

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Hebrews 10:32 – 11:1

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## THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.. *Hebrews 11:1*

Out text from Hebrews, "Faith is the extension of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," conveys the image of hope as the energy that pulls the carriage forward. So hope becomes the extension of faith. If faith is the process of trusting others, life itself, and ultimately God, all in the living present, then hope is the extension of that trust into the future. For the Apostle Paul, hope is one of three great cornerstones of existence, faith, hope, and love.

Gordon Atkinson talks about hope as yearnings that come out of memory, not accurate historic memory but a sort of romantic memory, the way our reminiscing decorates the past with even a little fantasy. He writes:

We live in the transition between the future and the past. We are the moment that hope becomes memory. Someday I will be dead and my children will cobble together their ragged memories and create me anew. They will create me in their own image. I will be clay in their hands with only the breath of their memories to give me life. So I spend a fair amount of energy trying to create good memories for my three daughters. This may seem rather contrived, but I'm of the opinion that parenting is mostly contrived. There's really no time for much else. Plant good memories while you can mommies and daddies. Our time on earth is short and hope becomes remembrance in the twinkle of a little girl's eye. (Gordon Atkinson, *RealLivePreacher.com*)

"Hope" comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to twist." It the same root that gives birth to the word *kiven*, a spider's web, something that has the qualities of extreme strength out of extreme fragility or weakness. We live out of a web of hopes. Let me read a passage by Violetta Raucha, a seminary professor in Managua, Nicaragua.

I want to share the story of Elba Maria. She is fifty-five years old, but has become old prematurely, and looks as if she were ten years older than she is. A widow with six children, she sells fruit and candy in my church's school. She has an illness that produces ulcer scars on her legs and does not permit her to stand for long or to walk very much. Her sales job requires lots of energy, but nevertheless she lives hoping that God accompanies her in selling fruit and candy, as well as consoling her in the illness that seems not to have any cure. How can she do that? Elba Maria is a woman who hopes, as Paul's and Peter's writings tell. Her hope is a vehement day-to-day hope, because many painful years have taught her to persevere with hope: through love lived in the midst of our faith community, through our prayers for her health, sand through her sharing of her own meager resources since she is the first person in the congregation who always is a contributor when a solidarity offering is called forth.

Like many other women, Elba Maria teaches us that miracles are lived daily in order to sell and get money, to ask for community prayers for her health, and to get consolation when losses are lived. The witness of women hoping even against all hope nurtures the faith of the community and encourages us to enjoy daily the fidelity and the responsibility of our lives as believers in a context in which hopelessness, disenchantment, and renunciation of dreaming for the future usually become the imposed order of the day. (Violetta Raucha, *Managua, Nicaragua*)

Our best hope is often the simplest. But it is not easy to do the simplest thing. Hopes don't have to be complicated, but we do tend to make them that way. The humorist, Sam Levin, tells of the night he and his wife came home from hospital with their first baby.. The baby would not stop crying. His wife was frantically turning the pages of Dr. Spock's 1960s epic on infant care and child rearing. And since the book is rather long, the baby cried a lot.

Grandma was in the house. Since she had not read many books, especially Dr. Spock, she was not consulted. The baby continued to cry. Eventually, Grandma, in a fit of frustration, said, "Heaven's sake, Sarah, will you put down the book and pick up the baby!"

Put down the complicated, and pick up the baby.

Put down your busyness, and pick up the baby.

Put down the material concerns, and pick up the baby.

Put down the overweening career, and pick up the baby.

In a survey of children's hopes and dreams, the question was asked: "What do you think makes a family happy?" When children answered, they did not list a larger house, or fast car, or a new video game. The most frequent answer was, "Doing things together." It seems that when we do things together they best hear the song of hope. "Pick up the children."

Hope that God will show a way through is what steers us through tragedy and hard times. Listen to this recollection from Tom Long.

Several years ago, while on sabbatical in South Africa, I had the occasion to meet a young Johannesburg physician whose specialty was AIDS virus. He labored in a dingy inner city hospital where the beds of the sufferers spilled out of the wards and lay scattered through the narrow corridors like toppled bowling pins. Taking a few minutes' break from his weary and hurried rounds, he sat behind his desk, massaging his temples. "The numbers are growing at a fearful rate," he said. "In some areas, over half the population is infected, and we do not have enough to help them. We don't have the medicine, the beds, the staff, the knowledge."

"What keeps you going?" I asked.

He spoke quietly, hesitantly. "My faith." He looked out the window. The African sky was steel gray. "I am holding on," he said, "to the possibility of hope."

The "possibility of hope." This young physician said it just right, I think. There was no bravado, no chipper, smiley-faced Christian optimism, no blind faith, no naïve "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." To have assumed such a posture would have amounted to a callous, even blasphemous, disregard of the real, unyielding human pain all around him. He was clinging on to hope, and hope alone; there was nothing in his circumstances to justify any positivism or optimism. The facts had to be faced: the virus was sure to spread, his patients would continue to die despite his best efforts, the red surge of suffering would flow beyond all human power to contain it. What kept this young man at work in the wretched wards of pain was the faith – the absurd faith, some would say – that the full trust about his circumstances was not self-contained. What allowed him to face the facts and to keep going nonetheless was the hope that God would act from the future toward the present to create a redemption not already there in the present tense. In other words, his eyes told him that the suffering and death all around him were a terrible word, a word that must be heard and heeded, but his hopeful faith reassured him that they were not the final word. That Word would be spoken from the future by the One who has promised to speak it, and it would judge the present, destroy all that damages life, and transfigure all creation, setting forth what Moltmann has called, "the universal Easter laughter." (Tom Long, *Journal for Preachers*)

And this poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay about the devastating floods in Holland in the 1950s in which 3,500 people died on lands, like New Orleans, that lie below sea level. The hope born out of suffering, endurance, and character is expressed in a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. She wrote it about a broken dike in Holland. Water poured over the fields, washing away the years of labor within minutes.

*The broken dike, the levee washed away  
The good fields flooded and the cattle drowned,  
Estranged and treacherous all the faithful ground,  
And nothing left but floating disarray  
Of tree and home uprooted. Was this the day  
Man dropped upon his shadow without a sound  
And died, having labored well, and having found  
His burden heavier than a quilt of clay?  
No, No. I saw him when the sun was set  
In water, leaning on his single oar,  
With garden faithfully glimmering yet...  
There bulked the plow, here washed the updrifted weeds...  
And scull across his roof and make for shore  
With twisted face, and pockets full of seeds.*

Hope was sown in those "pockets full of seeds." Hope as something carried in the pocket in the midst of tragedy.

Hope trusts our eternally frail resources (recall the spider's web) to God's far greater power. Some years ago a large barge sank in New York harbor and became embedded in the mud. The owners surveyed the site and made every effort to raise the barge but the mud sucked on the hull of the barge such that no man-made device had the power to lift it. Then a tug boat captain came up with a brilliantly simple idea. He had deep sea divers attach heavy cables to the barge and then to a flotilla of boats on the surface. At low tide they all took up the strain and

made fast. And as the tide imperceptibly rose, the great Atlantic did its work, finally freeing the barge from the grasp of the Hudson's ooze and raising it to the surface.

The story reminds me of Psalm 40. "I waited patiently for the Lord. He brought me up, out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay." Not by our own strength alone. On our own we can do almost nothing. I have on my Windows desktop a photograph of beautiful Crummock Water, a lake high in the English Lake District. Carolyn took it last May when we were in England. In the foreground lie three longboats tethered to the gravel shoreline. In the distance, the worn, grey, nearly treeless hills that make the land such distinction and an enduring dignity. In the middle ground, perhaps 120 yards away stands a pensive figure at the water's edge, hands on hips, staring down into the clear dark waters. A figure made startlingly small and insignificant against those monolithic, ageless hills. It's me, lost in thought or reminiscing. It's hard not to stand in that vale of nature's grandeur and not be led to thoughts of eternity among such immortal hills. In this we hope to be immortal. As Ecclesiastes puts it, "for God has set eternity in our hearts."

William James, the brilliant philosopher and founder of the psychology of religion considered all the great theories of immortality expounded among religions, and finally had to lay reason aside. He confessed that the mere notion of immortality is beyond our power to think or understand, much less prove.

"Was your taste consulted in the peopling of this globe? How, then, should it be consulted as to the peopling of the vast City of God? Let us put our hand over our mouth, like Job, and be thankful that in our personal littleness we ourselves are here at all. The Deity that suffers us, we may be sure, can suffer many another queer and wondrous and only half-delightful thing." (*Human Immortality*, 1898)

We hope for what we cannot see, but what the evidence of our experience encourages us to trust. Since the most ancient times almost all temples took the time to mark the passing of the winter solstice. Why? Because after that mark the sun began to rise a little each day, a sign that the days would warm, and crops would soon be sown again. The observance alleviated the fear that the sun might continue to sink.

Hope is also subject to over confidence. God's way "is not our way," as William James and Paul remind us. There is a certain family in our area, who, after a difficult divorce, began to divide up the household effects. One set of items, in particular were very expensive, and was to be kept in tact but exchanged for an agreed price. Then the former spouse who was releasing them had the idea to forgo the cost and give it away, gratis. It so impressed the other former spouse that the relationship was noticeably eased. Then, when first spouse was trying to negotiate a tricky relationship with another family member, the second spouse offered to intercede, and to great effect. Then while packing up the items for shipping, the first spouse came across a long lost, treasured heirloom, one of three, so that each might now go to one of their three children. Everyone became so much more at ease.

St. Augustine wrote:

Hope is the engine that drives our social concern, that demands we take responsibility for it, and for each other. Hope has two beautiful daughters: anger at the way things are and courage to see to it they do not remain the way they are. It is out of hope that our critique of the present order arises. It is healthy to be outraged – and then to get busy working for something just because it is good and needed. Hope also seems to be the parent of patience. Hope gives us that persistence and determination to keep working on the world.

And this poem, *Red Geranium* (from "*'L' Train Window*") by *Adele Jordan Tarr*

The snow has built a fortress on the hill—

It looms, forbidding in the winter dawn:

The bare trees shiver as the north wind, shrill,

Keens a lament for summer dead and gone.

But in a window where a sunbeam, wan,

Shines for an hour, a splash of crimson bloom

Lightens the shadow, glorifies the room.

One little geranium. The assurance of things hoped for.

Amen.