

# Live with Hope in an Imperfect World

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It is 2018. I can remember the huge celebration in Grant Park when we entered a new millennium. How does time flow with such speed? I recently hit a certain age I didn't see coming and will hit a milestone next year. C'est la vie! Age, whatever it means, is relative. How about if we can begin another year of life with God as people full of hope?

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and release to the prisoners,  
to announce a year of favor from the LORD  
and a day of vindication by our God.*

The Church offered this passage on the Third Sunday of Advent on Dec. 17. The prophet gave this message to Israelites who had just returned from years of exile in Babylon; they were deeply distressed because Jerusalem



and the Temple were still in ruins. In this magnificent paean the prophet offers people a vision of their savior yet to come. If you reread lines 3-6 you see a veritable mirror of the ministry of Christ himself. In fact, Jesus quotes this passage in his inaugural teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:18).

Jesus also entered a world torn by fierce political suppression, dire poverty and extremes of economic unbalance. The Romans and their local puppets like tax collectors smothered people with fear. Jesus bravely offered the People of God a ray of hope, a new way to God.

He preached, he proclaimed personal liberty from the chains of sin and announced the Reign of God. His entire public ministry was focused only on God and the gift of God's forgiveness. The brilliant German theologian, Karl Rahner, coined a lovely ascription for Christ: *The Word of God's Forgiveness*. This title captures the very essence of salvation in Christ.

In retrospect through the past centuries of Christian faith consider how many people of countless cultures and countries have placed their hope solely in God. We have a friar of our province who ministers as priest and nurse in South Sudan. He occasionally sends stories of how difficult it has been to offer the people hope in the light of civil wars, dire poverty, and starvation. How did millions of all races and walks of life find hope in Nazi Germany? Poi Pot of Cambodia annihilated nearly two million people, a quarter of the nation, in just over four years. The plight of Israel is one that is still experienced to this day around the world. How on earth do people find hope when they must live with such terror under the power of indescribable evil?

Sometimes when preaching I encourage people to be very attentive to the ending of our Eucharistic Prayers and the prayers surrounding the Our Father at Mass. All of them point us to a future hope promised by God in Jesus. For example, immediately after all finish the Our Father the presider prays the embolism:

*Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil,  
graciously grant peace in our days,  
that, by the help of your mercy,  
we may be always free from sin  
and safe from all distress,  
as we await the blessed hope  
and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.*

An embolism in liturgical parlance is an extrapolation of a prayer. In this case, *Deliver us, Lord, from every evil...* reiterates what all the people just prayed: *...lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*. For a little spiritual exercise here, stop reading this, pray the Our Father and then read the above embolism. See how well the embolism flows out of the other? This prayer has been in use in Christian liturgy since perhaps the fourth century. The virtue of hope has been passed on for centuries and is the

spiritual legacy we share in the Paschal Mystery. *Blessed hope and the coming of our Savior* places one foot into the future. A Eucharist celebrated in the present remembers the past Christ Event and takes us into the future with hope. Every single Mass does this, inviting everyone to enter more deeply into the Paschal Mystery.

There are three theological virtues in Christianity that are held in highest esteem: faith, hope and charity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hope clearly: *We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere "to the end" and to obtain the glory of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ. In hope, the Church prays "all people to be saved." She longs to be united with Christ, her Bridegroom, in the glory of heaven.* (¶182) Hope arises when many believers know and trust in God's promise of everlasting life based on past experiences. Experience is the foundation of all theology and source for spiritual growth. Hope is our anchor.

How does that growth come about? Let's look at our founder, Francis of Assisi. The medieval world was not an idyll portrayed in literature and painting or in images we overlay on life 800 years ago. Hygiene was virtually non-existent, diseases and plagues rampant and 13<sup>th</sup> century medicine was far from our present state of care. In the earliest writings he left us and other biographical sketches, it is clear that Francis feared death. Deeply feared death. "Let everyone know that whenever and however someone dies in mortal sin without making amends when he could have done so and did not, the devil snatches his soul from his body with such anguish and distress that no one can know what it is like except the one experiencing it." (*Later Admonition*, dated about 1220)

If you want to discover more of medieval fear, simply Google imagers of "hell mouth" and hold on to your chair! You'll see exactly why people were plagued with great anxiety about dying without the Extreme Unction. Works of art were created specifically to instill fear into the hearts of believers. I can't tell you how many Gothic cathedrals one enters under a

terrifying image carved in stone above the door of a monster swallowing sinners. Back to Francis...

There is good news here: freedom from the monster of fear. As he drew near to the end of his life of imitating the Crucified One, Francis lived with great pain yet could embrace death. He had a certain hope that allowed him to reach (what I consider) the apex of his spiritual life. Read *The Canticle of the Creatures*. You see the first two thirds of his *Canticle* is one magnificent hymn of praise for ALL of creation. He saw himself as a tiny part of every gift from the Creator. If all creatures are holy because they are united by the creativity of God, Francis realized that every human being is also holy and worthy of God's love and forgiveness. And that included himself. Just before he died Francis added verses to his *Canticle* about forgiveness. Here is one of the final ones:

*Praised be You, my Lord,  
through our Sister Bodily Death,  
from whom no one living can escape.*

Just like Brother Sun, Sister Earth and creatures, he embraced death as a part of creation, a natural flow of life from earth into Paradise. Nothing to fear. Nothing. *We must endure and persevere if we are to attain the truth and freedom we have been allowed to hope for; faith and hope are the very meaning of our being Christians, but if faith and hope are to bear their fruit, patience is necessary. We do not seek glory now, in the present, but we look for future glory, as Saint Paul instructs us when he wrote: 'By hope we were saved. Now hope which is seen is not hope; how can one hope for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience.' Patient waiting is necessary if we are to be perfected in what we have begun to be, and if we are to receive from God what we hope for and believe.* Words by St. Cyprian who was a convert to Christianity, highly revered as theologian, bishop of Carthage and died a martyr there in 258. The earliest Christians had to adjust to a delayed second coming of Christ when it didn't come as soon as many thought it would.

His words, however, still bear witness to the very nature of hope and also the power that hope gives to human existence. How often does one find oneself hoping that 'the

boss will get transferred' or 'I hope our team wins it all?' What of the ultimate meaning of life – in whom do we place our deepest hope?

If you want to see what hope is, try reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel. It is a very short remembrance of his and his father's experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald death camps. Wiesel survived but listened to his father being beaten to death in the bunk below him – for fear he would also be bludgeoned. He writes about the death of God, the inversion of parent-child relationship, a disgust with humanity, every value destroyed. It's been translated into 30 languages and first book of a trilogy: *Night, Dawn, Day*. Some critics because they doubted its authenticity and there are serious differences between translations for Jewish or Christian audiences. His message remains though.

On December 11, 1986 Wiesel gave a lecture after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. He waxed eloquently about the necessity of remembering: *Job, our ancestor. Job, our contemporary. His ordeal concerns all humanity. Did he ever lose his faith? If so, he rediscovered it within his rebellion. He demonstrated that faith is essential to rebellion, and that hope is possible beyond despair. The source of his hope was memory, as it must be ours. Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair. I remember the killers, I remember the victims, even as I struggle to invent a thousand and one reasons to hope.* He concluded by simply saying that peace [something we so blithely and frequently pray that God give the world], world peace, is not God's gift to all creatures, *it is our gift to each other.*

We hope the Blackhawks win. We hope we get new jobs, we hope the Church opens the windows (or shuts them) to change, we hope for new leadership, new clothing, a different house or car – our lists are endless! Yet what is it that we long for the most? Or should we ask ourselves: WHO is it that we long for the most?

Pope Francis gave a TED talk this year. In addressing the concept of solidarity among all people of the world he said: *The future of humankind isn't exclusively in the hands of politicians, of great leaders, of big companies. Yes, they do hold an enormous responsibility. But the future is, most of all, in the hands of*

*those people who recognize the other as a 'you' and themselves as part of an 'us'.* One of his banners heralds that the world and Church join together for the common good. And recalling the words of St. Cyprian we are also called to be patient in our hope. The early Christians learned to wait and so must we, even when up against almost insurmountable odds in 2018. The words of the embolism after the Our Father at Mass pull us into the future. They remind us that life on earth is not an end in and of itself; Christ calls us to eternal life, that Mystery he established for all people for all time. *The blessed hope to which we are called.*

Have you ever taken stock of your own concept of heaven? You may be surprised at what you conceptualize but this can reveal your hope. How did Wiesel and Edith Stein and millions of others find hope in the death camps? How can parents of a preemie find hope beyond



multiple wires and tubes? How could Francis alleviate his fear of death to a point where he embraced Sister Death and sang about it? The power of hope comes from an intimate relationship with Christ. Hope lives when we are completely

in love with Jesus and allow the Lord to shape our attitudes, encourage us, fill us with joy and let God's Promise take us into the future. And fear melts away! Trust me!

Reflect on an experience you've had when you knew God was right there beside you. Recall the power you felt by believing and hoping; the will to see God and the goodness of life – even when evil oppresses - enables each of us to know God intimately and walk together courageously. May God fill you and our world with everything that is good; may we make our hope visible. Rejoice that God loves you. We thank you every day in prayer for your generous support of our ministry at St. Peter's. May God enable all of us to gift others with peace in 2018!

