

Hope is a topic within the biblical story which appears again and again, and here it is in our Romans 8 passage for the morning. Like Paul in Romans, the writer of Hebrews suggests that “faith” is the assurance of things *hoped* for but not seen, and then goes on to summarize the stories of numerous characters of the Hebrew bible—female / male, pious and dubious—who lived into the hopes they had for their families, their nation, and their world (Hebrews 11:1ff). All told there at least 150 references to “hope” (not including cognates like “hopeful”) in my NRSV bible. 150, I believe, constitutes a bunch.

A cursory scan of these passages suggests that hope often involves action towards a Godly vision of justice and right-ness. Hope is not passive. Both the Old & New Testament words for hope (יָחַל / *yachal*) (ἐλπίς) point to active engagement toward a just and right reality.<sup>1</sup> For example, the Emmaus walkers had hoped Jesus was “the one to redeem Israel”, and so they joined in Jesus’ ministry (e.g. Lk 10:1-12) and followed him to the grisly end and beyond (Lk 24:21). In Romans 8 Paul places the active suffering of Roman Christians, which we hear about at the end of chapter 8, squarely on a foundation of hope (8:24ff). The hope of all those listed in Hebrews 11 is what inspired them to do what they did. Even when the Psalmist declares that my or our “hope is in God” (e.g. Ps. 33:2 or 130:7), speaking these sentiments is itself an action. There is a strong biblical link between hope and action. In this biblical landscape of hope our initial task is to consider those things for which we hope and those things in which we place our hope. These hopes tend to guide our actions for better and for worse.

An additional concept present in our scripture texts for today informs our hopes, and that is the idea of adoption. In Romans 8 Paul uses the term adoption multiple times while waxing on about hope. A sense of belonging releases a powerful energy. It is a big deal for a person who has not had a people to own God’s adoption. It is a big deal for seekers who have only known capricious and callous gods to receive adoption into the arms of a compassionate God and church family. Jesus has called us friends (John 15:15); God has adopted us; we belong to this family. This is very good news. It is the gospel message. Internalizing this intimate relationship with God and Jesus strengthens us to live courageously in the direction of faith filled hopes. These are lofty ideas, I know, so let me elaborate on the O.T lesson of the day from Genesis 28 which is an example of this theory.

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<sup>1</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol 2), edited by Gerhard Kittel and translated by Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp 521-534. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (vol 1), edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1990), p. 373.

At this point in the story Jacob has cheated his brother of his birth right. He has deceived his father. He has colluded with his mother in the deception. His brother has vowed to kill him, and Esau is a skilled hunter. Jacob is a son with no parents and a brother with no siblings. He is an orphan on the run. Into this isolation God visits Jacob in a dream. Angels and arch-angels are moving all around Jacob. God appears beside him offering a profound word of comfort: Know that I am with you and will go with you wherever you go (Gen 28:15). It is a defining moment for Jacob. God has reaffirmed adoption of Jacob, the promises made to previous generations, and Divine presence for future generations. Jacob has fled his biological family, but God will not let him go. Overwhelmed with emotion Jacob declares that this place is the “house of God” (Beth-El) and this is the “gate to heaven” (Gen 28:17). To be reminded of God’s care and compassion for us is indeed like standing at the gate of heaven. Accepting this adoption will, one day, contribute to a form of reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. Belonging to God allows Jacob space for a gradual reforming of his ways.

Many of us are on the run from something. Many of us are looking to start over again. Nationally and personally most of us operate with various gradations of deception. We are Jacob. How many of us with our periodic bad choices and ethical failures long to hear the word that a benevolent presence will not abandon us? God has adopted us and will not let us out of the family. If there is one thing to be remembered from this sermon it is the biblical phrase “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go”. This sense of accompaniment, of belonging, of adoption, is essential to empowering us to noble actions born of hope. I have a story of one experience in which I have felt myself to be standing at that gate of heaven. For me, at least, it is a hopeful story.

At the beginning of this century I was pastoring in Minneapolis and we had our regional gathering that year in Mt. Lake, Minnesota. Our congregation was more affirming of sexual diversity than most Mennonite churches at that time. We were up for sanctions, possibly even being expelled from the Conference. The tensions weighed heavily on me. I felt isolated and vulnerable. Crossing the lawn in-between delegate sessions a young woman joined me. I didn’t know who she was or why she was there. She asked me how I was doing. Not in the mood to disclose my feelings to a stranger I asked her who *she* was and why *she* might be asking such questions—the last thing I needed was a reporter from the Mennonite papers taking down a few awkward quotes. She gave her name and said she was with Christian Peacemaker Teams. I was stunned; I could not understand what she was doing here. So I asked her, “why are you doing here?” Her response, “where else should I be?” It was moving; no devastating. Feeling quasi ostracized from the denomination of my birth an angel, or arch angel, appeared to offer assurance. It was like being in the house of God, like standing at the gate of heaven.

God, I think, is a bit like that CPT woman walking alongside me that summer afternoon who finds us ambling numbly through the fields of life. That presence seeks to reassure us, affirm us, encourage us. We do well to remember that we are part of a larger family—God’s family. We do well to remind those close to us of this reality. We do well to be the presence of God for those who are easing their way to a good path. This presence, I think, permits us to a hope which is rooted in righteousness and justice.

Hope. A number of years ago N.T. Wright, former Anglican Bishop of Durham England, authored a book entitled *Surprised by Hope*. We all hope, we all place our faith in something, he notes. In the first chapters of the book he details the various systems in which well meaning people of the last few centuries have put their hope. Some have placed their ultimate hope in politics; some have placed their ultimate hope in nationalism; some have placed their ultimate hope in economic philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Together these have contributed to two world wars, countless genocides, and economic systems like communism and capitalism which have adversely affected the poorest among us. We are all people of faith; it is just a question of those things we trust sufficiently which in turn shape our actions. What do we hope for? What do we hope in?? Our answers to these questions about hope will undoubtedly direct our decisions and the direction of our lives.

I am hopeful for personal and social confession that racial tensions, gun violence and economic oppression will end in North America and the world. In this respect Psalm 130 is a perfect liturgy as we acknowledge our iniquities as well as God’s forgiveness, God’s steadfast love, and God’s redemption. Sometimes this kind of lament is all we can do, but even this confession leads places. The liturgy might, for instance, empower us to act with compassion even as we have been extended compassion. This reflects something else for which I hope.

I am hopeful people sensitive to God’s light (in the church and beyond the church) will rise to meet the challenges of these days with courage and compassion. Maybe this is already happening. I quote managing editor of *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* from a recent editorial she authored.

[E]ven as images of burning cars and shattered glass have reverberated around the globe, another narrative has emerged: of people hearing each other, and of the power that imparts. In Minneapolis one day, for example, as volunteers rallied to clean up from a night of looting, resident and co-organizer Ming-Jinn Tong explained what it meant to him. “This is love in action right now,” he told local TV station. Other residents, seeing the number

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

of businesses that were damaged, fortified a sense of community and caring by launching numerous GoFundMe efforts. Again and again, people spoke of foundational values in a way that would overcome the darkness of the violence.

In Seattle, after violence broke out amid peaceful protests, hundreds of volunteers flocked to scrub graffiti off walls and board up broken windows. As one of them put it, “It’s...showing each other who we really are.”

On a fraught night in Louisville, Kentucky, white women linked arms to protect black protesters, while elsewhere in the city, a black protester linked arms with others to protect an officer who had become separated from his squad.

And across the country...In Santa Cruz, California, the chief of police took a knee alongside peaceful protester. In Camden, New Jersey, officers joined a march against racism. Just days after Mr. Floyd’s death, Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo, in a CNN interview that connected him to the Floyd family, removed his hat as he addressed Mr. Floyd’s brother through the TV camera. “Being silent, or not intervening, to me, you’re complicit,” he said, speaking of the group of officers present as Mr. Floyd died. “If there were one solitary voice that had intervened, that’s what I would have hoped for.”

And in Michigan, we saw a powerful reminder of the meaning of togetherness. Near Flint Township, Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson met protesters. He was accompanied by officers in riot gear. They were carrying batons. But then both sides “stood down.” The protesters sat: the police removed their gear. “You tell us what you need,” Mr. Swanson said.

“Walk with us! Walk with us!” came the chant. And they did.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, I am hopeful that I, all who are listening, and those beyond the walls of our church community can come to own our adoption by God. Adoption is the place to shape our identity. In the House of God we come know that we are loved, and not just us but all those others created in the image of God. In the House of God we come to be not only siblings of Jesus Christ, but his friend. At the Gate of Heaven, in the House of God, we are reminded there is One greater than us who loves us and cares for us and never forsakes us. In House of God and at the Gate of Heaven we are given clues on those ways to choose and those to refuse.

It is in these things I am putting my hope in these days. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Amelia Newcomb, “The Power of Small Gestures” in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (June 15, 2020), p. 3.