

Being Hope

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
Dec. 3, 2017 First Sunday of Advent

“Critical thinking without hope is cynicism. Hope without critical thinking is naivete.” – Maria Popava

*“Despair is anger with no place to go. Hope is the knowing that this feeling is not permanent.”
– Mignon McLaughlin, adapted*

Do you ever take the long view of your life, the really long view,
and envision the earth 300 years from now,
or perhaps 7 generations after we're all gone?
If you do, what do you imagine?

My 4th grade daughters' class was recently given a homework assignment
to write about the future 300 years from now.
She didn't want to do the assignment,
which I realized was more than the usual resistance to writing.
It was because she didn't want to think about a far-away future,
because that felt dreary and negative, hard to imagine on earth.

The homework had to get done and since she is an artist,
I suggested she imagine a future in which humans could focus on creative arts.
(Won't robots be doing a lot of the other stuff?)
I imagined city pathways made of mosaics and huge, shimmering murals
on the walls of buildings and music intermingled with birdsong.

I remembered the work of John Todd,
a guy who completely re-visions urban environments into eco-cities
and creates miniature ecosystems that he calls living machines
that look like mini-greenhouses or pond-like aquariums but process wastewater.
By the end of our talk, I was imagining a fantastic, colorful, art-filled, life-filled world!
I felt a lot better!

She ended up writing that humans would be moving to another planet,
because this one would be used up.

I was glad, though, to talk to one of her friends
whose vision was that in 300 years, all people would be vegetarians and the world, peaceful.
He also had some thoughts of glee about certain politicians
who would no longer be around, but I won't comment on that-
except to say that if you're feeling dreary, maybe it's time to visit the 4th grade class.

Young people today are surrounded
by dystopian visions of the future as they get older.
There are books and movies like *The Hunger Games* and animated movies
that imagine the earth covered in trash and people fleeing into outer space.
As adults, we can read about such dystopias as well,
and find these narratives in both the fiction and non-fiction sections of the library.

I suppose these stories serve as warnings and calls to arms,
but I do wonder about their impact on the younger generations.
I wonder if kids these days- our kids, and other kids in our Valley and nation-
could use a few utopian visions to balance out the dystopian ones.
Or better yet- what about a whole bunch of possible, attainable, *creative* visions-
to get excited about, to aim for, to give their lives to!
I wonder if they could use a little more hope...
the kids who are- all in all- doing just fine, and the kids who are barely hanging on.
If so, they would not be alone.

Most of us humans can use a little more hope from time to time, especially when things get dreary for us personally, or for the society we live in, or for us as spiritual and ethical beings who are all interconnected.

Even as we try to live in the present moment, we can use, sometimes, a little more hope for the future- hope for change or possibility, for sons and daughters, for the direction of our society, for humanity, for ourselves.

Anyone here ever gone through a time in their life when they could have used a little more hope? We *all* go through such times. (Amen? Amen!)

As the Brazilian liberation theologian Rubem Alves writes, without hope, suffering can lead to resentment and despair. And even though we can remind ourselves that such states of mind need not be permanent, resentment and despair are difficult conditions to live with.

Resentment and despair make it hard for a person or a society to find energy. They make it hard to thrive, or even get through the day. They make it hard, quite hard, to notice the places where Creativity or Love or God are in fact lying in wait or trying to emerge; where they are, in fact, still possible- and even calling our names.

That's what the narrative in the Christian tradition of Advent is about. It harkens back to a time of Empire, a time when the wealthy controlled the poor, a time when there was no way out of violent oppression, a time when to follow one's faith could mean death. And it says that *even in the midst of all that*, something new, a power greater than violence or death or Empire, was gestating.

For Christians, it was the gestation of a baby who was God Godself,

who would be born and become a Savior.

For others, it was the gestation of a prophet who embodied love and in that way, resisted the Empire- which was miracle enough.

Both versions say that there *was* a power *greater than* the Roman Empire- which as we all know, fell long ago.

Call it love or God, call it the human spirit or Life's longing to be free- the story says this power outlasts Empires.

The Advent narrative is about the utterly unexpected places where Creativity or Love or God are in fact lying in wait, trying to emerge, still possible.

It is not a utopian narrative- as it takes place in a violent, frightening, nasty time in human history. But it is a narrative about possibility, about hope.

In our reading this morning, Rubem Alves suggests that hope...

"...is a suspicion that reality is more complex than realism wants us to believe, and that the frontiers of the *possible* are not determined by the limits of the *actual*, and that in a miraculous and unexpected way life is preparing *the creative events* which will open the way to freedom and resurrection . . ."

He writes,

"(Hope) is a refusal to let the creative act be dissolved in immediate sense experience... and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren."

It is a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren. I'd suggest we take that to mean our collective grandchildren, not merely our own progeny.

Alves suggests hope is a *suspicion*, a *refusal* and a *commitment*.

Those are interesting words, fighting words!

Have you ever thought about the way you live your life

as making a commitment to hope?

Or as the Rev. Dr. Cornell West puts it, do you ever see yourself as a Prisoner of Hope?

There can be so much in the world that can drag us down,
at times it can be a challenge to “be hopeful”.

But what happens if we remind ourselves that hope is not just
an idea in our heads or a rosy feeling-
but an active practice, a discipline, a behavior, a way of being?

What if being hopeful means making a practice of noticing the places
where Creativity or Love or God are lying in wait,
trying to emerge, are in fact, still possible- and even calling our names?

What if we humbly begin to see ourselves and others
as part of that Life, that Love, that Spirit
that is so creative and relentless in finding ways to unfold?

What if we shift from thinking about “having hope” or “being hopeful”
to simply “being hope” for each other?
After all, you can *be* hope for somebody else,
whether or not you are personally *feeling* hopeful- or full of hope- at all.

I think of the story that I told last year at this time
about the church women who raised the Rev. William Barber-
a Pentecostal preacher and a speaker of truth to power.
Every week, his gran-mamma and the other women in his family
would cook a big meal and then take part of it to someone in need.
Barber points out that his grandma didn't say they were going to *help* somebody,
they said they were going to go HOPE somebody.

It probably didn't matter to his grandmother
how she was *feeling* any particular week.
I'm sure some weeks she was not in the best mood, or her back hurt,
or she had too much to do, or was tired.

As a black woman living in the south in those days,
there may have been days that she did not *feel* hopeful at all.

But she had a practice-a spiritual practice- of going to offer hope,
creating hope that was not there before,
by presence, by loving hands, hot food and prayer.
And she did this with other people- so she had support and back-up, which helps!
That's the best way to do it.
Although there are times when we may feel called to embody hope
in a way that is uniquely our own.

In her book *House for Hope*, theologian Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker
shares this story: "In 1992 The principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera, Vedran Smailovic,
heard a mortar shell burst in the street near his home, quickly followed by screams.
People had been standing in line to buy bread
from one of the few remaining bakeries in the violence ravaged city.
When he looked out his window, Vedran saw the carnage.
The Shell killed twenty two people.

Grieved and shocked, he felt he must do something. But what?
He did what he felt he, as an artist, could do.
Dressed up in his formal concert clothes, he went out the next afternoon
and sat where the shell had burst and played the plaintive Albinoni *Adagio in G Minor*. He
played every afternoon for the next twenty two days,
one day of music for every person killed."

"Then he kept playing," she writes, "he played to ruined homes,
smoldering fires, scared people hiding in basements.
He played for human dignity that is the first casualty in war.
Ultimately, he played for life, for peace, for the possibility of hope
that exists even in the darkest hour."

Thankfully, most of us have not had mortar shells burst around us, although some of us have.

But for the most part, our stories of “being hope” for another will be a touch less dramatic than this- but that doesn’t mean they’re any less important.

I invite you to listen this week for stories about folks *being hope* for somebody. They can be simple stories:

-Inviting a friend who gets depressed at this time of year over for Christmas, even though every year he says he might make it and never does.

-Spending an hour on the phone with a friend whose kid is in an addiction-related crisis.

-Encouraging the woman who is getting chemo next to you to just go ahead and try the Reike treatment that is offered.

-Having a grieving friend over for dinner or taking them out to breakfast.

-Mentoring a young professional through tough challenges.

-Signing up for a protest march.

-Bringing your kids to church where the old timers can see them, and feel so glad at the sight.

Each one of these is a story about *being hope* for someone else, and each one is a story that I heard in just the past two days.

I’m sure there are many more.

This week, you might try telling your kids- no matter how old they are- “You know what, you give me hope because...” – and then let them know why. You might talk to them about *being hope* for someone else.

Or you might try telling a friend, “You really gave me hope when...”

-and then let them know when.

And you might seek out one person, place or moment that gives *you* hope: a support group, beautiful music, a good friend, a gathering, the words or drawings of a visionary, a poet, an artist, a prophet, the spirit of the holy, of God-

that suggests that *what we know now* is not the way things *must always be*.
We might all make a practice this week of noticing- just *noticing*- all the places
where Creativity or Love or God might be lying in wait,
trying to emerge, still possible- and even, in a way, calling us by name.

In his piece on hope, Rubem Alves writes,

“We must live by the love of what we will never see...

**Such disciplined love is what has given prophets, revolutionaries and saints
the courage to die for the future they envisaged.**

They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope.”

May we, too, plant seeds of hope...

and live by the love of what we will never see. Amen.

Reading: What is hope? by Rubem Azevedo Alves, a Brazilian theologian, philosopher, educator, writer and psychoanalyst who was one of the founders of liberation theology.

“It is a presentiment that imagination is more real
and reality less real than it looks.
It is a hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts
that oppress and repress is not the last word.
It is a suspicion that reality is more complex
than realism wants us to believe
and that the frontiers of the possible are not determined
by the limits of the actual
and that in a miraculous and unexpected way
life is preparing the creative events
which will open the way to freedom and resurrection . . .

The two, suffering and hope, live from each other.
Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair,
hope without suffering creates illusions, naiveté, and drunkenness . . .

Let us plant dates
even though those who plant them will never eat them.
We must live by the love of what we will never see.
This is the secret discipline.
It is a refusal to let the creative act be dissolved
in immediate sense experience
and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren.
Such disciplined love is what has given
prophets, revolutionaries and saints
the courage to die for the future they envisaged.
They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope.”