

Getting into the Habit of Hope

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“All shall be well.”

Few of the sayings of the medieval mystics are as well known to Christians as is this brief phrase from the fourteenth-century English anchorite Julian of Norwich. Many may even know the slightly longer phrasing: “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Of all the memorable language of the Christian tradition, this phrase might best express the sense of hope to which we are called as followers of Christ.

Sometimes, of course, the language of hope can devolve into a sappy optimism in which the whole world is seen through rose-colored glasses. When faced with a personal tragedy or experiencing a sense of deep sadness about the state of the world, it may not help for others to quote Julian’s words in a sunny, positive voice, as though singing the final number from a musical comedy. It may indeed be the case that “all shall be well,” but we will not understand the truth of that phrase if we fail to acknowledge everything that has been faced: the carnage and the mayhem, the pain and the suffering, the loss and the emptiness.

In this respect, a good place for us to begin is with the larger context of Julian’s words, which are part of her *Showings*, a series of fifteen divine revelations that she received and recorded when she was—so she thought—on her deathbed. She was gravely ill and in considerable pain. So we can be certain that for Julian at least, her words of assurance were neither felt nor meant as sunny optimism. She had experienced pain and suffering and loss, so it must have caused her a certain amount of existential angst to write that “all shall be well.” But the context of this language goes well beyond her personal experience. She understands this phrase to be a response to a much broader concern: the fallen state of the world.

Here are the sentences leading up to the famous phrase:

In my folly, before this time I often wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the onset of sin was not prevented: for then, I thought, all should have been well. This impulse [of thought] was much to be avoided, but nevertheless I mourned and sorrowed because of it, without reason and discretion.

But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: “It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

We might not use Julian’s language to describe how we feel, but we too are puzzled by “the onset of sin.” And not just in a broad, theoretical way, in which we might wonder “why bad things happen to good people” or “why God lets tragic events occur.” Right now, in this time and place, we have experienced the fallen state of the world quite concretely. Why did a mysterious disease break out and kill millions of people? Why are we experiencing a political divide that has rent the bonds of our

common humanity, setting parents against children and destroying longstanding friendships? Why have the markers of racial and ethnic identity become flash points once again, just as we had begun to imagine that genuine healing was possible? The Earl of Gloucester's words in Act II of *King Lear* could have been written in direct response to the heartaches of the past two years:

Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves.

And yet, this is not the worst: by Act V, Gloucester may think back on this distinctly pessimistic speech as insufficiently attentive to just how bad things can get. As his son, disguised, will remind us in a pair of asides:

O gods! Who is't can say "I am at the worst"?
I am worse than e'er I was....
And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say "This is the worst."

In response to this, are we genuinely ready to say "All shall be well"? Can we really generate that level of hopefulness?

The word *hope* is a popular one during the Advent season, running the gamut from selfish desires for a particularly expensive Christmas present to a genuine feeling of exultation and joy in anticipation of the coming of the Christ child. Across its full range of connotations, hope is often portrayed as a *feeling*: a person's inner disposition toward the world. Understood in this way, it is easy to understand the usefulness and the disadvantages of hope. Those who can cultivate a feeling of optimism about the future are appreciated for their positive attitude and, at the same time, roundly criticized for their inattention to everything that has transpired since "the onset of sin," as Julian would put it. And in a parallel way, those who cannot muster up feelings of hope are lauded for their clear-sightedness, and yet also disparaged for being killjoys and making us feel guilty for any trace of optimism that we might have left. To use a season-specific analogy: we certainly don't like Scrooge at the beginning of the story, but he's a little hard to take at the end as well. We all breathe a little sigh of relief that Dickens didn't add a couple more stanzas to this "Carol"; too much of the starry-eyed Ebenezer might have been a little hard to take.

Our difficulties here may spring from a misunderstanding of *hope*. As long as we think of it as a kind of inner feeling of optimism, it will always face the challenge of being too much or not enough. But over the long course of the Christian tradition, hope has not been understood primarily as an inner feeling. It is, rather, a virtue, which is often defined as a particular character trait, developed over time by certain good habits. Many people are familiar with the cardinal virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and prudence. These are not merely feelings; they have to be instantiated in action. We don't call people courageous just because they talk a good game; they have to

prove their courage by doing courageous things. Doing so takes practice: one can't spend one's life having never been in a dangerous situation and then be expected to be courageous without the slightest degree of preparation. The brave soldier, the brave athlete, the brave citizen—all have cultivated courage by doing courageous things. And this requires all kinds of training: instruction and mentoring, extensive practice, and a genuine commitment to rise to the challenge when the situation demands it.

Theologians have long recognized that some of the most important ethical demands of the Christian tradition also have the nature of a virtue. Paul's list of the fruits of the spirit, for example, are not simply inner feelings that we can generate in ourselves if we try very hard. To express joy (even when there doesn't seem to be anything to be joyful about), to be patient (even when there's no good reason to be), to show forth gentleness (when you just want to hit something)—these are not things that we can do by a quick snap decision. The “fruit” metaphor is a good one: trees do not produce fruit instantaneously or by mere force of will. They require cultivation, and the growth of their fruits takes time. So we develop the habit of patience by being shown what patience looks like (by others who are good at it), by practicing it (particularly in situations where being patient is difficult or may even seem foolhardy), and by reinforcing the habit by how we think and what we do. Stories of patient people can help; role models are important; and nothing substitutes for practice, practice, practice.

Two of the fruits of the spirit are love and faithfulness, and these two ideas show up in slightly different form in Paul's well-known hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13. Here we learn that “these three abide: faith, hope, and love.” These were also recognized in the tradition as virtues; St. Thomas Aquinas calls them “the theological virtues.” Again, we tend to think of these three words as naming feelings or inner states of being; we love people by feeling love in our hearts, and we have faith in God by choosing to do so. But a closer look at both of these elements of Christian action will quickly reveal them to be “more than a feeling.” Dorothy Day did not come to love her fellow human beings just by “falling in love” with them; it took years of wrestling with the realities that other people face and struggling through her own “long loneliness.” John Wesley spoke of his heart being “strangely warmed” with a sense of trust in God, but this did not appear out of nowhere. He had been studying the Bible and church history, meeting with other Christians, and contemplating the work of God in Christ for a good part of his life. Love and faith are virtues, just as courage and patience are. We need to be taught them by story and example; we need to pay attention to how well we are embodying them, recognizing that we will sometimes fail to do so; and we need to practice them by loving others (even when we might prefer to do the opposite) and by believing in God (even when unbelief seems the more sensible choice).

And so it is with the theological virtue of hope. Not a mere feeling—not something that we can summon up on the spot, just because we think it would be good to be hopeful from time to time. Being hopeful requires practice. It requires us to be in distinctly un-hopeful situations, committing ourselves to whatever degree of hope we can manage—remembering Abraham, who believed in God's promise while “hoping against hope” (Rom. 4:18). When we face such difficulties and make it through to the other side, whatever hope we have been able to generate will nudge us toward hope as a *good habit*: a positive character trait, a virtue.

Paul understood this well. “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance pro-

duces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). Too often, we read this passage as if hope were something of a consolation prize: “Too bad about your suffering, but it builds character, and as a result you’ll at least have hope.” What if we turned that around and understood that “getting in the habit of hope” was the *goal* of the Christian life rather than some kind of weak silver lining around some nasty grey cloud? Then the passage would have a different sense altogether—worthy of the “boasting in our suffering” with which Paul precedes it. Not that suffering is good, nor that we should invite it, and certainly not that others should feel free to inflict it on us. The emphasis here is on *voluntary* suffering; after all, Paul has repeatedly put himself in situations where suffering is likely. But it is much easier to take such risks, for a good cause, when one knows that the suffering itself—and the endurance and character that it produces—will in turn lead to the best possible life: a life lived in hope.

And we really do need that endurance and character in order to be hopeful, precisely because there are *so many good reasons not to be*. The onset of sin, the sorry state of the world, the terrible things that we do to one another: all are good reasons not to have hope, and therefore, all are good reasons to redouble our efforts to cultivate it. And this is where the season of Advent can make a difference, because it does provide us with some of the tools that we need to cultivate hope—even when we are surrounded by so many reasons not to be hopeful. I will mention some Advent resources under three headings: story, song, and action.

First, story. No shortage here: in the Bible, in short stories and novels, in poetry and plays, stories of hope are everywhere. The birth narratives are particularly rich in this regard, with shepherds in the fields and Magi on the move. But, recalling that hope is more than a feeling, it’s important that the stories that we choose demonstrate *how* people develop hope. So it’s important that we not be overly reliant on the biblical stories surrounding Jesus’ birth—at least in their bare form—because they provide so little backstory. To understand why the shepherds might have had hope, one would need details about the difficulties of their lives and the ways that they have built up hope as a habit. The sages from the East must have repeatedly experienced the wisdom of the stars, or they would not have risked a long journey in order to follow this one in particular. Mary and Joseph must have developed habits of hope in their young lives, or they would not have been able to respond to the angels with “let it be” and “yes, I will.”

A creative storyteller can “fill in” some worthy backstory to the Christmas narratives, and many have done so.¹ But we all have access to many parallel stories, advent-themed and otherwise, that are already written and ready for our use. I have my own assortment of such stories, and I will mention some of them here; you will have your own to contribute. For me, the stories that seem most likely to cultivate hope are those that present characters with a challenging situation in which it would be easy to feel despair. This in turn means that the hope that they are able to generate is hard-won and has probably come at some cost. Indeed, in many cases, these hopeful persons have been criticized by other characters in the story for their naïveté and their fruitless expectation that “all shall be well.” Importantly, it does not matter whether the thing that they have hoped for actually comes to pass. We learn how to be hopeful by observing the ways that someone else is hopeful and how that hopefulness makes them into a better person—the kind of person that we would like to

be—regardless of the final outcome. If I watch a production of *King Lear*, I want to be Cordelia rather than either of her sisters, even though Cordelia’s hope of restoring her father to his rightful place is completely vitiated by her sisters and in-laws. I love the hopefulness of so many of the characters in Flannery O’Connor’s stories—Mary Turpin and O.E. Parker and even Francis Tarwater—all of whom get pulled up short and discover that they’ve been hoping for the wrong things. How can the characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* possibly be hopeful, given the torments that they have endured? And yet they are. And if they can be hopeful, surely I can learn to do the same.

Second resource: music. Again, particularly at this time of year, we are not faced with a shortage. It really doesn’t matter whether your tastes run to the classical (Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*), the hymnic (even accompanied by arguments over whether to sing Christmas hymns during Advent!), or the popular (and yes, that includes the music in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*—even, or maybe especially, the piano jazz). From early in the Christian era, theologians recognized that music affects the soul and can thereby influence how we think, feel, and act. Augustine’s treatise *De Musica* is not an easy work to plow through, but its general message is that pleasing rhythms move us forward into an appreciation for order (which is good for the soul) and orient us toward God as the creator of all things—including sound. In some sense, all music is hopeful, simply because its rhythms put us in positive anticipation of what will come next. While I certainly consider some music more “hopeful” than others (I cannot experience Beethoven’s Ninth or Mahler’s Second in any other way), I recognize that this is a matter of individual taste and training, and I will not attempt to be prescriptive. (Still, if you’ve never heard the song “Icarus—Borne on Wings of Steel” by the rock group Kansas, give it a try sometime. I find it hopeful, in spite of the fact that we all know how that particular story ends!)

Singing is a particularly hopeful musical practice—and one that is easily accessible at this time of year. In an article titled “Singing Our Way to Hope,”² Mel Williams reflects on the beauty of congregational singing. He writes, “I’ve reflected often about why singing captures us and won’t let us go. What I’ve concluded is that singing inspires hope. In these times of tumult and strife, where do we find hope? I think that when a poetic text is set to a lovely melody, that combination becomes irresistible—and motivational.” He makes the provocative claim that the songs “sing us.” This way of thinking is particularly useful in the context of hope because it is also a good description of the *cultivation* of hope—and of all the virtues—in our lives. This does not take place simply by our own strength of will (as though we could do it all alone), but by something working in us from the outside. The medieval writers on the virtues were quick to point out that the good that is cultivated in us is ultimately God’s work, not our own. We need to allow God to do the work (though we often set up obstacles to it, whether intentionally or otherwise). When we are attentive enough to “get out of God’s way,” we find ourselves doing things that are far above our poor power to add or detract.

Williams mentions many great hymns and songs in his article, but perhaps the one that most connects singing with hope is this one:

No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging.
It sounds an echo in my soul,
How can I keep from singing?

And of course, during Advent and Christmastide, we know so many songs that “sing us,” over and over again.

In our current public health circumstances, opportunities to sing may be more limited than we would like. But we have all learned a great deal about technology during the Covid pandemic, and if that hasn't yet included virtual choirs, it's time to try. It's an amazing experience to sing alone in the quiet of one's room and then to watch one's work blend into a beautiful chorus on a computer screen. Tools to make this happen are widely available, and we owe it to our choirs and our congregations to make this experience accessible to them.

Williams's article concludes with the following remarks:

Theologically, it seems clear to me that God has chosen music as a primary vehicle to reach us. God rides on music. Singing becomes a spiritual practice; it wakes us up and gives us a surge of life and hope.

This speaks even to those who have difficulties with church. One Sunday, a stranger appeared in worship. At the church door, he said, “I used to go to church a lot, and now I don't. The only thing I really miss is the singing.”

I understand what he was saying. In our worship, Scripture, the liturgy and the sermon can bring insight and inspiration. But as my aged mother once said to me, “I've been listening to sermons all my life, and I don't remember a one of them.”

Yet she remembered many hymns and sang them often from memory. Those hymns sang her—and sustained her—through many ups and downs. And after a lifetime of deriving hope and joy from the music, how could she keep from singing?

Even if we can't do it together, let us sing.

And a third Advent resource: action. As noted above, we cultivate the virtues by doing the things that require them as aspects of our character. We become courageous through acts of bravery; we become people of faith by believing; we become hopeful people by doing hopeful things. All through the year, we have the opportunity to take action in hopeful ways: plan a trip, even though you might not be able to take it; greet strangers, despite the meager chance that they will become your friends; plant a tree, knowing that you will not see its fruits for many years, if ever. But the season of Advent is particularly rife with hopeful practices, because it is—after all—about practicing hope. We look for the coming of the Messiah, and our actions during this season are right about cultivating that hope.

But there is a flaw in this notion. We speak volumes about Advent hope, but we already know what will happen. December 25 will follow December 24 just as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow; we are not really in doubt about this fact. We do not experience this hope in the way that the people of Israel experienced it 2,000 years

ago, nor as Jews around the world experience it today: wondering when, or perhaps whether, it will happen. It has already happened, and we celebrate it every year, but our experience of Advent is usually more about preparation than about hope. We know what's coming, and we need to get ready; and then, sure enough, it happens. Quite frankly, these are not the best possible circumstances for the cultivation of hope. And this is not to mention the fall of the entire season of Advent and Christmastide into the mire of commercialization—a travesty that we criticize and rue every year, while every year it gets a little worse.³

So I encourage Advent practices that are more than just preparation for an event that we know is about to happen. Of course, we can do all kinds of good deeds: donate to good causes, serve meals to the needy over the holidays, and adopt a kindlier demeanor. But keeping in mind that the habit of hope takes practice, allow me to offer a few smaller, less obvious ideas:

- Buy presents for people you don't know and give them anonymously. You'll never know if they liked them, never know whether they are thankful, never anticipate something in return. But you will hope for all these things.
- Find a book by a Christian writer who wrote more than a century ago and read it at a pace that will allow you to read the whole thing during Advent. On the day you finish, decide whether you'd recommend it to others. If yes, celebrate; if no, deny yourself something that you want. The book may turn out to be terrible, but you can always hope.
- Make your own Advent calendar, putting items in unmarked identical boxes with no dates attached, and scatter them randomly about the house. Don't count how many you've done; just fill them until you run out of things and leave a few completely empty. Open one box each day—hopefully.

If these ideas strike you as too small and a little silly, that's okay. The virtues are not cultivated by single, large, heroic acts, but by a thousand small practices—each of which contributes just a bit to the development of a good habit.

I'll close by returning to Julian of Norwich and offer one more thought about her famous words of assurance—a thought that is actually related to the Advent resources of stories, music, and action. First: her words are more meaningful if I remember the whole of her story; these words, which might be seen as overly optimistic, grew out of a life of hardship and pain. So if you don't know her story in detail, it's worth a read. Second: the rhythm of her words has a musical quality that drives them forward and affects their meaning. This is perhaps more obvious if they are set out in verse, which makes certain words receive an accent:

All shall be **well**.

And **all** shall be well.

And all **manner** of **thing** shall be well.

The first line tells me: *well*, the second emphasizes *all*, and the third line propels that *all* into a more profoundly comprehensive reality: *all manner of thing*. There is nothing that will not be well, nothing that will not ultimately be redeemed. This is, I think, at the very foundation of the Christian faith. And if I am convinced of this, I should have no trouble generating ideas for the third resource that I mentioned: action. Knowing that all shall be well, we do not really need to know whether Christmas will

come on December 25 or not. All shall be well, regardless.

Can we imagine celebrating Advent *as though we did not know* whether anything will happen? Julian did not know; she was sick and seemed to be dying. Cordelia did not know; she had been cast out of her own kingdom by the very father that she was now trying to save. Beethoven did not know; by the time he wrote the Ninth, his deafness was profound. And yet they had hope—not a sunny optimism that elides tragedy and death; not a refusal to recognize the onset of sin and the fallen state of the world, but a clear-eyed, well-cultivated hope that nothing—nothing at all—is outside the loving embrace of God.

Notes

1 To mention two examples among very many: Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and Tom Hegg's *The Mark of the Maker*.

2 <https://faithandleadership.com/mel-williams-singing-our-way-hope>.

3 Yet here too, there are hopeful resources available. One of my personal favorites (and not exclusively focused on religious issues) is Jo Robinson's *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, revised edition (William Morrow, 1991)—which, despite its publication date, withstands the test of time.