

Hope Worth Hoping For

November 30, 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

There's an old joke that tells of a man who saw another man beating his head against a wall.

"Is something wrong?" he asked that man.

"Oh, nothing's wrong," said the second man, but he winced as he hit his head against the wall again.

"Then why are you beating your head against a wall?" asked the first man.

"Because it will feel so good when I stop."

In a 2022 essay at JourneyWithJesus.net, Amy Frykolm observes that a lot of our news reading involves predictions of the future. She writes, "We tell ourselves these stories about the future because they allow us to imagine that we can prepare, that we know what's coming, that if we only analyze the future rightly, we can create viable safety plans. The bigger the predicted catastrophe, the greater we imagine that just by knowing it is coming, we can avoid its most adverse effects. In other words, we use predictions about the future to try to escape the basic vulnerability of being human."

"But Advent is a time in the Christian tradition when we acknowledge that even as we anticipate something we know is coming — the Word, incarnate — we can't comprehend it."

Around two and three quarters millennia ago, Isaiah imagined the future and chose hope. It wasn't an easy choice. Isaiah didn't think much of the way things were going in his home city of Jerusalem. In chapter one he wrote:

Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;
learn to do good;
seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

How do you know things are going badly? The most vulnerable are suffering. As I and others keep saying, it's all about the widows and the orphans.

As Michael Chan writes at Working Preacher, "In this text, promise and judgement are not contradictory realities: judgment serves promise, and contributes to bringing about the fulfillment of promise."

Isaiah could not hope for the continuation of what was. People were suffering because of the actions of other people, actions which God had specifically forbidden, actions which God had reminded them over and over again through other prophets not to do. To make things worse, the nation faced a massive external threat. The Assyrian Empire had determined to conquer Egypt. Between the two lay a series of small countries, including the two Jewish nations of Israel and Judah. The Assyrian invasion ended the existence of the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah, Isaiah's home, barely survived.

When Isaiah dreamed of swords becoming plowshares and spears becoming pruning hooks, of weapons of war becoming tools for planting and pruning, there were a lot of swords and spears coming his way.

He might have hoped for something else. He might have hoped for a Divine victory that overcame the Assyrians. He might have hoped for a new David who would not just chase the Assyrians from Judah, but turn conqueror in his own right, and become ruler of Mesopotamia. Perhaps this new monarch would have such power that he could achieve the Assyrians' ambition and control Egypt as well. What an achievement that would be. That would be hundreds, thousands times better than David had done.

Isaiah seems to have worked directly with Judah's kings (he had a long career and served four of them). I'm sure they would have loved to hear that kind of hope.

That's not the hope he chose.

What is hope and how do you choose it? Rather like love, we tend to think of hope as a feeling, and like love, there's a truth to that. I can feel affection for someone. That's love. I can feel positive about the future. That's hope.

We don't choose feelings, however, so feelings can't be virtues. Feelings happen. We don't control them, and when feelings start to have too much power over us there's therapy. Fortunately we can often influence our feelings, which is why therapy works, but influence isn't choice, which is why therapy can be long and hard.

There is another way to think of love, however, and that is choice. To love someone is to set their interests at or above your own. It's what good parents do for their children. It's what couples getting married promise to do. It's what our firefighters have been doing recently during these terrible fires. It's what John meant when he wrote, "God so loved the world."

Likewise there is a way to think of hope as a choice. When I hope, I choose to imagine a different world. I choose to believe that things can be better than they are. I choose to embrace a future that improves the present. I choose to live toward, move toward, act toward that future.

I choose a chrysalis.

I choose what to hope for.

That's important. As I mentioned, Isaiah could have hoped for a sprawling Judean empire. It would have pleased the king, no doubt. He didn't. He chose to hope for something radically different, different, in fact, from anything he or his contemporaries had experienced. He hoped for peace.

What will we hope for? What will we imagine? What will we believe in? What will we embrace? What will we live toward, move toward, and act toward?

I think we should hope for something worthy of Isaiah. I think we should hope for something worthy of Jesus.

Hope can be so small, can't it? "I hope it's sunny tomorrow." Actually, I do, because it makes some kinds of photography easier. But that's a pretty limited hope, isn't it? That's pretty much just for me. "I hope the stock market keeps rising." That's a bigger hope, to be sure, but it sure sounds like it's still mostly about me, and it's also a hope where all you've got to do is take the long view. In the short term, stock valuations can be really volatile. In the long term, diversified investments rise in value.

I'd like a bigger hope than that.

There's a phrase with the abbreviation "B-HAG," which stands for "Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal." It's often recommended that companies, organizations, and advocacy groups choose at least one Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal when they plan. It's supposed to raise the energy and the

investment of time, resources, and labor. And you know, it seems to work. People work for something worth working for.

People hope for something worth hoping for.

Do you remember the song Sammy Davis, Jr., used to sing? Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse wrote it, and Lady Gaga recorded it last year.

Gonna build a mountain
From a little hill
Gonna build me a mountain
'Least I hope I will
Gonna build a mountain
Gonna build it high
I don't know how I'm gonna do it
I only know I'm gonna try

Building a mountain is a Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal. It's a hope worth hoping for.

Jesus chose a hope worth hoping for. He chose to hope for communities in which people honored God by caring for one another. He chose to hope that ordinary people would give of themselves for the benefit of others. He chose to hope that power could be made perfect in weakness. He chose to hope that love was stronger than death.

What's a hope worth hoping for?

I could start with the end of war. It's brought a lot of misery, a lot of suffering, a lot of death. Let's do without that.

I could go on to the end of greed. According to the Federal Reserve, as of the end of June, half of Americans possessed 5.4% of the wealth. You heard that right. The other half hold 94.6% of the wealth. The top ten percent of the wealthiest Americans possess 63%.

I don't think it's supporting the widows and the orphans.

I hope for the end of greed.

I hope for a world of people that care. I hope for people who plant and harvest. I hope for people who create and build. I hope for people who enjoy beauty and share it. I hope for people who tread lightly on the Earth.

A Big, Hairy, Audacious Hope? Yes, I'd say it is.

A hope worth hoping.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson