rife. And it is resentment that seeks allies and eagerly constructs out of its own loneliness a kind of hopeless hope that can neither build nor plant, but only destroy.

III

If these counterfeits of hope feed upon the hope revealed in the gospel, then what is the nature of that hope and how does it manifest itself, and, more to the point of this article, how is it to be proclaimed?

In scripture hope both comes to people and also keeps them. That is to say, the risen Lord, who came and who lives and who will come again is also the one who bars

the door against hopelessness, who refuses to allow death to be taken as seriously as it would like. That, in fact, is the source of nearly all our hopelessness, not so much our fear of death, but our acquiescence to its power. It is our end, we think, and at best we struggle, however vainly, to agree to its terms, whether political, material, or spiritual. It is this idolatry of death that makes our resentments sharper, that renders our opponents enemies, that tempts us to worship the principalities and powers that we think will rule in the end. It also threatens to empty our memory of hope's particular story, robbing us of both the past and the future, denying the grace that gives rise to gratitude.

But the gospel of hope refuses to give death that much power. How can it, given that the one who was raised and who lives is also the one who is to come? This is how memory becomes the mother of hope. He will come to judge "the quick and the dead." Not just the dead! Scripture (I Thess. 4:17!) and our own creeds insist that death does not own or define our end. That he will judge the living as well as the dead is a great sign of hope, claiming as it does that death is not the final judge of all. Our end belongs to the one who comes, Jesus Christ.⁶ And that is the one whose Advent we await, whose coming into the world is the hope of the world. Being open to this coming is what it means to live into hope. It is to stand over an open grave and speak of the resurrection and the life. Such an openness is less a form of optimism than it is a daily prayer to be given the strength not to give in to the forces of death. Yet such a strength can only come through the advent of him whose persistent, relentless, and intrusively faithful coming engenders that kind of radical hope, making a way where there is no way and enabling visions that subvert the settled "realities" that seem unmovable. So does hope inspire new ventures that might seem otherwise impossible and establish solidarity in the place of isolation. Preaching Advent hope is confident preaching because the one who is to come is precisely the one who has defeated death and whose life unveils a vision of community, of life together, even of politics based not on the binary choices we make but on the persistent faithfulness of him who will not be without "the least of these." This hope is not grimly strategic but is rather surprisingly joyful, summoning us to "rejoice in hope," even as we are counseled to "be patient in suffering" and perseverant in prayer (Rom. 12:12).

Such an Advent hope is countercultural in its piety. The principalities and powers that seem to rule our politics and guide our intellectual and moral currents are joyless in their death-dealing strategies. To them the proclamation of Advent hope must seem a kind of pious optimism having little to do with the way the world is run. Rather like Brueghel's painting of "The Numbering in Bethlehem,"⁷ the real action, we so easily think, is elsewhere and the holy couple dragging in to be registered is hardly noticed. But then that is the way hope seeps into our world, is it not? Just as Luke portrays it, with Caesar decreeing for the whole world and Quirinius governing his little patch of it and hardly anyone noticing the bedraggled couple trudging into Bethlehem. So does hope slip into our world almost unnoticed, creating a community that includes shepherds and angels drawn to a baby cradled in a manger, forming a more joyful and more encompassing polity than Caesar's.

Proclaiming such a joyful hope is the particular gift given to the church, a gift that makes the church itself a sign of hope in the world. Such a gift is not merely instrumental but inheres in the life together that the church embodies. To that extent, the church is the seedbed of hope in the world. And just so does hope reveal itself

to be deeply communal in nature, not the province of religious virtuosos but the life together that is connected by sinews and tendons of common work and witness, common suffering and loss, shared memories and joys. How much of the courageous struggle of the Civil Rights movement was funded by the worship and work of the African American church? The witness of the Confessing Church in Germany, as weak and as compromised as it was, was nevertheless the only institutional exception opposed to Hitler's *Gleichschaltung* and the only articulated vision of a different, more hopeful future. The pacifistic ministry of Andre Trocmé that helped rescue over 3,000 Jewish children by housing them in the homes of the poor farmers in his congregation in Le Chambon, France, was sustained by the worship of the "temple" people of the French Reformed congregation and their memory of being persecuted for their Huguenot convictions.⁸ More recently, the courageous and costly witness of French monks in North Africa to the reconciling grace of Jesus Christ whose love compelled them to love the world of Islam and see in it a hope-filled space for a genuine life together—this witness was clearly rooted in and sustained by their commitment to peace and their beautiful worship together in their monastery in Tibhirine.⁹

There is a danger in citing this roll call of hope, given the dramatic canvass on which the story of these lives are depicted. One should not desire such drama. And in truth, the hope that summons us to bear witness in our own day, small as we might think it, will be and is hard enough. Our day's own trouble will be quite sufficient for the day. But these examples do show clearly what it means for the church to be seized with that resurrection hope that begins to be announced and glimpsed during Advent.

As some of the Advent texts make clear, this hope also has a terrifying aspect: "Who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?" (Mal. 3:2). The advent of this one does threaten earthly powers. It always has. And, like the demons of old, they are remarkably faithful witnesses to its power, often more perceptive in their assessment of this One who comes than those who are called to expect him. And we too might well be frightened by such an advent, for we too are complicit in "the way the world is run." Only because the one who is to come is the crucified and risen Lord who has dethroned the power of death itself do we dare to walk in hope toward his coming with "head held high,"¹⁰ confident that his judgment, whatever it will be, will be a grace not only for the whole world but also, strangely, for us.

IV

Hope perseveres. Hope does not whine. Hope is content to work on small things in light of the big thing it knows. And hope works publicly, not just privately or spiritually. Hope is committed to the good of the community and is concerned particularly with the local community. More than the global or even national contexts, though not to their exclusion, hope cherishes the local and seeks to nurture and sustain the life that is rooted there, especially attending to the life that is most vulnerable. In particular, hope is concerned with the community that is gathered around the word each Sunday that lives by and expects to hear a word of hope proclaimed.

The Sundays of Advent are occasions for this hope to be announced with urgent joy and sobering clarity. In a time of political and social turbulence, a time when words seem to mean less and less and if anything, have become weaponized to hurt

and destroy, what is needed is that word that refuses to recognize the power of death over this world and instead finds its voice in the witness to the risen Lord who insists on showing up. His coming is announced in various ways, some prophetically outrageous, others almost lost in the noise of the world. The word of his coming has often been overlooked by the powerful and not taken that seriously, until they realize the threat he represents. That a little child could be so threatening is an indication of hope's unsettling work, just as it is a powerful witness to the way the kingdom of God slips into the world. Such a small gift. In such an out of the way place. "Who *can* endure the day of his coming?" Who can even preach it? Only those who have been taught by hope to remember such strange gifts and have learned that "to rejoice in hope" is the proper work of Advent. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Notes

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years" in *Letters and Papers from Prison (The Bonhoeffer Reader)*, Minneapolis, Minn., Fortress Press, 2013), 774.

2 To cite but one witness who lived through the results of such a hopeless enterprise and has written eloquently about it, see Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir of her husband's exile and death under Stalin, entitled, *Hope Against Hope* (New York: The Modern Library, New York 1999).

3 For an extended description of this option, see Jacques Ellul's *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York, Seabury Press, 1972).

4 "No one can 'have' hope; rather, when someone is 'seized' or 'grasped' by hope, that person lives in hope." Gerhard Sauter, *What Dare We Hope*, (Harrisburg Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1999), 21.

5 The most referenced text is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), but there are many others.

6 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3/2, 926ff. "According to the New Testament death has no such monopoly in principle. It is limited by that other form... of the end [Jesus Christ]." 926.

7 See W. H. Auden's poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts" for a theologically perceptive comment on this phenomenon.

8 See Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) for an account of this remarkable venture in hope.

9 See John Kiser's *The Monks of Tibhirine* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002) and the remarkable movie directed by Xavier Beauvois, *Of Gods and Men*.

10 See Q.52 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.