

Hope Against Hope

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Maybe you heard the same news report.
A couple of months ago, a busload of tourist in Iceland
took a major detour from their itinerary
when a member of their tour group went missing.

They had stopped on a Saturday afternoon
near a dramatic canyon in the southern highlands.

When it came time to go, though, a few passengers on the bus
noticed the woman who'd been sitting near them hadn't made it back.

When the tour director counted up the people on the bus,
there was, indeed, one person missing.

The passengers described her as best they could,
though no one could clearly remember what she looked like.

But there in a desolate landscape
with temperatures and darkness falling all about them,
it was clear this woman's life could be at risk.

There was only one thing to be done,
so some fifty people piled out of the bus
and began what became an all-night search party.

They scoured the terrain on foot and with emergency vehicles.
A Coast Guard helicopter was summoned for the search,
though thick fog kept it grounded.

Eventually, around 3:00am, the woman was finally found.

In fact, she had, herself, from the very beginning,
been part of the search party.

Apparently, during the stop, hours earlier,
she had gotten off the bus to freshen up and change her clothes.

No one recognised her when she returned,
and when others described what the missing woman looked like,
she didn't recognise herself.

It also didn't help that the tour guide had miscounted.

Fortunately, it was more a comedy of errors than a tragedy.

Still, I can only imagine how long and awkward
the ride back to Reykjavik must have been
with a busload of people who'd been up half the night in the cold. . .

How easy it is to waste time looking for the wrong thing.

How often do we go out in search of something,
without a clear image or understanding
of the very thing we're trying to find?

And how frequently do we end up looking in all of the wrong places?

It reminds me of the story of the guy frantically searching for his lost keys.
A police officer comes along and sees the man crawling around
on his hands and knees under the street lamp.

With a bit of a slur to his words, the man explains to the officer
that he dropped his keys on the way home from the bar.

The officer joins the search, but after a few minutes
of coming up empty-handed asks the man if he's certain he lost them there.

That's when the man confesses that he has no idea where he lost his keys,
but that he was sticking close to the street lamp
because that's where he could see best. . .

We find ourselves in the midst of a busy season

that is, if anything, about the search for hope.

Against the darkest days of the year,
people have long kindled fires and candles both
to bring more light and more hope to the world.

As so beautifully put by Margaret Starkley:

Out of the darkest time of the year
out of the bleakest days,
we make a season shine with lights.

[We deck our halls with] mounds of greenery,
[and] the brightest ornaments,
[to] bring high summer to our rooms [and our lives],
as if to spite the somberness
of winter come.

In [a] time of want,
when life is boarding up
against the next uncertain spring,
we celebrate and give of what we have away. . . .

There is a blessed madness[, she says,]
in the human need
to go against the grain
of cold and scarcity.

[And, so] we make a holiday,
the rituals [as] varied as the hopes of humanity,
the reasons as obscure as ancient solar festivals,
[and] as clear as joy on one small face.¹

“We make a holiday, the rituals [as] varied as the hopes of humanity.”

On this last day of Chanukah, this third Sunday of Advent,
this final turn of the Wheel of the Year toward the Winter Solstice,
how well do you understand the hopes that you hold?

¹ Margaret Starkley, “One Small Face.”

Do you know what you're looking for,
and are you sure you're looking in the right place?

Given today's news of our world,
there is much that would inspire us desperately toward hope this year—
toward the sacred, urgent hope
that a new world, a new way of being,
might be within reach, might be just around the corner.

A world where the guns of war at last fall silent,
and the meaningless madness of murdered children is no more.

A world of plenty, where there is enough for all,
where peace is the way and justice the outcome.

A world where our own hearts are led by love,
overflowing with compassion, and boundless in courage and resolve.

A world where we are awake
to that maybe too-faint stirring of joy in our own lives,
where we find some sure foothold to trust
that maybe this world is getting better—and we with it.

Such hope can be hard to hold on to in light of recent headlines.
When so much seems broken, when so much has been lost,
hope can feel entirely inadequate to the task.

It can feel naïve and misguided
and maybe even a distraction or deterrence
from doing what can be done to make things better.

The political humourist Molly Ivins said it so well
when she admitted it's often hard for hopeful people
to argue against those who've grown cynical, because the cynics, she said,
always "sound so much smarter than optimists,
since they have so much more evidence on their side."

Hope is a curious thing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes a page and a half to the word.
Among its many definitions: "desire combined with expectation."

Or, conversely, “expectation combined with desire.”

However we put it, it’s hard to imagine life without it, even when it proves elusive.

The French writer Andre Gide said a person,
“can live about forty days without food,
about three days without water,
about eight minutes without air,
but only for one second without hope.”

Indeed, it is a force, a feeling that gives life to our days, setting our hearts on the possibility of some expected change, some desired difference.

And, yet, hope can also be less than helpful.

It is possible to feel an intense longing, a burning desire and still never lift a finger or take a meaningful step toward what it is that we hope for.

I think that’s what Emily Dickenson was getting at in her poem titled, “Hope.”
“Hope,” she said, “is the thing with feathers.

...That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune—without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I’ve heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

Never in extremity did it ask a crumb of me, she writes.
Never did hope ask or require anything of me.

She speaks, I believe, of that idle, helpless hope which does so little good.
The hope that is no more than wishful thinking.
The hope that distracts from the task at hand.
The hope that is so much on offer—and so often on sale—
during the holidays.

While there is a certain beauty to such wishful longing,
we need, I believe, to find our way to a higher hope—
to hope against hope, to hope beyond hope.

A hope that does actually ask something of us—
and likely something more than mere crumbs.
This is not the stuff of magic or of miracles.

And it's a lot harder than the hope advertised on television this time of year.

I'm talking about the kind of hope that calls us to action—
that calls us out and into the fullness of life,
with all of its challenge and all of its brokenness—
to make real that for which our hearts most deeply long.

It's a hope that goes the distance.
The hope that begins when and where all seems hopeless.

For weeks, I've been trying to think of a way
I could show you an image of the kind of hope I'm talking about.

And, then, this week, there it was—
on Bruce Schwartzentruer's facebook page.

The photo of Katie Kirkpatrick and her husband, Nick,
on their wedding day, January 11, 2005.

The photo is found on the covers of your Orders of Service this morning.

At first glance, it looks like one of those photos you find
in a brand new frame, a photo of beautiful, happy people you don't know.

But, if you take a closer look, you'll notice how thin Katie's arms are,
and the oxygen tube that keeps her breathing.

That photo is so powerfully alive with love—and with hope.
Katie died just five days later.

They both knew what they were getting into.
She had been sick for years.
Even as their wedding approached,
her dress had to be altered on a daily basis
to keep up with the toll the cancer was taking on her body.

Theirs was no idle hope.
They weren't holding out for a miracle.
They were making the most of what there was.

Though there was surely a hope for more,
they knew that things weren't breaking in their favour.

Nonetheless, with genuine hope,
they committed themselves to living into what they had,
into what was left—
in the trust that it would just have to be enough.

It was this hope that Vaclav Havel named in the passage I shared earlier.

“Hope in this deep and powerful sense,
is not the same as joy that things are going well,
or willingness to invest in enterprises
that are obviously headed for early success,
but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good,
not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

“The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope,
the deeper that hope is. . . .

It is not the conviction that something will turn out well,
but the certainty that something makes sense,
regardless of how it turns out.”

Friends, hope is hard work.
It very often needs our help,
if it is to take root, and grow, and flower into something that gives life.

May that be our true work in this season.

May we deck the halls with abandon,
feasting and celebrating the wonder of this life.

And may we welcome the in-breaking hope of this season,
casting open our hearts with the love and dreams and commitment
that will—and so often does—transform this world for good. Amen.

Closing Words

I offer you a short, anonymous prayer about hope:

I am afraid of nearly everything:
of darkness, hunger, war, children mutilated.

But most of all, I am afraid of what I might become:
reconciled to injustice,
resigned to fear and despair,
lulled into a life of apathy.

Unchain my hope,
make me strong.

Stretch me towards the impossible,
that I may work for what ought to be:
the hungry fed,
the enslaved freed,
the suffering comforted,
the peace accomplished.

May this be a prayer for us all in this season and throughout all our days.