

Hope: Being Anchored to the Future

Hebrews 6:19-20

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A human is a creature suspended between memory and hope. We might say that it is memory that forms us—that our identity is virtually the sum of our memories. But the New Testament wants to insist that we are formed also by our hope. It is not only the past which determines who we are—as individuals and the church—the past of God’s saving work in history, the coming of God in the flesh, the death and resurrection of Jesus; it is also true that the future determines our identity—the future of Christ coming to reign and the triumph of God’s kingdom over everything that is wrong with the world. Jesus does not teach us to pray only thanking God for what he has done in the past; he teaches us to pray our hope: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

When we use the word “hope” in a Christian context, we mean something a little different than a child means who is hoping for a bicycle for Christmas. You might remember the old Dusty Springfield song that says “Wishin’ and hopin’, and thinkin’ and prayin’...won’t get you into his heart.” She thinks of those as four equally useless exercises. And honestly, most people would be hard pressed to tell you the difference between wishing and hoping.

But hope in the New Testament is not an iffy thing, a feeling about something that might or might not happen. Will the Patriots win this afternoon? I hope so. But who knows? After all, Alabama got upset yesterday. Hope in the New Testament refers to a confident expectation that something will happen. The New Living Translation often chooses to translate the Greek word for hope with the English word “confidence.” God is called “the God of hope.” Jesus is called “our hope.” In a graveside service, we commit the body to the ground in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer* “in the sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That meaning of hope is why that wonderful verse in Hebrews (6:19) can say “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we are on the hinge between memory and hope. Thanksgiving is all about memory, isn’t it? We remember all that God has done for us, all that our family has done for us, all that our community and our nation mean to us. Counting your blessings is looking backwards. But then we come to Advent, a season when we think about Christ’s coming (that’s the meaning of the word “advent”)—and not primarily, according to tradition and the lectionary, God coming as a baby, but primarily looking forward to God coming to rule in the form of the Messiah’s kingdom, which is still out ahead of us. And the first Sunday of Advent is often designated the Sunday of Hope when we light the hope candle.

It gets a little complicated, doesn’t it, when the Christmas season is so much about nostalgia—about memories of a simpler time, a simpler faith, memories of time together with family, and all the wonderful accumulation of traditions that make our lives feel richer during December. And yet the whole idea of Advent—itself an ancient tradition—is asking us to look forward into the future. Our hope is anchored to Jesus, who has gone on before us and promised us that he will make all things new.

Do you know the word *Maranatha*? It’s an Aramaic word preserved from the worship of the early church, which appears only once in the New Testament but we believe was a common word in the early church. It’s one of the only Aramaic words saved for us. It’s usually translated

“Come, Lord Jesus,” and it’s a popular term today among charismatics and others who pray for Jesus’ return regularly. So on the first Sunday of Advent it is right to shout out “Maranatha!”

But there’s something scholars have discovered about that word. The “Mar” part means “Lord,” and the verb in it is “come.” But depending on how you break the syllables, Maranatha can either mean “Come, Lord!” or “The Lord is come!” Both ways of saying Maranatha are important and necessary. We declare today that the Lord has come and that we hope for his coming.

One scholar of early worship named Thomas Talley has reflected on the dual meaning of Maranatha and has written [“History and Eschatology in the Primitive Pascha,” 1982], “We always live...between memory and hope, between his coming and his coming; and the present which is the threshold between these, between memory and hope, between past and future, this present is the locus of the presence of him who is at once Lord of history and its consummation. The remembrance of his passion and the recognition of his glory are integral to one another, and have been from the beginning.”

I know that sounds academic, but think of this meal we are about to share. The Passover meal which Jesus shared with his disciples before he died was always a meal of memory and hope. If you’ve ever shared a seder, you know that it tells the story of God’s mighty deeds in the past which set us free, but it is also an expression of hope that God might set us free again. We raise the cup and say “Next year in Jerusalem!”—and Jews said that during all the years they had no access to Jerusalem at all. They toasted one another and God in hope. The same thing is going on when we share the Lord’s supper. We do this “in remembrance” of Jesus, to tell the story of what Jesus did for us when he gave his body and blood for our forgiveness on the cross. But it is also a meal eaten in hope. Jesus said to his disciples, “I shall not drink this cup again until I drink it new with you *in the kingdom of God*.” Paul said, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*.” The book of Revelation makes clear that this meal is a foretaste of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb that we will share with those from every nation, tribe, and tongue, and with heavenly creatures when God’s victory is complete.

Does this matter? I think it matters whether we understand ourselves as Christians to be exclusively people who are dedicated to remembering and conserving something ancient and good, or as people who live at that intersection of memory and hope. It matters if we see ourselves not fighting to keep things as they are, but leaning forward into what God is in the process of doing in the world. If we were 100% conservative, we would be focused only on conserving the good things of the past, preserving the memories and texts. If we were 100% progressive, we would be focused only on being a part of what God is doing today and will be doing in God’s wonderful future kingdom.

But as Christians who find ourselves at this table we find ourselves between memory and hope. We are at the intersection of past and future—what else can the present be? We root ourselves in the stories of God’s liberating work in Israel and in the person of Jesus, but we also root for what God has promised to do in the future. We cheer the kingdom on, we enter into it by believing confidently that God will win, that peace and justice will triumph, and we act in relation to this world as if God will win. To say that we are people of hope is to say that we are radically oriented toward the future.

You know that the ancient symbol for hope is an anchor. That is of course what you see on the Rhode Island flag: an anchor and the word Hope. It comes straight out of Hebrews 6:19. It’s not an Enlightenment slogan that means that every day in every way things are getting better and better. It was intended by the founders of the colony to mean that our hope is in God—and because we have this confident hope in God, we can approach the future with confidence. What Hebrews

says about hope is that Jesus has gone on ahead of us—into heaven, through the curtain that separates humanity from the holy God, into the future which is more real than the present, and that we will follow Jesus there one day. We are not afraid of persecution, we are not afraid to die, because we have this confident hope. Hebrews says that our hope has entered the real heavenly temple beyond the curtain, and we are anchored to that reality. Jesus is our forerunner, the one who made a path for us, and he is our anchor.

In Hebrews, hope is like a rope tied to an anchor that is ahead of us in the future, and we are being pulled forward by the anchor into God's future. We usually think of the anchor as holding us back, as keeping us from moving or changing. But here the anchor goes before us and pulls us into heaven and the kingdom.

When we hear the words of the prophets about the way the world will be someday, when we hear Jesus describe how it is in the kingdom and hear Paul talk about everything being renewed and reconciled, we are filled with hope. It's not just wishful thinking. It is God's promise and the direction of history. Some of it may happen gradually and some of it may happen all of a sudden with the arrival of the Messiah in power and glory. But it will happen, and we will find ourselves transformed into Jesus' likeness as well. So we live our lives now not as if this is just the way things are, as if nothing can change, but as if we believe that God is going to make everything right someday. We believe in Jesus who is already at work in the future preparing a new world for us. Richard John Neuhaus was a deeply conservative Christian thinker and priest—first a Lutheran and then a Catholic. He told the story of being driven from the Pittsburgh airport for a speaking engagement. As must often happen in such situations, Neuhaus' host and driver began ranting about what is wrong with America—the social fabric is disintegrating, Christian values are being lost. After a while, even the conservative priest had had enough and he told the driver, "The times may be bad, but they are the only times we are given. Remember, hope is still a Christian virtue, and despair is a mortal sin" [David Neff, "Why Hope is a Virtue," *Christianity Today*, 4-3-95, 24].

Even in the darkest time, our hope is an anchor, firm and secure. There is a famous carving in the door of an old church in Leicestershire, England. It reads: "In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation demolished or profaned Sir Robert Shirley, baronet, founded this church; whose singular praise it is, to have done the best things in the worst time, and hoped them in the most calamitous."

I like the story of the little girl who read a question on a science exam: "Upon what do hibernating animals subsist during the winter?" The correct answer, I suppose, was "fat," but this little girl was of a more philosophical bent. She thought for a few minutes and then wrote, "All winter long, hibernating animals subsist on the hope of a coming spring." [*Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale, 1988, 292] I don't know about bears, but I know that believers subsist on hope, the hope of a coming Christ and the hope of eternal life with him.

Prepare your hearts now to join in this meal as an act of memory and hope, thanking God for the past and trusting God for the future.