



"A WOKE HOPE" - ISAIAH 64:1-9

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Hope seems impossible when all that surrounds us are the ingredients for hopelessness.

We all live in these times of despair. Each of us, both personally and collectively, live in a world and in a space wherein seemingly hopeless situations abound, and it leads us to despair.

When unarmed and vulnerable black and brown bodies are *still* being slaughtered against the pavement, while the blood-stained streets cry out for their justice, we live in despair.

While the rate of violent mass shootings increases, and the only responses some have to offer are “thoughts and prayers” rather than viable action, we are certainly living in despairing times.

We all live in these arenas of despair.

We live in despair of the sundry ills and –isms that plague our everyday lives and our bodies.

We live in despair when new stories of sexual violence emerge daily, and some who profess Christianity offer defenses of the horrid actions using a twist of our sacred texts.

We live in despair of a nation that perpetuates racism and xenophobia from the highest office and whitest house in the land – placing broad-sweeping biases against those who are “other.”

We even live in *our* own despair: where disease hits *our* bodies, where trouble is on *our* mind, where *our* bills are due, where fear keeps *us* up at night.

Our friends in the text also are living within the circumstances of despair. This lament from Isaiah, a prayer of grief, is offered as those in the text are living in circumstances of despair. They are living in

the despair as a people who have endured the Exodus and its aftermath. They are living in despair as a people who experienced exilic years in the wilderness. They are living in despair now as they have witnessed foreign occupations, widespread destruction of the lands around them, oppression from the Babylonians, and even the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple! *Despair.*

And as a result of the despair of their lives and of their world, this lament is offered to God. This lament – not a dishonest prayer of happy and cheery days, but rather an acknowledgement of the current pain and sorrow – is offered to God. This lament begins with a recollection of what God has done for the people in times afore. The prophet in the passage here is leading the people to look toward the Divine in a plea for that same God to intervene again; “God, we have seen what you have done before! You did awesome deeds that we did not even think possible! We know no other God above or besides you!”

The lament, however, is not just a recognition of what God *can* do, but it is primarily a plea for God to actually *do* it. And it should be noted that the people do not ask God to do anything in particular, but rather the request is for God to just do *something*. “Rip open the heavens! Descend and come down to us! Make the mountains shudder at your presence. Make the nations shake in their boots. Shock your enemies into facing you!”

God’s people are living in despair. They are surrounded by circumstances that seem hopeless. They are living amongst situations that appear to be insurmountable. They understand that their own power and their own will is not enough to uproot their world. But, they maintain a sense of hope in the One who is able. They position themselves in a posture of hope toward the One who can bring about a change in their condition. They acknowledge and pray to the One who they trust will bring them out of exile and into their flourishing period of liberation. *Hope.*

Although we may live amid hopeless situations, the Advent of Christ empowers us to hope.

The good news, my sisters and my brothers, is that we have been given the capacity and the opportunity to hope despite our current situations. We have been given the power to see visions in the face of our despair. We, through the Advent of Christ, can hope *afresh and anew*.

New hope. New hope. I am talking about our hopes for the here and now, our hopes that can and will be made manifest here in this earth. We love our hopes of the life to come. We love to hope and wait in expectancy for the “after while,” “when the morning comes,” “by and by,” “soon and very soon,” “when we all get to heaven.” We love to await the place where there are walls of jasper, streets of gold, gates of pearl, a building not made by man, eternal into the heavens.

But we are given the power to hope anew for the here and now – hopes for a right world, hopes for the glory of the Lord to be revealed and for all flesh to see it together, hopes that await the day when the kingdoms of this world fully become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

It might be easier, of course, to not hope. Some would advocate for leaving our days of despair just where they are. Some might suggest our world is fine just as it is, that there is no need for a new vision. Why should we hope? What does it? Hoping is not what pays the bills, right?

But we are not those people. We are empowered to not give up hoping. Our very lives and our work in our Zion do not allow us the cop-out of not envisioning a new world. It is far too simple to place a ceiling on our expectations, to “believe little rather than to believe big.” But it is in moments of despair – such as these disconcerting times – that we are encouraged to “lift high the ceiling” on our hopes.¹ We must maintain large hopes. We rest in the expectation of a coming Savior. Like the prophet, we know that a better day is coming, and we trust in the One on whom we are waiting to rip the heavens open and descend to the earth to shake its foundations.

Not only are we expected to hope, but we are invited to build those hopes into realities.

The Gospel lesson for today teaches us that this enduring hope, however, must not be paired with lasting lethargy. We are invited to make our hopes transcend the reality of our present nightmares. The gospel reminds us that we must “keep awake” – we must “stay woke.” We *do* trust in the

¹ Paraphrased from Howard Thurman, “The Ceiling of Thy Hopes I Will Lift on High,” from *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1985).

expectation of a coming Savior. We *do* rest in the Incarnate Divine that will transform our world. But our hope must be ‘woke,’ that is, it must be a vigilant waiting. Hope is a noun, but it is also a verb. And our hope must be active, not passive. Our hope must be persistent, not intermittent. Our hope is a form of our resistance. Our very Zion was founded on this woke hope. Ancestors such as Richard Allen and Jarena Lee did not just hope for a better church, but rather they put action to their hope, they put their works in dialogue with their living faith.

And the prophetic author reminds us in verse nine that we are all God’s people. We *all* are invited to participate in this work of hope: sons *and* daughters, young men *and* old women, the wealthy *and* the impoverished, the soundless *and* the outspoken, the conventional *and* the progressive, the strong *and* the fatigued, the choir *and* the preacher and the ushers *and* the stewards and the trustees *and* the laity *and* the missionaries. We *all* are invited to hope afresh and anew for a better and a right world.

In this time of preparation of Advent, we are invited to work *alongside* the Divine Incarnate to bring about a new age where our hopes prosper, and where new life is breathed into our hearts’ decay. The gospel author beckons us to participate in the tongues that will tear open the heavens, in the actions of resistance that will cause the mountains to quake, and in the disposition of a woke hope that will agitate the realms of power in our world. This is our faithful response to the hope of the forthcoming Incarnation: an active faith, a vigilant waiting, and a woke hope.

So we hope.

We hope, even with our worries and concerns.

Hope, despite disappointment or frustration.

Hope, even when we are living in a period of exile or while we fight for a new Exodus.

Hope, even when others around us are destroying the land and desecrating the temples.
Keep hoping and keep working! Keep hoping, and one day we just might look up and realize that
the Almighty is still hoping, too.²

Keep hoping until we see order stemming out of the chaos.
Keep hoping until we see a new light emerging from the old darkness.
Keep hoping until we see life being breathed into piles of dust.

Keep hoping *and* keep working . . .
until we see God still doing a new thing and making all things new,
until we see God still fixing hearts and regulating minds,
until we see God still making hills and mountains low and exalting valleys,
until we see God still making the crooked places straight and the rough places plain,
until we begin to see the very kingdom of God.

So we will continue to pray, “Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!”
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth, as it is in *Your* hopes.

In the name of the One who was, and who is, and who is to come, Amen.

² Adapted from a sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Robert M. Franklin titled “The Vocation of Argument,” at Fall 2015 Convocation, Candler School of Theology.