

What Hope Is Not

Proverbs 24:14, Romans 8:24-25

Fall Series – Hope and Wellness: A User’s Guide #1

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Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, you will find a future, and your hope will not be cut off.
Proverbs 24:14 NRSV

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. *Romans 8:24-25 NRSV*

After a week of record-setting and soul-draining, mind-numbing high temperatures, I really needed to hear jazz this morning! Each day I hoped the meteorologists would give us better news about the weather. I know I can’t pin all my hopes on them, but each day I just kept waiting and hoping to see a different color code for temperatures over Marin County and no more excessive heat warnings.

We need hope. We read the newspaper or watch the evening news (or not) and may feel like the writer of Proverbs – that our hope has been cut off. And yet, we as people of faith, as people seeking to follow the ways of Jesus, as people who are gathering in person and on line, we want to be encouraged in our daily lives and be hopeful. So what is hope?

If you had to offer a few words to say what is hope, what would you say? Or what makes you hopeful for yourself, your family, your friends, your community, our country, the world? Maybe it is easier to focus on small hope, small steps, things we can touch or something we can wrap our minds and hearts around.

Over the summer I read that one of my friends and Presbyterian pastor friends, Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, was going to have her third book published on the theme of hope. I was thrilled. After a long summer of heartache over the war in Ukraine, the mass shooting at the school in Uvalde, increasing threats from white supremacists’ groups and people who cling to Christian nationalism, and our ever growing climate change catastrophe, I needed to read her book. It has been a source of meaningful reflection and deeper questions. I am learning where my own growing edges are and what it means to enter into conversations about hope with humility and openness. Today I will offer some of her insights as we move in to a new season of ministry and mission, friendship and spiritual formation.

It has been a tumultuous few years for me, for us and for the world. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the work of confronting racial and economic injustice and the other realities I mentioned, I have found hope hiding in small corners in our life together as a church and in the beauty of creation. And yet, I longed for a deeper and broader exploration. Maybe you

have too. We are ready for a hope that is scrappy and durable. We can find it in biblical images and stories and beyond. We want more than a pithy saying embroidered on a pillow. We want to know what it is, what it is not and how to practice it alone and together.

When it comes to hope, our culture peddles a lot of cheap knockoffs. Let's clean out the toolbox, remove those dull and rusty tools that don't work for us anymore. (pg. 5)

Hope is Not a Prediction

Hope is often more general than specific, more internally oriented than outwardly predictive. When we are hopeful, we often follow it with a "that." I'm hopeful that the chemo will work. I'm hopeful that I'll find a job soon. I'm hopeful that I can help my friend get sober. I'm hopeful that I can find the right place to live when I downsize.

There is nothing wrong with hope that points in a particular direction. But when the world is falling apart, it can be hard to find a suitable "that" to complete the sentence. The steps we take to address climate change matter, but what if we are only hopeful if certain benchmarks are met? Is hope possible when we are not attached to a specific outcome?

Cornel West, Princeton professor and social justice activist, says, "Yes." He borrows from the blues, a jazz tradition that acknowledges the pain and glory of the present moment but doesn't revolve around a clear and chipper "that" in order to persevere. "A blues man is a prisoner of hope," he says. "Hope wrestles with despair... It generates this energy to be courageous, to bear witness, to see what the end is going to be. No guarantee, unfinished, open-ended. I'm a prisoner of hope. I'm going to die full of hope." (pg. 8)

Our first step is to divorce "hope" from "that" and to embrace hope as mysterious and open ended and see where it takes us. Do you consider yourself a hopeful person? Why or why not? How does resting Divine Love offer us open-ended hope?

Hope is Not Optimism

One of the distinctions McKibben makes in the book is the distinction between hope and optimism. Many folks use them interchangeably but here is the vital difference. Optimism does its best work in those Before those life changing moments. When the evidence point in positive directions, when you can still anticipate the best possible outcomes. Things could work out OK. But when some doors close, that we need sturdy hope. Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way. Hope isn't mathematical; it's philosophical, physical... True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcome. (pg. 11)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, "Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better." (pg. 11) We gather here on Sundays and through the week and online because we have a hope that God, Divine Mystery, Spirit, is inviting us into this hope and this kind of life, in

our worship, our giving, our working together here and in the community. Our church can be a community where we imagine many possible outcomes or solutions that reflect Christ's love and compassion and justice. And then we find the words that remind us that there is always something we can do or control, however small it might seem.

How do you see the connection or difference between hope and optimism? Do you use hopeful or optimistic to describe yourself? Does one require the other? I think about the people in my life who have demonstrated hope in midst of challenging circumstances.

Hope is Not a Thin String

Our passage from Proverbs invites us to see hope as something we seek and discover. The writer of Proverbs, maybe Solomon or those in the wisdom sage tradition, wrote down all these wise sayings. Divine Wisdom depicted as Woman Wisdom is there for those who seek her. And when you seek her, it will be like honey for your soul. And this will bring hope, a strong hope, that will not be cut off. Hebrew word for *tikvah* תִּקְוָה It appears 24 times in Hebrew scriptures, many times in Job. *Tikvah* is a cord, many threads twisted together into a strong cord. So hope is not a thin string. It is a strong cord the Holy One offers.

Hope is Not Toxic Positivity

Sometimes in people's efforts to be caring or helpful, they might offer phrases like "Everything will turn out OK in the end," or "Grief is the price we pay for loving someone," or "It's hard, but you'll get over it. And others have it so much worse." People do their best, but these are not helpful. I have said these I am sure in my life without thinking. Maybe you have too.

Hope is not a simple phrase that overly focuses on silver linings or platitudes or minimizes someone's loss or pain. McKibben offers a helpful distinction between a safe space and a brave space. In her book *Brave Church* by Elizabeth Hagan, she discusses the importance of each space for authentic communication. "Safe spaces offer understanding, comfort and belonging – gifts our souls crave. Brave space, on the other hand, allows parties to enter into the mystery that goes beyond answers and platitudes. We commit to muddling through together, whether it's a discussion about hard topics like immigration policy or deep silence with someone's grief or illness. (pg. 20)

Being very positive about every situation may seem safe, but often it is not. Authentic presence without answers is brave. And hopeful too. How might we reflect on the phrases we use for ourselves or others when faced with a challenging situation? How might we practice presence and listening?

Hope is Not the Opposite of Despair

This is a challenging chapter in McKibben's book. She starts with the prayer of St. Francis which we have said and sung, ...

Where this is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
Where there is sadness, joy

Beautiful words. We are accustomed to seeing hope as an antidote to despair. But maybe these binaries don't always work too well. It sets it up as if one list is bad and the other good. (pg. 25) Can't joy and mourning exist at the same time? I have felt that so often in my life and ministry. When our two sons have grown and now are navigating the world, I feel joy and pride, but I also feel sadness and loss. I am excited and hopeful to see our sons at Christmas time, but the joy is mixed because the time is short. Feeling both at the same time. Focus on joy and gratitude in the moment, but I can acknowledge it is complex.

McKibben reminds us that people who suffer from depression have told me that the opposite of depression is not happiness, but *feeling*, feeling whole, feeling alive, feeling a range of emotions. And for marginalized communities the opposite of hope can be desperation, because it can move people toward action for change and the common good. (pg. 25)

So how might we see that hope is part of the continuum of life and faith?

This week, let's take some of those rusty tools out of the box that really don't work too well when we need real hope. Let's get ready to imagine a resilient hope. As Paul wrote to the early Christians in Rome, we cannot see it, but we imagine it and trust it. Our souls can hear it – a tune that fills us up. We can sing the blues when we need to, and we can tap our toes when the melody moves along, knowing we are being drawn closer to the Holy One, Divine Wisdom, with a sacred cord of hope that connects us and holds us together now and forever. Amen.

I am grateful for this new book that has inspired my September sermon series. This sermon includes excerpts taken from *Hope: A User's Manual* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana (Grand Rapids, MI: Eardmans, 2022).