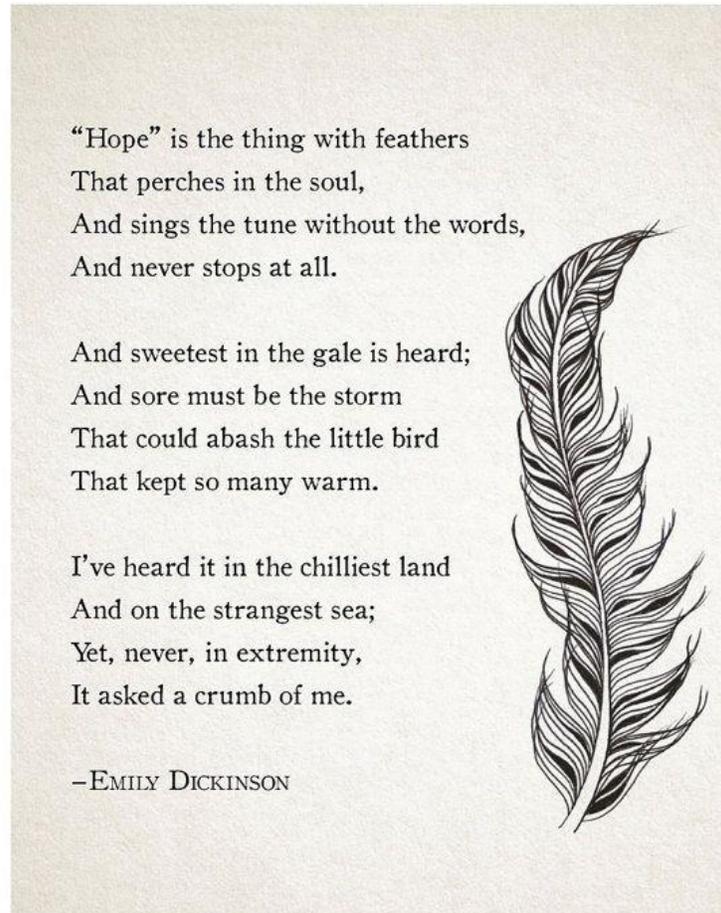


“Pandemic Hope”

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020



John 14:15-21 ~ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Let's imagine that you are part of a trivia team over at the Big Apple when the following question is asked: What do Marilyn Monroe, Steve Jobs, John Lennon, Alexander Hamilton, and Eleanor Roosevelt all have in common? And the correct answer, which goes to the team representing #TeamFCC, is they were all orphans! And not just orphans but orphans who went on to do great things!

In a portion of what are known as the "Farewell Discourses," which extend in John's Gospel from chapters 14:1 to 17:26, the 12 Disciples are sitting with Jesus in an Upper Room in Jerusalem on the Passover. The meals then were extended gatherings that had two parts. In the first part a meal was eaten with the focus being on food. The second part, called a "Symposium" by the Greeks, was the period following eating when people relaxed as their food digested, they continued sipping wine, and engaged in lively conversation. While often the conversation could be a kind of give-and-take dialogue, on this particular evening Jesus really needed to have a heart-to-heart talk to his disciples. Judas had left the room to go off on some strange errand, and Jesus said these words to the eleven who were left: "***Little children, I am with you only a little longer.***" (Jn 13:33) Simon Peter, Thomas, and Philip, seemingly startled, jumped into the conversation and asked Jesus to explain what he meant by these extremely baffling and upsetting words. And with the prompt of these questions, Jesus launched into what some call his last will and testament to his disciples and us as he sought to comfort and encourage and give them final instructions.

"I will not leave you orphaned" (vs. 18) Jesus reassured them. Being left orphaned, being abandoned by the primary persons in our life is a primal fear. Those who took introductory psychology or child development classes and studied Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs may remember that after our basic physiological and safety needs for food, water, rest, and security are met, our psychological need of a sense of belonging must be satisfied for us to develop fully.

Children who have been abandoned either literally or emotionally can have difficulty later on in life. Parents know this and they struggle with how to help their children feel emotionally secure. Some adhere to attachment parenting, sleeping with their babies, wearing them in pouches, picking them up the moment they cry lest their children feel abandoned. Others feel their babies are more emotionally resilient and let them cry themselves to sleep in cribs alone. There probably is a happy medium to be found there, but we also know that babies who are orphaned and then have been left alone in cribs without much human touch, as was the case of the babies in the famed Romanian

orphanages, can be left physically and emotionally stunted. There was a report this week on BBC News about the 51 Ukrainian babies born to surrogate mothers who are stranded at a hotel in Kiev because their adoptive parents can't get them because of the border closures imposed because of the coronavirus. The report stated how worried they are about the emotional impact of this on these tiny newborns.

One can only imagine what war and displacement do to young minds and hearts such as the Lost Boys of Sudan or the 276 school girls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Chibok, Nigeria in 2014. Or those separated from their parents while fleeing from ISIS in places like Syria through death or drowning in boats trying to get to freedom in Europe. While these are extreme cases that seem like a world and an ocean away, those whose parents were emotionally distant or abusive also can struggle their entire lives with attachment and abandonment issues. That's why we so appreciate people like the Italian educator Maria Montessori, who is remembered to have said that ***“a humankind abandoned in its earlier formative stage becomes its own greatest threat to survival.”***

That fear of abandonment, of being orphaned, is so universal and primal that one wonders if an orphan card should be included in the major arcana of archetypes. It's no surprise that we find the figure of the orphan featured so prominently in literature and theater. In addition to Little Orphan Annie, have any of you ever heard of the Little Princess, Heidi, Pippi Longstocking, Mowgli, Tarzan, Curious George, Batman and Robin, Cinderella, David Copperfield, Bambi, Captain America, James Bond, Dorothy of the Wizard of Oz, Pollyanna, Oliver Twist, Superman, Snow White? How about Harry Potter (after "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" killed Lily and James Potter, Harry was fostered by his evil aunt and uncle)? How about the many orphans in the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson? Obviously these reveal humankind's fear of abandonment, or being orphaned, as we see our primal fears vicariously displayed through all these characters and so many more.

“I will not leave you orphaned” (vs. 18) Jesus reassured them, speaking directly into their primal fear of being abandoned. Yes, it is true that I will be going away and you won't see me in the flesh anymore, but I also promise that I will send you “another Advocate, to be with you forever.” The Greek word Paraclete (*paraklētos*) has been translated in the NRSV as ‘advocate’. Other translations use words such as comforter, helper, counselor. While a Paraclete is a legal advocate or assistant, at its most literal level it means ‘the one called alongside’ (p. 160, FG). The one who stands beside, speaks on our behalf, and advocates for us.

Don't be afraid, Jesus told his disciples. I will not abandon you, or leave you orphaned. ***“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”*** Jesus will send another advocate. Their first advocate was Jesus himself. But Jesus has told them he is going away and will send them another advocate. But who or what is this other Advocate who will be with them forever? And why Jesus are you abandoning us now? Do we not now live on an orphan planet that has been abandoned by our God in the midst of a global pandemic? Where are you God? Why are you not saving us? Why have you left us as orphans fighting Covid-19 on our own?

Jesus told his disciples in an Upper Room before he was going to leave them, and he tells us today, at a moment when we also are fearful, anxious, and feel abandoned and orphaned: ***I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.***

This Advocate whom Jesus was sending, this Counselor, Comforter, the Holy Spirit abides **with** us and is **in** us no matter where we are and what circumstances we might find ourselves in. And even though we might not see it in the external world and in all the suffering, death, and uncertainty around us, this Advocate truly is within us and manifests itself through the fruit we exhibit and especially in what the Apostle Paul identified as the three great theological virtues of the Christian Life: **Faith, Hope, and Love.**

Now of these three siblings, Faith and Love get lots of coverage. We are told we are saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). We remember that the greatest of these is love (I Cor. 13). That overachieving older sibling Faith and that pampered younger sibling Love! They're out front and flashy on the center stage, getting lots of claps and accolades, people fawning over them. But that middle child of Hope often gets the short shrift of things, just like middle children in families sometimes do. No one pays much attention to Hope. Yet, in the midst of this pandemic, it is that neglected middle child Hope that comes from the Paraklete, from the Holy Spirit within, that we need above all else to sustain us as, day by day, we try and stand courageously in the midst of the storm.

The curtain opens, the spotlight gets turned on, and Hope now stands center stage. Hope is what we must draw upon. Hope is what must empower and fuel us. And both secular and spiritual sources know this. That's why Time Magazine created a *Time 100 Special Report* on "Finding Hope" in its April 27 / May 4 edition.

On its front cover is a lone woman wearing a face mask, who is walking alone down a street in downtown Paris, France, beside apartment buildings where people are sheltering in place. It contains essays on hope by people including Margaret Atwood, Angelina Jolie, the Dalai Lama and more.

That we need the strength of hope during this pandemic is also seen in many spiritual sources, including the weekly Friday series from Chalice Press entitled “Messages of Hope,” which I encourage you to subscribe to. This past Friday, they shared things like the following (from the *Another Way Manifesto*):

- Strengthen your capacity to embrace mystery by thinking about, playing with, and adapting to uncertainty, because it, like death, is inevitable.
- Sing, dance, move, take a meditative walk, and engage other embodied practices. Integrating these ways of knowing moves us past the places where we get stuck.
- The wisdom of our ancestors is always present and available to us, so remember to welcome them as we face the most difficult tasks of our lives.
- Cultivate new possibilities that emerge by resisting the tyranny of either or. Hold the paradoxes that shape our communal life with patience and curiosity.

Now these suggestions, along with the articles in *Time* magazine, are great! I love them! Especially the one related to resisting the tyranny of either / or and being patient and curious. But these are only possible practices when we are able to access hope from within. For hope is not human manufactured positive thinking or forced optimism or glib reassurances or human confidence or expectations about the future. Rather, as Alexander Pope rightly says, “hope springs eternal.” In other words, hope comes from the very heart of God and that is why it can spring eternally. It is not something we can produce on our own. It is God’s Spirit abiding within us and a strength we can draw upon from an eternal reservoir.

This is something two famous orphans from the Bible—**Joseph** and **Moses**—discovered. They were able to find hope from a wellspring deep within their souls, only after they had been sold into slavery or forced to flee into the wilderness. And we lift up **Job** as the supreme exemplar of hope. His has been called “perhaps the most relentless pilgrimage to the wellsprings of hope in all western literature” (Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p. 7). When, within the context of a cosmic wager between God and Satan, all was taken away from Job—his wife his children, his livelihood, his health—he did not try to make sense of his circumstances through the false hope of manufactured positive thinking or the explanations of his friends or material abundance or sought for reassurances from God

but only by recognizing God (though as seemingly absent as God may also seem in this global pandemic), as the wellspring and source of all that is. It was only this hope, stemming from an eternal source in God, in which he could root himself, as he ultimately proclaimed with confidence: ***“I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand upon the earth.”*** (Job 19:25)

Job’s is a story of mystical hope, which has three characteristics:

1. Mystical hope is not tied to any kind of outcome or expectation about the future. Marilyn Chandler McIntyre has said that while the “face of hope turns toward the future ... the feet of hope are anchored in the Now that lies like bedrock beneath the stream of time.” (“The Hope is in the Waiting,” *Weavings* / XXVII:2, p. 12)
2. Mystical hope is not outside us but is a dimension of the Spirit within us as an abiding state of being. It is the experience of being grounded in God.
3. Mystical hope bears fruit as we are enabled to live our lives more spaciously, joyfully, generously, and especially more gratefully.

Just think of those through history who hoped while imprisoned or in concentration camps or were suffering. Remember how the Apostle Paul was in prison, chained to a Roman guard. As he suffered hardships and had no idea what his future would hold, he penned a letter to the Philippians that was filled with hope, writing toward the end of it ***“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!”*** (Phil. 4:4). Think about people like Nelson Mandela, Viktor Frankl, Ann Frank, POW John McCain. Those in hiding during the Rwandan genocide. Those in prison today. Everyone all around the world who are in hospitals or nursing homes or prisons or refugee camps with Covid-19 or are sheltered in their homes, uncertain about what the future will bring to them individually and our world at large. Yet the Biblical teaching is that difficult times can build character, and character hope, as Paul says in the book to the Romans: ***“We know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”*** (Romans 5:3-4)

This hope is the strongest driving force for people, that which keeps them going. And there are times when we have to fan the flames of hope in others, when they come to us and ask “Do you think everything is going to be okay?” And then we are called to help them remember the song only they can sing, the eternal love on which we stand and

which surrounds us in this life and the next, as we remind them, with the words of St. Julian of Norwich, that ***“All Shall Be Well, and All Manner of Thing Shall be Well.”*** We blow on the eternal sparks of hope that lie within them as those embers are fanned within to a blazing fire again. Hope is thus a communal act.

And hope can spring up in the most unlikely places, as Heather Murray Elkins writes in her poem “Hope Thrives” that:

*Hope is not
A domesticated state of mind.
It seems to camp out in odd places,
Crops up at the worst possible times.
Just as we resign ourselves
to the minimum wages of life
with no benefits,
hope whispers that we shouldn't settle
for despair's bottom line.
Hope thrives in the barren places of our lives.*

(*Alive Now*, Nov/Dec 2011, p. 23)

As someone many of us admire said, oh the audacity of hope! How audacious it is for us to have hope during the worst possible times, in the barren places of our lives! Even though middle child Hope doesn't get the attention that older sibling Faith and younger sibling Love do, it is Hope that is the fuel that gets us through the dark times, the barren places in our lives, illness, death, loss, economic uncertainty, exhaustion, pandemics. Times like these which Tony Van Dyke described the visceral feeling of when he asked last week whether we might all be dreaming right now. I took this to mean that we are presently in a kind of collective unsettling dream of uncertainty, confusion, and dread.

While Faith is symbolized by a cross, and Love by a heart, Hope is given the symbol within Christian imagery of an **anchor**. Hebrews 6:19 says: ***“We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”*** As strong winds and powerful waves crash down upon the little boat we are on, we need not be afraid, for our boat is attached to an anchor that will not break during the many storms we face in life.

And as we live through this present storm of a terrible pandemic with an uncertain future, let us remember that people have faced far greater storms than we in the past. Like Hiroshima, for example. Linda Hogan recalls (in *Dwellings*) that:

In Japan ... there were wildflowers that grew in the far, cool region of mountains. The bricks of Hiroshima, down below, were formed of clay from these mountains, and so the walls of houses and shops held the dormant trumpet flower seeds. But after one group of humans killed another with the explosive power of life's smallest elements split wide apart, the mountain flowers began to grow. Out of the crumbled, burned buildings they sprouted. Out of destruction and bomb heat and the falling of walls, the seeds opened up and grew. What a horrible beauty, the world going its own way, growing without us. But perhaps this, too, speaks of survival, of hope beyond our time." (Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 162)

Today, no matter what is going on in our external world and in your internal lives, I challenge each of you to draw upon and trust in that eternal wellspring of hope that lies within you to see you through this present storm. Remember that, no matter what, God will never abandon us! Jesus will never leave you orphaned! For he has sent us another Advocate who gives us the ability to HOPE!

I end today with this prayer by Beth A. Richardson:

*God of the universe
Accept my tentative offerings of hope
And strengthen my practice of hope
Sharpen my vision
So that I may see the signs of your goodness
at work in the world.
I am your partner in hope.
Amen.*