

**SONGS FOR OUR TIME: HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS; PS. 40:1-11, IS. 49:1-7;
JANUARY 19, 2020; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

Our readings today speak of a God of great power; Isaiah talks about a God who will save not just Israel but will save every nation; and the Psalmist tells his story of being saved when God bent down to him and pulled him up from the muck and mire.

But what happens when we lose a job or a loved one, if we receive an ominous health diagnosis or have some dream crushed by unexpected circumstances, what happens when we experience God not as powerful but as absent?

We saw *1917* last week – a stunning war film. The movie portrays the brutal, dehumanizing forces of the battlefield. Two of the main characters – for all intents and purposes ordinary soldiers – are sent on a dangerous mission that stands little chance of success. They know the odds are stacked against them. But they choose the mission. And they perform with valor. Here's the question I want to explore today: What is it that drives those two soldiers – or any of us – keeps us sane, focused, and even on occasion valorous when we find ourselves in dire circumstances?

The answer Marilynne Robinson suggests has to do with how we see ourselves in this world; she rejects the ancient belief that we live in a 'vale of tears' that we only escape when we get to Heaven. Rather, she proposes something completely unexpected, "There are two occasions when the *sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent*, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us."

In other words, Robinson says *it is in* our weakness, limitation, and failure and *when the world* fails and disappoints us that the glory of our humanity is expressed. *This* is 'the sacred beauty of Creation', and, she implies, it is no accident *but God's intention* that in a world of risk, danger, brokenness and where life doesn't go on forever that we are defined not by tears but by hope.

This view also runs counter to the aim and purpose of the medical/industrial complex and the cosmetic, fashion, marketing, and consumer industries. Hope counters a culture that idolizes virile youthfulness and considers anything else—age, disability, disease—unfortunate or a curse.

The source of the idea that life is a vale of tears is found in the traditional interpretation of Genesis in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden because they violate God's instruction not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Their punishment for eating the forbidden fruit is that they must leave the Garden where everything is perfect and enter *this world*, east of Eden. And because it is our punishment for disobeying God, traditional Biblical scholars and theologians describe this existence as a 'vale of tears'; for in this vale, this valley, boundaries and barriers are imposed upon us – limits in which and to which we are confined and held accountable and must pay the consequences.

Yet, it is this existence, this world – finite, human, and mortal – where not the curse but what Robinson calls our 'gift and beauty' or what I would call the fullness of our humanity is not just revealed but becomes, as she says, "dazzlingly apparent." Rather than picturing Adam and Eve leaving the Garden covering their faces, we might think of them as embracing their full humanity with grateful hearts and heads held high.

Robinson's idea that our essential humanity shines through our flaws and brokenness, that *it is in what makes us human* that who we are as creatures made in the image of God comes to fruition, captured my imagination. Not only does that make sense if it is true but it is our sword and shield when we come up against the 'cold, hard facts of life.'

If we can put our finger on *what it is* about humans when we find ourselves in a bind and have an opportunity to become what God created us to become, even if we get just a glimpse of God's intention for us in our circumstances; we will possess what the Psalmist means by being rescued and given a new voice.

Here's an example when the sacred beauty of Creation was dazzlingly apparent. In 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and the Iron Curtain collapsed after years of repressive, brutal Soviet bloc rule; after endless violations of human rights and people living under the harshest conditions—that is, when humans were insufficient to the world and the world was insufficient to humans—Vaclav Havel, the new leader of the Czech Republic, put his finger on what gave birth to the miracle of freedom.

"Hope," he said, "is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and is not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation...It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. I don't think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or of some favorable signs in the world. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are...It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

You see, when the people of Czechoslovakia and other central and eastern European nations were under the thumb of communism and dictatorial rule, when people could not hold normal conversations without worrying if they would be reported to the secret police and sent to prison, when food and shelter were secondary to the largesse of the rulers and military might, there was nothing in their world or their estimate of how things would progress or in any effort or movement of dissidents within or supporters without—as promising as those signs might have been—there was nothing that guaranteed that everything would turn out okay someday and that they could, therefore, be hopeful.

Havel says that's not how hope works; hope is found not in any circumstance of the world because hope is not of this world; it is a spiritual condition, an orientation of the heart; anchored in what *we* call the image of God within us or the power of life working through us.

Havel was a nonbeliever but you'd have to search long and hard to find a better Christian definition of hope. And this is what Robinson is getting at – hope is not being 'religious', rather it is being human, it is embedded in our spiritual DNA, a capacity we have, deep instruction written on our heart as the Psalmist says.

We either choose to trust and step out upon and exercise our innate capacity to hope or not; we either choose to listen to the instruction written upon our hearts that tells us what is the right in the midst of all that is wrong or not.

Hope is human capacity, it is what makes us human and in Robinson's words beautiful, hope is the fullness of humanity dazzlingly apparent.

But lest that sound too easy, let me return the movie *1917*; there's no flipping a switch into some mode of hopefulness where courage and iron resolve come at our beck and call. Rather the reality those two soldiers faced seemed impossible: crossing 'no-man's land' against their peer's advice; dodging bullets and bombs in areas still held by the Germans while the clock ticked away the time remaining to reach their destination before tragedy struck. Their mission was punctuated by doubt, underscored with second-guessing and finally bolstered by rededicating themselves to the mission.

This kind of hope when the external conditions counsel despair, when all the indicators recommend retreat and surrender, such hope goes against the grain or as one writer said metaphorically, goes 'against gravity' by which she means goes against the weight or pull or force of a given situation.

When we choose to hope, we choose to trust in a balancing-out of the forces, tilting the scales of reality toward some equilibrium; toward a counter-reality that may be only imagined but which has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual situation.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend we remember and celebrate the legacy of one of the great leaders against the gravitational pull of racial bias and bigotry. Dr. King's life fought against hugely overwhelming odds.

His work was sustained not by the circumstances of this world even when he began to see signs of some progress for his efforts; rather he found his motive and energy and hope for a better world, for a world free of prejudice against people of color in an alternative reality he dreamed of, a day when black children and white children could walk together into a future of equal opportunity.

If we suspect in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can, as Dr. King did what he could, and as those WWI soldiers did what they did to add weight to the lighter scale...we must ever be ready to change sides like justice 'that fugitive from the camp of conquerors.'

For the past three years, the Racial Equity Round Table of the Community Foundation of WNY has worked for the racial rebalancing of our region; that is, the righting the scales of education, health care, job opportunity, and housing so that people of color in this city will not lag behind white people.

Could there ever be a day like that, when the color of a person's skin would not give or take advantage and privilege in virtually every arena of life. The odds are stacked against that day. But those who are working for it, and those who have worked for it, Dr. King, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and so many others known and unknown – put their trust not in a guaranteed outcome but in their certainty that a re-balancing of human opportunity is what was needed and made sense—whether they would live to see that day or not.

The truth and goodness and rightness of that day is what they trusted in and hoped for.

But still something needs to be said. Centuries of Christian hope are grounded in Christ's identification with the plight of the poor and outcast.

His life made dazzlingly apparent his trust, his hope in the providence of God.

Even though the odds were stacked against him, he embraced his mission, his calling; he trusted the orientation of his heart, the state of his mind, the dimension of his soul that compelled him to work against gravity.

Indeed, the words of the Psalmist today could be the words of the one Isaiah says is chosen by God to save the nations, the words of Christ, they could also be the words of you and me who follow the Son and Servant of God,

“I put all my hope in the Lord. He leaned down to me; he listened to my cry for help. He lifted me out of the pit of death, out of the mud and filth, and set my feet on solid rock. He steadied my legs. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise for our God.”

It's not when we succumb to the forces of brokenness and the gravitational pull of despair that we fulfill our humanity in some vale of tears, but when we trust in a hope written on our hearts and anchored beyond the horizon of whatever circumstances seem overwhelming and more than we can handle; that is when God's purpose for human life, for you and me, becomes 'dazzlingly apparent.' Amen.