

The Practice of Hope

Exodus 1:12-20, Romans 15:13

Fall Series – Hope and Wellness: A User's Guide #3

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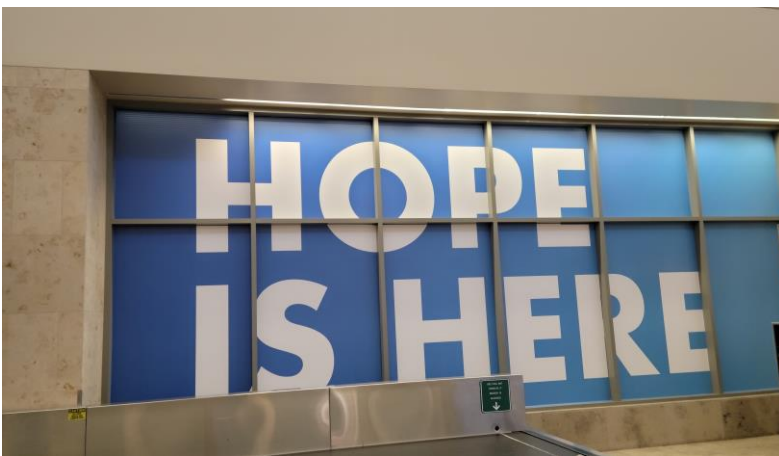
But the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. Exodus 1:12-20

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

I walked into a building on Wednesday and this is what I saw.



And I thought – Thanks be to God! I have one more sermon on hope to preach and I have come to the right place! Any guesses where I was?.... The truth is I was standing in the Orange County John Wayne Airport in the baggage claim area. What an interesting place to

find hope. Hope that my suitcase made it from Oakland to Santa Ana? Spiritual hope as we journey in life from one place to another? Is this a sturdy hope I have been talking about for the last few weeks or the kind of hope that feels more like platitudes and positivity?

It turns out that this bold claim “Hope is Here” was being made by Hoag Memorial Presbyterian Hospital, based in Newport Beach. A top notch, faith-based hospital for over 70 years. Both my mother and older sister were treated there at one time. They are claiming that hope is there, in those amazing doctors and nurses, in their excellent patient care, in the treatments that can bring healing, in treating unusual illnesses and injuries. They might even say at their hospital; they practice hope through all the ways they care for patients.

After offering the last two weeks on What Hope is Not and What Hope is from MaryAnn McKibben Dana’s book *Hope: A User’s Manual*, I am going to offer a few ways we can practice hope. Author Barbara Kingsolver said in a speech, “The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope.” (pg. 113) What do we do with hope? How do we live inside it? What are some ways wellness are connected to living inside hope?

As I thought about biblical stories that reflect people practicing hope, one that has been central in my own life is the story of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. They are in an impossible situation. The Pharaoh is feeling paranoid and threatened by the number of Hebrew people now living in Egypt. He comes up with this plan that the midwives will do his bidding – let the baby boys die and let the girls live. It is a terrible and evil plot. And yet these two women, who know that life comes from the Creator, Elohim, Yahweh, the one God of Abraham and Sarah. They worship the Holy One and trust in the Spirit’s guidance. So they practice hope for the Israelites by saying no with their actions and by living in to a vision of hope. They disobey the royal edict. They paint a picture of the strong Hebrew woman. They figure out a different response. I wonder if they stayed up all night figuring out a way to keep the babies alive and to convince Pharaoh his plan would not work.

Practicing hope can come in moments of decision, of doing what is right, of a sense of a larger vision. And practicing alongside a friend, a spiritual companion.

The Practice of Pointing the Compass

When dire news breaks and the all kinds of news outlets teem with anxiety and despair, how do we respond? We have talked about turning the news off. We don’t need to know all the latest breaking crises. In Dana’s book, she writes about a person who is a writer and journalist who works on lowering the temperature on breaking news. “Here is another way to look at this. It is bad but it may not be as bad as first reported and here’s why.” What he is doing is orienting himself, and his readers, in the direction of what is good, what is possible. (pg. 115)

For him, hope is an ethic. A hopeful orientation of the spirit is one we really need right now. One that comes from a vision of justice and goodness that inspires us to act. Paul was inviting the early followers of Jesus to know that kind of hope, a hope that flows from the Spirit into them they might be filled up and act on it.

We can see the realities – the forces of injustice, of cruelty, of ignorance, of division. And they may seem to have the upper hand. And yet, we can practice orienting ourselves, map in hand, and a compass trained on hope. Maybe we are called to reflect on the idea of hope as an orientation rather than a goal or destination. Next time a news story comes to you, what would it take to keep your compass trained on hope? (pg. 117)

The Practice of Finding What Is Stable

Dana writes about learning to paddleboard. The biggest challenge is balance. She wobbles whenever she gets on. And then there is something she has to remember – The paddleboard is stable. It is wide and she is practicing on a lake that is fairly calm. Her mantra has become that – the paddleboard is stable. She learns to trust that. (pg.121)

She writes about a rabbi that talked about different names for God in scripture and in the Jewish tradition. The most common name for God in scripture is “Elohim” which means “the one who is the object of reverence.” And there is Yahweh “I am who I am.” But many believe the earliest name for God is pronounced “Ha-makom.” It means “the place.”

Instead of God as a Who but a Where, a sense of stable ground under our feet. Even in the midst of wobbliness, we can trust in ha-makom, a great trust-worthy stability undergirding all things, love itself.

What if we pictured what is stable in our lives right now? What grounds us? Taking time to remember this grounding, this sacred sense of being connected to the earth and all creation can offer a sense of hope.

The Practice of the Big Three

It is easy to feel disconnected from hope. Dana writes – I’ve realized that my ability to access and practice hope boils down to the presence or absence of three basic elements. The first is *beauty*. When we neglect the natural world or art music, story, we can feel disconnected. Maybe beauty does not make us happy, but it can provide moments that make us hopeful. Her next one is *relationships*. Feeling connected to others can lower our cortisol. Teoma spoke about this last week in Adult Ed. Among the leading causes of life, connections are among the top five. And the third is *action*. We can do something for someone else – notes of encouragement and thank you, letter about issue you care about, phone call to family or friend. Beauty, relationships, action. Which one feels most needed right now? (pg. 133-35)

I wonder what would happen if we had a similar banner outside on 5th and E. And made the same claim about First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael. Hope is here! A sturdy hope, grounded in spiritual practices, hope that moves in our bodies, hope that lifts our spirits as if on eagles' wings when we are weary, a sturdy hope that we can hold onto but also hold loosely because we know that many machines and most things in life work best when there is a little give. Hope that comes as we serve our neighbors near and far. Together. Come learn the stories of people like Shiphrah and Puah and stories from other faith communities and poems and wisdom that helps us follow the ways of Jesus.

May we continue to imagine and even craft a more hopeful story for ourselves and our world. Amen.

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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).