

The Hopeful Community
Col 1:3-6

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One of the great insights of Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* was that in the concentration camps of World War II the difference between those who survived and those who didn't often boiled down to one thing – hope; the person who possessed hope often prevailed and the person who did not frequently resigned themselves to perishing and did so in short order.

After that war there arose a host of theologians who identified hope as the primary generative power of life and central to the Christian story. People like Jurgen Moltmann wrote books with titles like *A Theology of Hope*. And then, in more recent times, people like Andrew Lester, professor of Pastoral Care, made his life's study on the power of hope (*Hope in Pastoral Care*).

The power of hope has always been there but in certain times it rises up as an even more urgent matter.

A few moments ago we heard words from first century Christians who depended on the same thing: “We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.”

Hope. Now, I think, is one of those times in which hope is more important than ever. And if the Christian community cannot become a bearer of hope, what can be?

So if hope is so central and makes all the difference if found or lost, just what is it? Or maybe we should ask first “What is it *not*?”

Hope is *not* wishful thinking. I hope I win the lottery, wouldn't that be nice and wouldn't it solve a lot of my problems.

Hope is *not* probability. “I hope to win the lottery and the odds are 1 to a zillion that I win. Why not me?! It's possible to beat the odds!”

Hope is *not* magic. “If I hope in just the right way I will change the outcomes of history into the way I want them.” Hope doesn’t determine all the outcomes.

Hope is *not* a substitute for action. “I hope for this to happen so I will wait passively for something to change.” Hope isn’t the opposite of action; it is the *engine* of action.

So just what is Christian hope? Christian hope is *trust in something* rather than in certain outcomes. That something is the power of God to transform. That power is at work all the time in everything. And if we trust that power then we wait in hope.

Trusting that power, waiting in hope, is a present and future activity both. Waiting to heal from the disease and waiting for a universal treatment for it in the future are part and parcel of the same thing. Hope is now and then. It is here and there.

And what if hope is not realized in the here and now? Christian hope relies on this power into the indefinite future.

We say that the God that was, is and will be is all the same thing; we give ourselves in hope to that God, trust ourselves into God’s hands. And when life is hard we rise up to resist, or accept, or build, or reconcile or whatever is called for – all of that in hope, with this internal reliance on the power of the Spirit.

That is why hope can be so revolutionary. Think about it, the first thing a despot tries to do to a population is to disempower them. They do that by removing any semblance of hope – at least hope in change of any kind. And an effective totalitarian dictator depends on religious structures (unless Communists who want to remove religion and hope that way) to teach that enduring suffering rather than changing the cause of suffering is the ticket to heaven. That’s one of the ways they keep people compliant in the face of injustice, by stating that the reward is later in the sweet by and by.

The worst nightmare of a fascist is *hopeful people*.
And that's because hope provides a source of conviction and empowerment.

Hopeless people lose a vision for the future and perish.

Hopeful people are able to project new possibilities and know that now is not forever.

Hopeless people are passive and simply receive their fate like a death sentence.

Hopeful people wait expectantly on what God shall do next.

Hopeless people are immobilized, frozen and assume the position of the victim.

Hopeful people know that the Spirit is at work and at work in them to do what they can.

Alice Walker once said, "Hard times require furious dancing." When I think of that furious dancing I don't think of people losing their minds, going crazy and jumping out of windows.

Instead, I think of the full measure of mind, body and spirit animating the whole person, activating the soul, launching into an authentic response to the challenge before us. That is frantic dancing. And it is full of the Spirit.

Sometimes there is no amount of dancing that will change the tragedy, or bring back the loved one, or undo the indignity or change the ultimate direction of history. Sometimes our movement is toward our inevitable end which we all face. And when those hard times come we dance a slow dance with the Lord of life and death and give ourselves to God's future ... with hope.

And that is the best we can hope for, that we keep on hoping. And when we cannot, which is a struggle for all of us at some time or the other, it is the hopeful community that surrounds us for a season and hopes for us ... until we can find the spring in our step again, find our song again.

Whether in this life or leaning the next, we wait, we live, and we breathe in hope.