

Living by Hope

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” Psalm 42: 11

We can wish upon a star. We can wish others a happy birthday or a merry Christmas. We can wish that we lived closer to a friend or family member. Or we can wish for a new car or a cruise or a senior discount. But what do such wishes add up to?

Hope runs much deeper. We hope that our lives will matter to others. We hope to be decent persons. We hope that God fills the world with goodness. Such hopes, then, demand that we take action. We take risks for such hopes. We do what such hopes require of us. If I hope that the poor will be fed, I’ll be found working at a food pantry or making donations or...

Hope has to do with what God wants for me, for humankind, and for the created world. Wishing has to do merely with what I want out of other people or objects or groups of people or God.

Hope grows in the soil of the eternal possibilities of God. Wishes sprout up in the soil of present circumstances. Hope is anchored in the faithfulness of God. It thrives in adversity or when there appears that there’s no chance. Hope is what keeps a cancer patient going when, in spite of the last round of treatment, cancer cells are still multiplying. Hope is believing in the potential of a difficult relative, even when his/her bad decision making makes you want to scream.

Charles Pinches says that “by hope we struggle to point the whole of our life in one direction – to keep on one way. Hope for Christians has always involved a movement toward a share in God’s kingdom. As such it also involves a passage through time and a passage in a particular earthly life. It is the virtue of the wayfarer.”

Along our way, despair seeks to pull us off course. Despair says that what God requires of us is too difficult. From the opposite side, presumption also assails us. Presumption assumes that the object of our hope can be easily attained. So, by despair we say, “I cannot share in God’s goodness: it is too difficult.” By presumption, we say, “I can easily share, there is nothing to it.” And then we quit hoping when we see that what we hope for is not easily accomplished.

Whatever God gives me to hope for is mine and mine alone. This is the message of the old gospel folk song “Lonesome Valley”: *“You got to walk that lonesome valley,/You got to walk it by yourself,/Nobody here can walk it for you,/You got to walk it by yourself.”* Hope pertains to one’s own goodness, one’s own share in the kingdom of God. Therefore, it is a lonely journey at times. However, what the Bible and Christian history teaches us is that one’s hope is supported by others who walk close by. “Travelers in hope lean on one another.”

Peter Marty says that when Nelson Mandela received a visit from his daughter near the end of his 27-year imprisonment, and he held his ‘vulnerable and soft’ granddaughter in his calloused hands for the first time, the encounter overwhelmed him. He named the yet-to-be named baby Zaziwe, an African word for hope. Why? He later wrote, “During all my years in prison, hope never left me.” – DJ

