

What Hope Is

Jeremiah 29:11, Isaiah 40:28-31

Fall Series – Hope and Wellness: A User’s Guide #2

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For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Holy One, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.
Jeremiah 29:11 NRSV

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. This God does not faint or grow weary; with a depth of understanding that is unsearchable. God gives strength to the weary, and empowers the powerless. Young women may grow tired and weary, young men may stumble and fall, but those who **wait** for Yahweh find a renewed power: they soar on eagles’ wings, they run and don’t get weary, they walk and never tire.*

Isaiah 40:28-31

The Inclusive Bible

*but those who **hope** in God will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

Isaiah 40:31 NIV

Last week I talked about what hope is not. But what is it? One of my primary resources for this series has been a new book by a friend and colleague Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana entitled *Hope: A User’s Manual*. As I continue to read and reflect on her book, I am being stretched to consider how hope operates in biblical narrative and in my own life and ministry.

Last week having cleared out some of the clutter of what hope is not - hope is not specific or limited by a particular outcome, hope does not require us to use the word “that” when we are hoping for good news, hope is not optimism. Now it’s time to invest in ideas of hope that are sturdier than what we’re leaving behind. Today we will explore some of nuances and possibilities of what hope might be. I am not offering merely definitions, but think of it as excursions: detours and discoveries, parables and promises.

Prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah wanted the people of Israel to sense that hope is something God, the Holy One, Yahweh, offers to them. And then they will be able to do something they thought was impossible. They will have a future when they seemed to be cut off from all that gives life meaning. While they were in exile, Jeremiah offers – God has plans for you, to give you a future with hope. Those feeling forgotten in Babylon could hold onto those words, those words of *tikvah*, hope, a strong cord.

And Isaiah reminds people of all generations to trust in God to have a strong sturdy hope. Maybe this feels harder some days when our knees are hurting or our backs or hips or

shoulders. I hear from some of you that when our bodies are not what they used to be or we are facing a serious illness or are living with chronic pain, it is harder to feel hopeful. Part of what Isaiah is offering is an image, a symbol, that despite evidence to the contrary, the Creator of the cosmos, the source of shalom, offers us in every age wings like eagles. Our spirits can be lifted when we rest on the wings of the Divine. So sometimes hope looks like eagles' wings.

This word can be translated differently – Those who wait for God or Those who hope in God. The Hebrew word *qavah* verb means “to wait for” (probably originally - twist, stretch, tension of enduring, waiting: a cord; Arabic - be strong, strength, also strand of rope; Syriac endure, remain, await, threads.) So hope can be this time of stretching, waiting. *Tikvah* comes from *Qavah* - expectation, hope, live, thing that I long for

Hope can come to us in biblical symbols and images. Waiting, hoping, trusting in the ways God is present when we are weary and present when our strength is renewed.

Hope is connected to wellness in our body, mind and spirit. This kind of strength and hope that we can feel in our bodies. I am looking forward to hearing more today at our adult ed class from Rev. Teoma about how we are called by called to be well.

Hope Is What We Do

We have daily lessons in what we can and can't control. I can make a long list of what I can't control. A spiritual practice is to act on what we can control. Hope as a series of actions rather than a feeling. McKibben Dana writes in her book about a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem named Mitri Raheb. He is the president of Dar Al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture. He is a Palestinian Christian in that dangerous and conflicted area, in what is called the occupied territory. And yet his motto and statement of faith is “Hope is what we do.” Hope is wrapped up in what we make real. Hope isn't what we think. Hope isn't what we feel. Hope is what we do in the face of suffering, pain and injustice. (pg. 39)

Think about a situation that feels overwhelming. What is one small action you can do in response? What do you notice? I had a family member who was struggling with depression. He was getting help and medication, but he was fearful. He imagined so much that could go wrong. Part of my response was simple acts of kindness – a text, a phone call, send a picture. And remind him to remember the resources he did have. How do we pray to know the ways we can hold onto that sacred cord?

Hope is Either On or Off

McKibben Dana suggests we can learn about hope from people who are runners. Maybe this applies to those of you who have been in long bike rides races, etc. She said there is a term – *pass-fail running*. When you are in a long training cycle and building up to a race, a coach or training plan may schedule a variety of workouts – long runs, short runs, hill repeats, etc. They all serve a physiological purpose. But good races are not built on the excellence we bring to

this training. Good races are built on consistency. And consistency means getting out there and doing something, even if the something wasn't on the plan.

Excellence can be a dead end. Consistency can give us options, because it sets up a manageable choice: do nothing because you can't attain perfection at the moment, or do something – anything – as best you can at the moment. Imagine a runner who is supposed to run on the track on Tuesday, but she comes home tired. If excellence is the standard, she'll skip the track because she won't run well and hit her targets. But if consistency is her standard, she will put on her workout clothes and run the neighborhood instead or walk with a friend or do 10 minutes of stretching. (pg. 50)

What it means is the imperfect thing we did means everything and the perfect thing we left undone serves no one. So we find ways to consistently offer food for the hungry, support for those who are unhoused, house a new bilingual preschool, provide space for people of different faith communities and no faith community talk and listen about living into the Beloved Community. Nothing is the perfect solution, but we do them consistently.

McKibben Dana proposes that we consider hope as a binary phenomenon, a pass, fail condition. Even a little hope is adequate. My hope may not be excellent, but it is *imperfectly consistent*. In this way hope can be the small candle flame that illumines a dark room. Perhaps Rabbi Adam Klingfeld has this in mind when he reflects on the meaning of Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday commemorating an ancient miracle that kept the lamp oil flowing for eight days. He suggests that the real miracle isn't that the lamps never ran dry; the real miracle is that someone had enough hope to light them all. (pg. 51)

Hope Holds Things Loosely

In his book *Every Tool's A Hammer: Life is What You Make It*, author Adam Savage explores the difference between loose and tight tolerance. When machines are put together, they are put together with various levels of tolerance, which is broadly defined as the precision with which the pieces match one another, whether they fit tightly or loosely together. The appropriate level of tolerance depends on the machine, its purpose and use. Machines with loose tolerance have a lot of give in them. And then there are machines that are ultra precise like sports cars. Tight tolerance is reserved for the highest performing equipment. Neither is better than the other.

Savage in this book is writing about life as well as machinery. There is a cost to putting our lives together with too little tolerance, too little "give." Maybe we have been in situations when we were expected to act in ways that were precise, high performing. But I think hope tends more toward loose tolerance. Hope expects things to be chaotic and loosens the screws, ever so slightly, in the name of keeping the apparatus together.

Maybe hope means holding life and faith and relationships a bit more loosely rather than clutching them. This sacred cord of hope is not meant to bind us, but hold us just snug enough. And to be kind to ourselves when our efforts fall short. I think this is grace. And hope is rigid and false without it. (pg. 54) Think about the areas of your life that have tight and loose tolerance. Have you calibrated things in a life-giving way? Are there shifts that are necessary?

Hope Takes the Long View

Sometimes life and sermon preparation collide. As I was reading the book this week, I let out a gasp. On page 57, McKibben Dana wrote – Some five thousand years ago, a group of people in present-day Ireland took on a monumental project: a tomb one acre across, built with painstaking precision. On precisely one day a year – the day of the winter solstice – the sunlight shines through a narrow opening at just the right angle to illumine a 60 foot corridor where ancient bones were laid to rest. A symbol of light over darkness, victory of life over death. The Stone Age farmers who built Newgrange sought to make the beginning of the new year. Archeologists believe the project took decades so this project was handed down from generation to generation. They imagined something no one had ever seen before, that barely seemed possible. And together, over time, they did it. (pg. 57)

Jeffrey and I are going to see Newgrange ourselves in October and we are thrilled. Not the winter solstice, but still a thrill to see in person. It is place of early Celtic peoples, a place where ancient Celtic practices bumped up against Christianity and there was a weaving together of symbols that remind us to take the long view. Light penetrates the darkness.

Think about how the idea of hope being generation level work. How might we take the long view and give thanks to those in the past who left a legacy of such vision?

When we hope for and wait in Divine Love and grace
have a hope that is imperfectly consistent
remember to turn hope into small actions
hold life loosely
and take the long view,
we may know and experience what enduring and sturdy and deeper hope is. 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).