

Choose Hope

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When I was a little girl, I remember the wonderful anticipation of Christmas. There was so much to look forward to: the school Christmas party, the Sunday School pageant, decorating the tree, making Christmas cookies, the Christmas TV shows that were only on once a year and we got to stay up past our bedtimes to watch them. My favorite was, and still is, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the original cartoon version with Boris Karloff narrating and singing “Mr. Grinch.” There were presents under the tree, and on Christmas Eve my father’s side of the family had a get-together at my grandparents’ home and all us cousins would play games and eat all the homemade goodies. On Christmas Day my mother’s parents would be at our house for our present opening and breakfast, then we would make the rounds to Pembroke and East Machias to visit great-grandparents.

The days leading up to Christmas were filled with anticipation and such fun. Things changed as I got older; my grandfather died and the Christmas Eve get-together evaporated. Christmas Day remained largely the same until about 1987, when my last remaining great-grandparent had to go to live at a nursing home because he could no longer live alone. The Christmas Day celebration became smaller, but new traditions emerged. Even with all the changes, I still remember that feeling of anticipatory waiting in the buildup to Christmas.

When my son, Christopher, was little, I recreated a lot of that anticipatory feeling for the two of us. It was comforting to me to have those wonderful memories to build on for our Christmas traditions. We did some different things than when I was little. For example, my sister gave Christopher a wooden Advent Tree. Every day, he’d put a wooden ornament on until Christmas Eve, when the last ornament is the star for the top of the tree. We watched the Christmas shows from my childhood, decorated the tree, and made Christmas cookies. Christopher anticipated his school party and Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with the grandparents and his aunt and uncle. Now he does the Advent tree with his children, the tradition continues, and they (I hope) look forward to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with me and their great-grandparents.

In the church where I grew up, we didn’t celebrate Advent. I didn’t even know what Advent was until I started coming to Centre Street. My memories of Christmas have more to do with our family activities than the birth of Jesus, but something deep inside me resonated with the way Advent is observed at this church. I think Advent is a purposeful slowing down so that we can savor the waiting and, in a way, join with Isaiah in the anticipation of what is to come.

The Bible Project tells us that the Hebrew words for hope are *yakhal* and *qavah*. *Yakhal* means “to wait for,” and *qavah* is the feeling of tension and expectation while you wait for something to happen. In the Old Testament, Biblical Hope was that God would bring the day when the Israelites would be free from their oppressors. The prophets look back to the Exodus and the

freeing of the Israelites from the bondage of Egyptian slavery into freedom and envision a time in the future when that freedom will come again for Israel. The waiting for the coming Messiah. Unknowingly, I was looking backwards on my traditions growing up to form new traditions going forward when Christopher was a child. As human beings, we do this looking back to move forward all the time.

Lately I've been learning a lot about how the brain works. We are hardwired to want to feel good. We have natural dopamine and endorphins that course through our brains, and we feel really good when they are zooming around. Hope is kind of like those endorphins; without them, we feel morose, sad, and depressed. There are good ways to get those endorphins going for us: spend time with someone we love, do something nice for someone, go for a walk, complete a project. Any number of positive experiences make us feel hopeful. Some of us find it easy to do these things and feel good, and others don't. Without hope, we look to outside stuff to make us feel good, and then we get into all kinds of trouble.

I think hope has been taken out of context and minimized to mean something very small now. "I hope you feel better," or "I hope things work out okay." Hope has become a feeling that refers to pretty small stuff in the larger scheme of things. We have become a people who focus on the small stuff, and the focus is generally pretty negative. Surveys are taken now to determine how hopeful people feel, and it turns out that not many of us feel terribly hopeful. I think we also mistakenly conflate hope with optimism.

Biblical Hope is not a feeling. Biblical Hope is based on a person, not an experience. Not on a set of traditions or circumstances or how we feel. Biblical Hope is based on God and God's faithfulness. In the New Testament, Biblical Hope is based on Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection are the Hope that frees us from slavery to our own desires and the corruption of this world. We see that the world is a mess, just like in Isaiah's time when the Israelites were losing their way, but Isaiah chose Hope. Hope isn't optimism. Hope recognizes that things are a mess, but we can make a choice. We can make a choice to hope, to anticipate something better. We can descend into chaos or choose the Hope that Jesus offers, that things will be different. Optimism is looking at a situation and finding something good in it. Hope is knowing that a situation is bad, but choosing to believe that God knows what is going on and that there is something better. The Bible Project shows Biblical Hope as a door that we choose to open and walk through.

In a recent UCC Daily Devotion, Rachel Hackenberg says that Hope is an alien to our daily bodily existence. We try to tame hope and limit it to our locations or past experiences, confining it or quelling it with reason or theology. We say, "I should have a plan to achieve my hopes." To this, she replies, "Hope with a plan isn't hope. It's a plan . . . and that's lovely, but it's self-made and assumes the self I already have in the space it already occupies and the life it already knows. Hope—the Hope to which God calls us—comes from an alien space, a wild space, a holy space. And from that space, hope offers possibilities we cannot devise ourselves."

Biblical Hope is a wild, untamed thing. Read the book of Psalms—Hope calling from the depths of despair, from the valley of the shadow of death. The Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I

need. Are there more hopeful words than that? I'm more inclined to say that I am an optimist, rather than that I am hopeful. I put hope in a box and bring it out sometimes, but it's still small and fits into that box. It's safer to be optimistic. I will have to explore this for myself some more, but I'm sure it has something to do with that whole needing to have a plan thing. The idea of anything running wild and free? Even hope makes me uncomfortable.

Where is your Hope? Are you unwrapping it this Christmas and then putting it away after Epiphany? Are you keeping your hopes small to keep from being disappointed?

During Advent, we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and we're doing it a lot this Advent season. This is not a hymn that I remember from my childhood. The first time I heard it, as I recall, I thought it was a mournful hymn. It's been playing in my head for the last few weeks, especially when I would think about what Hope means for me. The more I think about it, it's a hopeful song. O come Emmanuel, set us free, be our Hope.

God calls us to embrace the wild mystery of Hope. By doing so, we embrace God. Howard Thurman writes these words of hope, taken from "The Mood of Christmas":

I will light Candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.

Choose Hope. It's God's gift to all of us. Amen.