

**“Hope Springs Eternal...Despite it All”**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dottie Mathews, Associate Minister**  
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**Call to Gather:**

*When despair for the world grows in me  
And I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
Rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things...<sup>1</sup> ~Wendell Berry*

**Reading:** The Fountain by Denise Levertov<sup>2</sup>

*Don't say, don't say there is no water  
to solace the dryness at our hearts.  
I have seen*

*the fountain springing out of the rock wall  
and you drinking there. And I too  
before your eyes*

*found footholds and climbed  
to drink the cool water.*

*The woman of that place, shading her eyes,  
frowned as she watched but not because  
she grudged the water,*

*only because she was waiting  
to see we drank our fill and were  
refreshed.*

*Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there among its scalloped  
green and gray stones,*

*it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,*

*up and out through the rock.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Peace of Wild Things, Wendell Berry (NY: Harcourt Brace), 1968. p. 30

<sup>2</sup> Poems 1960 – 1967, Denise Levertov (NY: New Directions Paperback Books), 1966, p. 57

## Sermon:

Imagine if you will the theology and world-view that would make someone adopt this life motto: *“All shall be well; all shall be well; all manner of things shall be well.”* Perhaps you know Julian of Norwich, the woman who wrote this. She is said to be one of the greatest English mystics of all time. She lived about 600 years ago and wrote much more, but this pithy saying is her most enduring legacy: *“All shall be well...”*

The first time I heard it, I felt a bit cynical about her apparent naïveté All shall be well? Had she failed to consider the starving children? Had she somehow forgotten about the aged person struggling for one last agonized breath? What about the parents whose listless toddler was dying in their arms? I heard Julian of Norwich’s reputation as a contemplative, as a devout woman of great faith and deep spirituality, but I wondered at the level of gullibility she possessed to believe that truly all shall be well?

And, then, the more I repeated her celebrated phrase and considered possible meanings, the closer I came to comprehending what she might have been saying. Or, perhaps better said, I came upon an interpretation of those words that seemed to make sense for me, within the context of my own theology. I’ll explain more on that in a moment.

Part of why Julian’s story interests me is that she (like our Universalist ancestors) broke from the prevailing religious authorities and chose instead to follow her own spiritual journey, to listen to her own soul’s truth. She came to reject the view of a punishing, righteously-angry God, and wrote instead of a loving, nurturing God, with whom she spent many years quietly communing.

She believed there was a marvelous flow to the universe that allowed her to trust thoroughly in the uncontrollable, unfolding events of life; and it was not a particularly serene time on earth. There was a lot going on in the late 1300’s! Part of what was uncontrollable and unfolding around her were things like the Black Plague, the Hundred Years War and the Peasant Revolts. So, it wasn’t so much that she lamely believed each individual event of life would always come to a pleasing conclusion, but that she felt there was a grander, overarching scheme, an order to the universe, that was worthy of trust and acceptance, and which was based entirely on love.

Her philosophy was not much different from that expressed in various writings by the author of the oft-quoted line I borrowed for this sermon title: *“Hope springs eternal”* written by Alexander Pope. He lived about 300 years after Julian of Norwich and he, too, felt that life unfolded in ways that were unfathomable yet reliably and ultimately good.

I find both these views interesting and more-than-a-little inspiring. But for both Julian of Norwich and Alexander Pope, their hope was attached to the belief in an all-good (if incomprehensible) divine being who somehow held all of life in the palm of his hand - who wrote the script, produced the set and was the solo director of the show, so to speak. Their hope was founded in their faith in the absolute benevolence of this all-powerful being, not unlike our Universalist ancestors.

For me, and possibly for most here today, hope comes from other sources than trust in an omnipotent being who will ultimately work things out well for us. While I find it comforting to remind myself on occasion that *“All shall be well”* (and I confess that the phrase does occasionally enter my mind unbidden when I am embroiled in a painful situation) for me, it serves as a reminder. It is a call back to my awareness that even when I’m worried and hurting, the planets somehow wondrously continue spinning and life remarkably continues to move forward. I remember again that situations have a way of resolving and that frequently, in retrospect, I see that they resolve in ways that I could not have possibly imagined when I was caught up in the midst of them. Saying that phrase helps me recall that there is a community of support surrounding me, and creative people who willingly offer assistance.

When I can step out of the weight of my fears, I am often better able to find the clarity to seek a new course of action, to open some new door, to reveal some new option for addressing the worrisome difficulty I've found myself in. In other words, I am able to embrace once again my heart's hope.

As we discuss this word, I note that there are a couple of the ways "hope" is used in our standard parlance. There's the trite and flimsy use of the word: "I hope you have a good day." "I hope I get to see you when you're in town." There's not much oomph or power in those kinds of statements. They're often really just another way of expressing a light desire, but there doesn't seem to be much riding on the outcome; not much personal investment in it.

But the hope that I am addressing is a vast, limitless resource that arises from within and is potent enough to counter the gravest of life circumstances, to help move you forward, despite heavy grief in your heart, despite fear in your soul. It is not a simple optimism that a difficult situation will have a cheery happy ending. It is the persistent choice to keep moving forward, regardless of the odds. Hope is that mysterious thing that causes the weary teacher to head to that harrowing inner city classroom once more. It is the energy that gets a parent of a troubled teenager to sit down for one more attempt to communicate lovingly together. It causes the social worker to seek help for yet another impoverished family and it motivates the domestic violence advocate to answer that next call. For each of these people, their hope doesn't necessarily rely on a trust that long neglected schools will soon become a haven for respectful, eager students, or that teens will no longer rebel, or that poverty will be totally wiped out, or that acts of violence in the home will be stopped altogether. But what these people DO believe is that their portion of the work is worthwhile and meaningful.

Hope is a belief that, even against enormous challenges, we can make a difference. It is an inner certainty that what we do has the potential to impact our corner of the world for the good.

I have recently been reading two absorbing books that delve into this subject. One of the books is Apprenticed to Hope by Julie Neraas<sup>3</sup>. Neraas is a Presbyterian minister who has been dealing with long term, significant health issues and she writes about her struggles with finding hope in the face of her sometimes-debilitating disease.

The other book is entitled, The Anatomy of Hope by Dr. Jerome Groopman<sup>4</sup>, a physician who examines the role hope plays in the healing process. Both books, then, deal with the very important subject of finding hope in the face of serious illness. Both share several strands of thought and themes (some of which are included in this message) and both are very worthy reads in my estimation.

When one is dealing with a health crisis, the meaning of hope - and how to access it - can be a very intense spiritual question. For some, holding onto hope means that they will not allow themselves to believe for even a moment that they might not recover. There sometimes occurs a kind of "magical thinking" where people feel it would be disloyal, and maybe even have a causal effect, if they dare entertain the idea of "losing the battle" with whatever dreaded disease they're struggling against. For others, there can be a kind of full-force acceptance of the gravity of their situation and, at the same time, acknowledging their deep desire to regain health. But their hope is not so much completely pinned on that eventual day of full recovery. Their hope rather is evidenced in being as fully alive as possible each single day, in deciding again and again to make

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<sup>3</sup> Apprenticed to Hope: A Sourcebook for Difficult Times, Julie E. Neraas (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books), 2009

<sup>4</sup> The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness, Jerome Groopman, M.D. (NY: Random House), 2004

each day the most loving and joy-filled it possibly can be within the limits of their illness.

Many of you know that a few years ago, my youngest child was gravely ill. Against the odds, he did make a full recovery and happily, gratefully, he retains his health to this day. It was interesting to me that for quite some time after he went into remission, when asked how he was doing, his standard response was, "On this day, I am well." For him, his hope was to be found by embracing this singular day, this moment, and focusing his energies and attention on that. He was a young man then, a college student, and during his illness some of his friends came to visit. When they saw him, some would be overcome with emotion and he could tell they were afraid he might not survive. Seeing that, he later said to me, "Mom, don't they know that everyone is going to die? But not everyone truly lives?"

His personal vow was to LIVE his hope as fully as possible on each and every day that was given him. I have learned some very important lessons on hope from my son.

And I was reminded of several of those lessons as I read these two books that I mentioned. I was also enticed to think not only about hope's impact on one's health but also about hope outside the realm of chronic or terminal illness. It is certainly a universal theme. The subject has drawn the attention of poets and writers for centuries. There are countless literary references to choose from:

Emily Dickinson tells us  
*"Hope" is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all..."*

More recently, Anne Lamotte tells us that  
*"Hope begins in the dark,  
the stubborn hope that if you just show up  
and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.  
You wait and watch and work: You don't give up."*

How, I wonder, would we say hope compares with optimism? To me, hope is meatier and more realistic than simple optimism. Hope is like optimism ... but with legs on it. As I think of it, true hope is not the product of rose-colored glasses. Hope is that ineffable thing that inspires us to reengage, to participate again, to struggle, to seek, to reach and keep on reaching, not knowing for sure we'll get the outcome we most desire, but reaching anyway because it is the right thing - because it is the only thing to do.

True hope straightforwardly faces the realities, the magnitude, of what's going on around us. Blind optimism can have a "head-buried in the sand" aspect to it but hope, as I'm describing it today, has a hefty realism behind it. It has the power to look the steepest of challenges squarely in the eye, and persevere anyway.

I can't help but think of one of my dearest personal heroes, Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz as a young woman. The journal kept of her time in the camps is certainly a record of the sort of hope I am attempting to describe. Here is one excerpt of so many I might have chosen: *"The misery here is quite terrible and, yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, it soars straight from my heart - I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force - the feeling that life is*

*glorious and magnificent and that one day we shall be building a whole new world.*<sup>5</sup>"

Etty Hillesum didn't have any reason to believe that she might be part of that editorial "we" who would be building that new world. But she did have hope that the kindnesses she could show other prisoners, the generousities of spirit she could experience, the appreciation of the limitless sky and the visible flowers anyway, gave deep meaning to each and every one of her days.

Hope is grounded in realism and hope is fed and expanded by use of the imagination. When we feel that all possibilities have been exhausted and there is nowhere to turn, hope plummets. But when we uncover another option to check out or one more resource to call upon, it's like gently blowing on the glowing embers of hope within. There are so many creative possibilities in life. Our biggest limiter is our own imagination, and our imagination grows dull with despair.

Apparently, Thomas Edison agreed with this idea because he said, "*When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this: you haven't.*" Edison was able to accomplish such great things in his life because he always searched for that next imaginative option, the next possibility, the next alternative. This is hope in action.

In the Apprenticed to Hope book, Neraas uses an analogy that I've also found helpful when supporting folks as they work to reinvigorate their sense of hope. Neraas talks about how beneficial it is to view our challenging life situations as chapters in a book of our life. We know that if we can keep turning the pages, keep doing what's in front of us to be done, this current chapter will end (one way or another). Things will eventually change, and another chapter will start. When we lose sight of that perspective it's easy to feel that the current circumstance is the sum total of our story; and when we lose that wider context, we can find ourselves drifting toward hopelessness. Remembering that unknown possibilities await us in that next chapter helps reinforce and renew our hope.

Now here's another interesting aspect of hope that has always impressed me. Hope is essential to human flourishing, and it is a quality that cannot be forced, created, stolen, or hoarded. Yet, hope can be enlivened and, most intriguingly, I believe hope can be borrowed. Many people who have been helped to heal from some excruciating personal trauma or have had a close companion journey with them through a life crisis can tell you that the unwavering hope of another trusted person is one of the greatest resources available. A creditable person can say, "I know you are having a very hard time finding your own hope right now, but you can trust that I know you; I see you; I believe in you; and I know you can handle what's ahead. Borrow my hope if you can't access your own just now."

I have witnessed how effective this can be. There are times when the availability of a trusted outsider's hope is enough of a lifeline for a person to grab a hold and hang onto until their own hope reemerges. It is wonderfully true that hope can indeed be borrowed without in any way diminishing the lender's own supply.

Hope is an attitude of the heart that is connected to the realities surrounding us and also very much connected to the community around us too. As we've said, spiritually grounded hope does not pretend to guarantee a positive outcome, but carrying and nurturing this sort of hope within us, invites us to live in a more compassionate state, appreciating our place on this interconnected web of existence as we give and receive, borrow and exchange, encourage and fortify hope in one another. Being actively engaged in community helps us know that we have a role to play in relieving the suffering of the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life, Etty Hillesum (NY: Henry Holt & Co.), 1996, p. 295.

In the long history of humankind, there has always been suffering. It is the unequivocal state of humanity. But in response, there has always been the desire and willingness to alleviate suffering. There have always been countless people who have chosen again and again to do what was right to support others, even when the odds were significantly against them.

There are innumerable examples of this but one particularly inspiring story comes from Le Chambon<sup>6</sup> in France during World War II. At the same time Etty Hillesum was witnessing and experiencing the Nazi atrocities, this small community bravely became a living pronouncement of hope, against incredible odds, purely because they knew it was the right thing to do. In Le Chambon, two protestant ministers held the belief that despite Germany's declarations about the superiority of one race over another, despite the complicity of the French government and so many others, despite the overt and tacit support of most of the denominational hierarchies, these two ministers steadfastly preached nonviolence and the equality of all people. Their congregation was joined by the eleven other churches in their vicinity and amazingly, together, the residents of this community very quietly and dedicatedly made it possible for about 5,000 people - most of whom were Jews - to escape to freedom.

When the stories began to surface decades later, these citizens were surprised by questions about their motivations. In their minds, it was patently obvious. Of course they risked themselves in this noble endeavor. It was simply the right thing to do. Their hope made them know that they needed to take action, not because they held any assurance that their small town could stop the Holocaust, but because they knew that saving first this person and then that one, and that one, was simply and purely the right thing to do.

Hopeful people reach toward the good, over and over again, because it is good, and that is reason enough. Hope does “begin in the dark” and it is what sustains us as we each face our individual life crises. Hope is what keeps us plodding forward as we undertake each step of our justice work. We owe it to ourselves and one another nurture this precious gift of hope, to freely and intentionally offer it to others, to recognize it for the crucial lifeline that it is.

May we be sources of hope for one another and for our world today and always.  
Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.auschwitz.dk/Trocme.htm> and <http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?en/saviors/others/le-chambon-sur-lignon.2468.htm>. Last accessed June 13, 2009.