

Hoping Against Hope

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Sarah laughed at the messenger who told her she would become pregnant.

When you feel hopeless. Hope can feel like the most ridiculous thing.

Hope can seem like a fantasy. An absurdity.

Hope can seem like a kind of wishful, magical thinking. Not rooted in the real world.

Abraham and Sarah were promised a child, despite the fact that they were both very old. And Sarah laughed.

I also wouldn't blame her if she got angry.

When we are feeling hopeless, sometimes hope can feel like an attack on the truth of our pain. It can feel dismissive. Someone telling us to look on the bright side.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The first Sunday of the 4-week stretch before Christmas. The theme of the first Sunday of Advent is hope.

You will notice this year that this sanctuary is decorated in beautiful blues. This shade of blue is a liturgical color that is associated with Advent because it recalls the color of the night sky when the very first light is beginning to emerge.

Today we light one small flickering candle on our wreath, one small light in the shadow of night, a flicker of warmth amidst the bleak winter.

The very first glow of light, brightening the sky.

Hope.

I think that standing in the night, watching the sky brighten is an easy place to feel hope. Because who among us doubts that if we wait long enough, the

sun will peak over the horizon, night will give way to day, the birds will sing, the flowers will open.

And so we stand in hope of something that we know in our hearts will come. Perhaps something so certain can scarcely be called hope.

When Paul reflects on the story of Abraham and Sarah, he gives us this beautiful phrase. He says that: “when it was beyond hope” they “hoped against all hope.”

Quite a different situation. Unlike waiting for the dawning sun, Abraham and Sarah are living with hope for something that they had been nearly certain will *not* happen.

They only begin to believe that this will happen when they realize that the promise comes from God. And they believed it was possible. Indeed they came to believe that it was certain to happen.

And they hoped, against all hope.

They hoped when there was no good reason to hope.

Convinced that God would do what God has promised. And that hope, their faith, causes Paul to count them as righteous.

Who hoped against all hope.

So what is hope? I think this word has been trivialized a little bit by our overuse. I hope the Red Sox win. I hope we get a snow day. I hope they have my favorite flavor.

Those are not really hopes. They are wishes. Things that we desire, that know we will be delighted by.

Hope is something different entirely.

Hope is not something you wish for.

there is a psychologist named C.R. Snyder who has written extensively about the importance of hope in clinical work with patients who are trying to find their way through crisis. He identified true characteristics of true hope.

The first he called pathways. For hope to be genuine there must be pathways between the present and the hoped for future. That is, I cannot hope to be in the NBA. True, constructive, helpful hope needs to be realistic. We need to be able to see the way from here to there.

The second element of hope is agency. That is, we have to have to find how we can be a part of bringing the hope about. We have to have a sense that we could move along those pathways.

Snyder's work is mostly about individuals. But I think this applies to groups too. We can hope for a future if we can see a way to get there, and if we believe that we could walk that way together.

So hope is not an emotion, it is not just the character trait of optimism. It is not wishful thinking. It is not just looking for the silver lining in the cloud.

Hope is seeing a truly possible pathway to a better future, and seeing a way to embark upon it.

For Abraham and Sarah, the pathway to something that seemed absurdly impossible opened when God promised them a child. The agency was not theirs, but God's. But because they believed that God could do anything, and because they trusted that God would do what God promised. They were able to hope, against all hope.

But hope is not just something that comes. It is not just something that wells up in us unbidden. There is spiritual work involved in making our hearts hopeful.

I will tell you one place where I struggle with hope is when I hear the dire alarms raised by the world's scientists about the damage that we are doing to God's creation, and our home.

I know that cities up and down the coast are preparing for the inevitability of continued sea rise.

We are already living with the consequences of stronger storms, bigger fires, and deeper droughts.

And we learn that in order to keep the planet livable, we need to get off fossil fuels yesterday. And I am listening to this story while driving my car around the block to help my daughter fall asleep.

i cannot explain it. But these dire predictions, which I am certain are largely correct, do not change my behavior hardly at all. I mean I am doing a few things better. But not the big things.

It turns out that fear is not actually a very strong motivator. Fear mostly just makes us freeze. Or it makes us tune out and ignore the threat.

What would it be like to hope.

Hoping wouldn't mean just throwing our hands up and saying "I am sure it will be fine someday."

It would mean being able to say clearly the future we desire. Looking at the path that gets us from here to there. And believing that we can walk that way together.

I have that hope. I believe that is possible. I know that there is a future that is livable, and that together we have the ability to make it so.

I have hope.

For those who struggle with addiction. It can seem hopeless. But given the right resources and opportunities, people can recover. People have, and more people will. There is a pathway. And you can walk it.

Have hope.

If you are angry about the way that something is in our community, or in our world. Don't just wish it would change. Hope.

Hope. Even if it feels hopeless. Especially when it seems hopeless. Hope. See the pathway. Go forth.

Hope is not the passive wishing for a different world.

It is the constructive imagination of what could be. What will be.

So here we are. Standing at the beginning of Advent. Our one small light, kindled in hope.

Hope that God is coming to dwell with us. Hope that in the midst of all our pain, all our fear, all our despair. In the midst of the world's brokenness. In the face of human cruelty.

Hope that in the midst of all that, God will come, Emmanuel, God with us.

But we do not just hope for God.

God is the source of our hope. God is the one who teaches us how the world ought to look, how we could live with one another.

God is the one who calls us forward, to be better and better day by day. God is the one who opens the paths between the pain of our present and the hope of our future.

God is the one who walks with us. Who encourages us. Who picks us up when we are set back, and who corrects our course when we stray.

And here is the good news. Although many of the things we hope for will not come to be, and although many of the futures we imagine will fall to dust.

God's presence. And God's love. Will shine for you, as surely as the sun will peak over that horizon and douse the world in warmth and light.

Hope for God, yes.

But also hope with the courage and boldness that God's presence brings.

