

A Fierce Hope

I have read these texts for months now, knowing this day would come. During that time, my spirit keeps returning to the admonition, “let us hold fast to the confession of hope, without wavering.” But my heart responds, “without wavering,” really? My expression of hope is often more like a breathy whisper than a full-throated confession. Did the writer of Hebrews truly live in a world that different from ours? Was the present reality that much more optimistic two thousand years ago? I’m holding onto hope, tenuously maybe? By tooth and nail most days, if I’m honest. But without wavering? That is a lot to ask of my grasp on hope as missiles fly and forests burn and discarded needles and broken spirits lie on street corners. But I am aware that is only a comment on my fallible faith and failing human vision of God at work in the world. Hope itself is not that fragile a thing; it can stand up to the realities of the world better than my confession of it can.

Too often we confuse the two; we pretend hope is this frail, dainty thing we need to shelter, to nurture, to guard, lest it be snuffed out. I blame Emily Dickinson for that imagery, that misconception. She is the one who wrote “Hope is a thing with feathers, it perches in my soul.” It is easy to pick on a poet, particularly a long-dead one, but hope is not a dainty little bird chirping a melodic song to you in your heart. Hope is a powerful and fierce thing. If it is a thing with wings at all, they are dragon wings, capable of carrying you away from your present place, attached to a scaly armored body ready to do battle, and a mouth that breathes fire to light up the night of your soul, and of our dark world. Yes, hope is powerful and fierce and the oppressive and destructive powers that be know it.

Or maybe the modern image of hope is the boxer who’s been knocked down twice already and yet gotten back up to his feet, beaten and bloodied, and yet not bowed. Make no mistake, that one is dangerous. He is to be feared, because in spite of all evidence to the contrary, he still believes that a different outcome is yet possible - that he could win; and if you dare to think otherwise you should avoid getting within his reach. If you are paying attention in our world that is the hope we need today – a dreamer on the verge of delusion, but desperate enough that he might just make it happen. Can we collectively muster the energy to rise up again and believe that a different future is yet possible, for us together and our world? Can we proclaim it in the streets?

I dare say our neighbors need us to be a force like that. I have been reminded or informed of the stark reality outside these walls repeatedly during the month I've been here. I spoke early on with a young man who told me there was no realistic expectation, despite his education and training, that he could attain the lifestyle of his parents. Driving to work my first week, I heard on the radio that to make it through the path from unhoused to self-supported independent living is akin to fighting through a battlefield full of leftover landmines from a different era. I was told in conversation a couple weeks ago that no matter what progress we think we have made, most indigenous children born here still too often lack the resources to dream the same dreams that my children can. This week I heard a new Jewish acquaintance tell me that her religious community is the only place she feels completely safe in Victoria, and a Muslim friend informed me that 49 percent of the Arab population in Canada is of Lebanese descent, and if the war spills over the northern border there will be an audible wail of grief that could be heard across this vast country. And just in the last couple of days I read articles about how the loneliness epidemic is measurably shortening the lives of our elderly, that suicide is the second leading cause of death among high school and college age students in this country, and that toxic drugs are now the leading cause of death for people aged 10-59 in B.C. That is a staggering age-range to be addicted to death.

In other words, there are literally people dying outside these walls, and throughout this city, across this country, and around the world *for want of hope*. Lack of hope that it isn't a zero-sum game – us or them, that the work and struggle of life is actually worth the effort, that true community exists where they can be safe and feel loved, that life's proverbial storms eventually run out of rain, that darkness gives way to morning, that mere existence could become real life worth living. What they are longing for is hope that what that visionary Anglican healer Desmond Tutu used to call the Dream of God, is not some ethereal promise, or far off reality, but is yet possible in the here and now. Do we have the energy to dream with them, maybe even dream for them, that despite all evidence to the contrary, a different outcome is yet possible?

What they need is me and you – whether you are a longtime parishioner of this cathedral or a faithful member of this diocese who came tonight in promised support for our common mission, whether you are a civic leader in this city or a non-profit partner working in the streets who can share a similar vision for a better community, whether you are a First Nations' member or an interfaith leader who is here because you are willing to give the promise of real relationship one last chance, or you are one of our unhoused neighbors just showing up to try to hold us accountable to being the people we say we are. The folks outside these walls need all of us, living out those roles but doing it in real community, provoking one another on to love and good deeds, as the passage says, in ways that make hope a

tangible reality. They need us building the systems of trust that would allow us to hold one another accountable, and they need us encouraging love even when it is hard. They need us doing it with integrity and authenticity.

If you will permit me to use the image of hope most natural to my faith tradition, they need us to be like the resurrected Christ – well-acquainted with suffering and death, indeed, with scars to show and a story to tell from it, but still walking out into the world to whisper the deep truth: there is light, and life and love on the other side. I'm quite certain that I am not the only one with a tenuous grasp on hope. The last few years have not been an easy time to be a non-profit manager, or a civic or cultural leader, or a religious cleric, or just a human being, hence the statistics. But we do it because we have not lost all faith, not given up on hope. Even though all available evidence might mark us as delusional, we still believe a different world is yet possible... *even promised*.

And people need us to make a profession of that hope in the face of the very real struggle. They need us to push for reconciliation because, no matter how many times it has broken our hearts, the alternative is untenable and our children deserve a future of mutual thriving, and it is worth it. They need to hear from the civic leaders that can say solving these intractable problems have just as many leftover landmines on the policy-making side of the equation, and we have the political wounds to prove it, but we will not stop fighting for you until there is dignity and agency for every human being in our city. They need the non-profit managers trying to piece together the grants and funding sources that would make your program functional, if not truly whole, to recognize that that struggle is the same as the life struggle of the people you serve and that you are all in this together really, and you understand them and still believe in it enough to get up another morning and fight for a better life for people at the margins. They need someone who has closed a church to say, "despite our best efforts and our faithfulness, it died, and it was sad, but you know what, then there was new life, and we found meaning and purpose again," because, by God, that's our story most worth telling.

For that to work we need us to be honest with ourselves and with each other. We need to do the hard work of creating real community so we are not in this alone and we can hold each other when our individual grasp on hope becomes tenuous. We need to encourage one another on to greater works and more perfect love. That has always been the way to the Dream of God, or whatever your profession of hope wants to call that vision we can share.

Dear friends, colleagues, fellow workers in the city and co-creators of the dream: The stakes are high and there are people literally relying on the folks right here in this room to make the difference. I am in it with you if you will be in it with me. So, waver as you will, we're only human after all, but still hold fast to hope, confess it in the street with scars to show you know the cost and still believe, and

let us join together in spurring one another on, through encouragement and admonishment, to love and good deeds, because nothing short of the lives of our neighbors depends on it. In the name of the One God. Amen