

November 28, 2021

*“My Hope is in You”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Psalm 25:1-5; James 5:7-11

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Well, another Advent has begun. And one of the things I like about Advent is that the themes each week highlight virtues we all desperately want in our lives – hope, peace, joy, love. And we reflect on how God offers us all of these. So today, on this Sunday of “hope,” let us say with the psalmist, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul, in you I trust. My hope is in you all day long.”

Let me share with you a story. After completing her novitiate in Darjeeling, India, Mother Teresa made her vows and began teaching in the convent school there, along with working part-time as an aide at a small hospital. One day a poor and destitute man arrived at the hospital carrying a bundle out of which protruded what at first appeared to be twigs. When Teresa looked more closely, she saw that they weren't twigs at all, but were the impossibly emaciated arms and legs of a child, blind and near death. The man told the young sister that if she didn't take the child, he would take the baby into the wild and let the jackals have him. Teresa's journal takes up the story: "With much pity and love, I took the little one into my arms, and folded him in my apron. The child has found a second mother."

Now when we hear this story, I imagine a number of thoughts flood our minds. Perhaps the first is the incredible, selfless love of Mother Teresa, and all she accomplished living among the poorest of the poor. Another thought might be of the cruelty of the human condition, where a baby has to starve and suffer in the first place. How can that be allowed? Or, another thought, as difficult as it may seem, might be this: here is a man who had nothing left to give, who was so desperate, and yet his very last act for his child was one of hope. Yes, hope. Hope that somehow this woman might save the child he could not.

Now, how can we relate today's Advent theme of hope and trust in God to the type of difficulty and suffering this father was most likely going through? Or the difficulty and suffering we are going through? Well first, I think we have to look at what we mean by ‘hope.’ Hope is a word we throw around a lot. Like – I hope the Patriots beat Tennessee today. But that is a wish, wanting the Patriots to bring about our desired outcome. That is not hope. Hope that will get us through those difficult times is different. Listen to what Anglican Bishop John Habgood says, “Hope, in its simplest terms, is about making sense of life and those aspects of life where it challenges and disturbs us.” Just look at Scripture. Nearly every page of it was written by faith filled men, like King David who, we heard today, loved and trusted in the Lord. Yet, these very same pages of Scripture are, like David's life, filled

with tragedy and pain and suffering, with genocide and rape and more. And still, through it all, the underlying tenet of the Bible is one of hope. Hope and trust in God. Hope in God's love, God's promises, God's power to bring about a good and desirable outcome. Often, when we go through those difficult and stressful times in our lives, we put our hope in other people – we hope they can make things better for us. And often, we are disappointed. But when we hope in God, we give ourselves over to a power, an authority that is higher, greater, beyond anything we could ever imagine. And we can trust that God will indeed help us through. How do we know this? We look to Jesus Christ. The empty cross and his resurrection is proof that God can and will overcome the very worst of suffering, struggles or situations. And this is why we can be certain, that even though God may not always save us from our ordeals, he will be with us in and through our suffering, offering us the hope and assurance that ultimately things will change, will work out for the best, will be made right.

Because that's why Christ came in the first place, to put things right. You know, sometimes when I look around and see people in a Christmas parade brutally plowed down, or shop owners' livelihoods threatened because of mass looting, when murder trials are daily headlines, and Covid and its variants seem relentless, I would like to just get out of this world. And yet, what we will soon celebrate is God wanting to come into this world. God wanting to participate in the suffering, the trials, the human condition. And trust me, back then, the human condition was just as bad as it is now. Back then, as now, ordinary people worried about their lives and the world. Back then, as now, there was much suffering and injustice. Back then, as now, humans were sinful, the rich were greedy, the nations were crazed with power. So what does God do to combat the free will of mankind that has allowed its evils to run amok? He comes with a message of hope and peace and joy and love in the form of a baby. A child born to humble peasants perhaps not much different than that man in India. What better way to disarm all the pride and evil in the world except by God himself coming in the form of a baby born in a stable?<sup>1</sup>

For that baby, Jesus Christ, grows into a man with a message of hope for the ages. Whose message is, "I am the light of the world that shines in the darkness." Whose message is, "Come to me you who are weary and I will give you rest." Whose message is, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart – I have overcome the world." Whose message is, "Do not worry about your life, or what you will eat or drink, or the clothing that you wear, but strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness,

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<sup>1</sup> Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, "The Greatest Hope"

and all these things will be given to you.” Whose message is, “I will bear your sins and die your death and assure you of life eternal in the kingdom of God.” These are messages that God loves us, and because of that love, we have hope, for the present, for the future, for all of eternity. And these aren't some motivational thoughts or daydreams. These are promises that God will lead you through the valleys in your life to a place of peace and joy and love and give you hope.

I like what spiritual journalist Krista Tippett says about hope. She writes, “Hope is distinct, in my mind, from idealism. It has nothing to do with wishing. It references reality at every turn and reveres the truth. It lives open eyed and wholeheartedly with the darkness that is woven permanently into the light of life and sometimes seems to overcome it. Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice, that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It’s a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be.”

And so, until that time when life is as we wish it to be, when Christ will come again, ushering in a new world of love and nonviolence and justice, we are to wait and be patient as we heard the Apostle James say today. And have hope. Hope in God who will make a way when you can’t see ahead of you. Hope in God who will give you a peace that passes understanding. Hope in God who lifts us up when life wants to bring us down.

And with that I want to leave you with a modern day parable. Two birds sat in the same tree. The one above, was full of golden plumage and sat patient, serene and majestic. Full of hope about its life and future. The bird below was restless, going to and fro, eating the fruits of the tree, some sweet, some bitter. Once he ate an exceptionally bitter fruit. He didn't like it, but he paused and thought and looked up at the majestic bird above. Soon, though, he forgot about the other bird and went on being restless, going to and fro, eating the fruits of the tree as before. Once more he ate a bitter fruit. And once more, he paused and thought and looked up at the majestic bird above. This time, though, he hopped up a few branches, nearer to the bird at the top. This happened again and again until eventually the lower bird came to the place of the upper bird. There he found, to his surprise, that there had never been two birds in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, let us say with the psalmist, “O Lord, in you I trust. My hope is in you all day long, until that time when Christ comes again and your kingdom is fulfilled.” Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> God in All Worlds by Lucinda Vardey New York, Pantheon Books