

What is hope? I mean, not expectation for something for which we wish, or something that benefits us or those whom we love. I'm talking about biblical hope. A thing that may end up being directly contradictory to what we wish would happen. Wishing for something good to happen to me is different from biblical hope, I think. Biblical hope expands beyond me and the good for me; it encompasses not only me but the community of which I am a part. And it is broader than the expectation of something that will benefit me; it expands into the realm of trust in something that will transfigure my world and therefore also me.

The word in biblical Greek for hope is *ἐλπίς* (*elpis*). The Greek dictionaries that define this term in relationship to how it is used in the New Testament define *ἐλπίς* as looking forward with confidence to that which is good and beneficial. Now that sounds like it could be only just for me, until we look at examples. For example, Luke 24:21, on the Emmaus Road: "We had hoped that he would be the one who was going to redeem Israel." Hope there is communal, universal, historical, transformational. 1 Timothy 4:10: "...because we have placed our hope in the living God." Hope is also directional. It seeks out a location. In God. And what does that hope in God target? Well, to be sure, many things. But listen to this from Acts 23:6: "I am on trial here because I hope that the dead will rise to life." Resurrection. Universal resurrection in the Reign of God. Hope is directed toward life, eternal life, with God. What we call the Reign of God. When Paul begs in Romans 15:4, "in order that through patience and encouragement given by the Scriptures we might have hope," he is talking about hope in God's Reign being a reality for God's people. In the future, fully. In the present, in glimpses. This hope is built on trust. There is no real evidence for it. Indeed, Paul says in Romans 8:24, "when what is hoped for is seen, there is no longer any need to hope." Hope is an end result of faith. Trust in God leads to

hope that God will usher in God's Reign. In the future resurrection of all the dead. In the present inbreaking of the representation of future life in the midst of present dying.

Biblical hope is in this way apocalyptic. *Apocalyptic* comes from the word apocalypse. The verb form of this noun means to reveal. So an apocalypse is a revelation of something. In the New Testament what is being revealed is God's future intent, the future reality that is the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem come down out of heaven, to use the words of John the Revelator. The gospel writers called it the Kingdom of God. The Reign, the Rule of God. That future rule. Revealed. In the visions of the future, such visions as John the Revelator saw when he looked up into that open door in heaven and saw God and the Lamb and the cherubim and the 24 elders in the heavenly throne room, and the multitude of souls bowing and singing in everlasting praise and worship. That is the future hope. All people, and tongues, and tribes, and nations, and races all living together as one people before God. This picture of radical, universal, loving community before God is revealed to be God's future promise, God's coming Reign. That is our Christian hope. We hope for this future. Our Christian purpose, if Jesus is to be a guide, is to do all we can to realize this future in the midst of the present.

How might we do that? In this time now, for example, filled often in the news with pandemic and protests calling for the end of social injustice?

What does it mean to live as a people of hope in a world where a virus threatens both our ways of living and our very lives? Who we are, what we believe, and how we live can make a difference now, just as it has always made a difference when Christ's believers lived out their faith in times of societal trauma?

Since much of today's societal trauma involves African American calls for justice, let me start from the African American context. In this case, the context of the trauma of African

American enslavement. The enslaved African Americans of the antebellum United States knew the power of prophetic hope. It was this hope that sustained so many of them across centuries of human bondage. Prophetic hope. For a freedom coming. The freedom promised was in the future.

Trusting the hope for that future transformed the way enslaved African Americans lived in their present. It was a hope that encouraged endurance and rallied resistance. A hope in Jesus that was as historical as it was spiritual. A hope in and for a liberated existence even in the midst of an enslaved circumstance. A trust that God was, even though they could not see it, working God's purpose out.

Enslaved African Americans knew how to talk about God and talk *to* God in the midst of their horrific circumstances. What is our God talk in the midst of our tragic time? How do we talk about God? How do we talk *to* God? How do we talk to each other about how we live in relationship to God in such a monstrous moment? I would submit that, like the enslaved African Americans, we engage the talk of prophetic hope.

Does living such trust and hope in God make a difference in times such as ours? One answer to that question lies with the earliest Christians. In the years 165 and 249 AD, two great pandemics swept the Roman Empire. A quarter to a third of the population died from the first. During the worst of the second, a reputed 5,000 people died each day. Operating from a prophetic hope that God was working God's purpose out, and that that purpose was benevolent for human life even if that life was to be secured ultimately with God in transcendence, these early Christians transformed hope into engaged love.

Unlike the leaders and devotees of the other major religions of the time, and unlike even the great physicians of the time, these hopeful Christians, hoping in and for life, even in the

midst of such suffering and death, risked their lives to nurse not only their believing loved ones, friends, and colleagues, but also strangers, near and far. They followed the lead of Jesus, who went out of the way to engage those who were infected with all sorts of brokenness and sought out the sick, the infected, and nursed them.

“I was sick, and you took care of me,” was not just a Scripture verse; it was a mandate for living. Love proclaimed became love lived. Love lived created an infrastructure of caring that was unparalleled in its time. Indeed, the emperor Julian hated these “Galileans” because they loved even those who did not love them by risking their lives to care for them. And as one historian notes, Julian recognized that their love in action created a “miniature welfare state in an empire which, for the most part, lacked social services.”

Imagine that. Love fueled by hope, willing not only to envision an alternative reality to the one assaulting us, but determined to change that reality by putting that love into deliberate, dangerous action.

Does what they lived then have implications for how we live now? Another historian thinks so. “We can spend time in prayer, lamenting the death toll and devastation, but also praying that God’s wisdom and strength would comfort or challenge those who need it. We can exercise our compassion by looking after the vulnerable and marginalized among us and even those who are far from us... We can remind ourselves of our future hope and confidence in God’s restoration of all things, and that can shape us here and now as we live lives characterized by compassion and care, as well as justice, through this pandemic, but also beyond it.” In other words, we can live out our love, grounded by our hope that God is on the move, and engage our spirituality in ways that impact our world and the frightened people living in it.

The enslaved African Americans hoped and, leaning upon that hope, transfigured their world, even while they remained in bondage. That hope gave them power. That hope gave them life. Their hope gives us a glimpse of how we can hope today. Such hope changes us. In the midst of great difficulty such as we experience now, such as the early Christians experienced in their pandemics, hope waters the ground upon which love sprouts and grows. The early Christians risked love because they maintained hope. Such love changed their world.

Hope and Love. Perhaps they are the spiritual vaccine that inoculates us from our fear so that we can boldly anticipate the breaking in of God's Reign by living with and for each other as if God's Reign has already come. The early Christians did it amidst plague. The enslaved African Americans did it amidst bondage. We can do it now.

This is the stuff of apocalyptic hope. Seeing the future revealed by God, and doing all we can, by and through our engaged love, to realize as much of that future as we can in our human present. That is the apocalypse of hope. The revelation of God's future. For the here and now.

Jesus, as you might imagine, is the test case for all of this.

Why? What is it about the revealing of God's future that makes the present so tense?.

Because of what Jesus' love looks like. Jesus represents the revelation of God's future intent in the present moment. Jesus is walking, breathing, apocalyptic hope. How so?

For the leper, the tax collector, the sinner, the women, the sick, the ones unjustly restricted by legalistic interpretations of the law, for the Samaritan and the Gentile, those who were ethnically different, ethnic outsiders, Jesus' life and ministry represented hope, because it revealed God's inclusive future intent in the midst of an oppressive and discriminatory present. In that way, Jesus represented the revelation of God's future intent in the present, represented the realization of God's Reign in the present moment. And he called disciples to follow him in doing

the same. Even knowing the consequences. That is what love, based in a hope of God's future breaking into the present, looks like.

In my history in the United States, I have seen a people hope for the revelation of God's future intent in the present moment. God's future as a place where all the nations and all the peoples are seen and treated as equal before each other just as they are treated equally before God represents that hope.

African American churches read and hear the present news of our collective circumstance. It is news preoccupied with contemporary evils like racial profiling, the disproportionate killing of African Americans by some members of law enforcement, the return of extensive resegregation of our nation's schools and communities, the revival of hate groups that target people based on ethnicity and race, the lack of access to educational and employment opportunities that leads to an ever increasing communal impoverishment, the pervasive preponderance of the impoverished and the destitute, the cries of the hopeless in our inner cities, and the wave of radical and now violent political conservatism in response that nonetheless exhorts accommodation to life as U.S. society presently endures it. Because the bulk of African Americans in this country still count themselves among the most impoverished and oppressed,¹ the apocalyptic message to hope, to reveal God's future intent while resisting the urge to maintain present, destructive human reality, is *still* a necessary message.

Perhaps we can learn a lesson about hope from the history of enslaved African Americans. If ever there was a people who had no right to expect change, it was they. And yet, even amidst oppressive circumstances they somehow conjured the power to hope, to craft hope

¹. Blount, *Go Preach!*, 199-267; Mark Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Forthcoming).

inside the story, and to use that story to create the possibility of God's future breaking into their present moment.

I give as an example the slave creation High John De Conquer, shared so brilliantly with the world in the writings of African American author Zora Neale Hurston.

The image is neither logical nor rational by contemporary standards. It is an image built from stories. Visionary stories of hope. High John De Conquer, a slave legend from the future, who, in the present, gave slaves an ability to overcome the horrors and bear what by all logical standards was an *unbearable* existence. High John went about as a whisper of freedom, marching through the plantations, instilling hope in the minds and spirits of incarcerated slaves about a freedom to come. Listen to what Zora Neale Hurston writes:

Sho John de Conquer means power. That's bound to be so. He come to teach and tell us. God don't leave nobody ignorant, you child. Don't care where He drops you down, He puts you on a notice. He don't want folks taken advantage of because they don't know. Now, back there in slavery time, us didn't have no power of protection, and God knowed it, and put us under watch-care. Rattlesnakes never bit no colored folks until four years after freedom was declared. That was to give us time to learn and to know. 'Course, I don't know nothing about slavery personal like. I wasn't born till two years after the Big Surrender. Then I wasn't nothing but a infant baby when I was born, so I couldn't know nothing but what they told me. My mama told me, and I know that she wouldn't mislead me, how High John de Conquer helped us out. He had done taught the black folks so they knowed a hundred years ahead of time that freedom was coming. Long before the white folks knowed anything about it at all.²

Hope. For a freedom coming. The freedom promised was in the future. But the hope for that freedom changed the present. It was a teaching about a transformed future turning back to transfigure a wretched present. It was a vision that encouraged resistance for a time to come.

². Hurston, Zora Neale, "Sometimes in the Mind," in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, editors (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1958) 96.

High John did for the slaves what Jesus did for all of us: revealed and lived an alternative reality to the reality that oppressed us. That revelation, that living, is the essence of hope.

Why is the future so important for the biblical concept of hope? From the perspective of enslaved African Americans, and I'd say any oppressed community of people or individuals today, perhaps it is the reality that only in the future could they have realistic hope. Whether it was the immediate future of death and a new life with their Lord, the intermediary future of a land of escape perilously achieved, the long-range future of a coming war that would shatter the institution that bound them, or the imminent future of God's Kingdom sweeping in from on high, the slave knew that his or her hope for freedom lay with the transformative power of King Jesus in God's highly anticipated coming day. Hear the words of this spiritual:

Children, we shall be free,
 When the Lord [as Messiah] shall appear.
 Give ease to the sick, give sight to blind,
 Enable the cripple to walk;
 He'll raise the dead from under the earth,
 And give them permission to talk.³

For a people incarcerated in the present, a glorious past may encourage endurance and even foster the fight to resist, but it is in the future that the real hope for transformation will dwell. For that is where the Jesus who found liberation from even death now resides, waiting with an at-the-ready God to finish what Jesus' first-century ministry started, the establishment of a liberation like His for all those who follow Him, who live in response to that future now. The eighteenth and nineteenth century enslaved African Americans understood this socially as well

³. James Cone, "The Meaning of Heaven in the Black Spirituals," in *Heaven*, edited by Bas Van Iersel and Edward Schillerbecks (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 58.

as spiritually. So, too, did the apocalyptic Jewish writers of the first century.⁴ According to New Testament scholar Christopher Rowland,

The Christians did not abandon a hope for this world. . . . When we recognize that the teaching in the New Testament, particularly that attributed to Jesus, is about the ideals applicable to God's reign *on earth*, the New Testament writings can certainly be seen as the struggles of those who looked forward to a new age but also recognized the obligation to live in the present *as if* they were [already] living in the age to come.⁵

James Smith was an enslaved African American who lived on a plantation in Virginia.

James Smith was received one day into the church and baptized. Not long after this, he felt loudly called upon to go out and labor for the salvation of souls among the slave population with whom he was identified. James Smith felt called to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. James Smith felt called to preach the *hope* of new life in Jesus Christ. Hope of liberated life in the midst of enslaved death.

James Smith felt called to preach a new heaven and, yes, a new earth, with God relating in a new way to God's people. All God's people. According to the historical record:

At this preaching conduct James Smith's master was much displeased. So, James Smith's master strove to prevent James Smith from the exercise of what James Smith considered to be his duty to God and his people, on the Sabbath day. To stop James Smith from preaching his sermons, James Smith's master sometimes kept James Smith tied [up] all day on Sundays while the other enslaved persons were allowed to go just where they pleased on that day. At other times, because James Smith refused to stop preaching his sermons, James Smith was flogged until his blood would drip down at his feet. And yet, James Smith would not give up preaching God's love and God's Christ and God's hope of life in the midst of death whenever he could get an opportunity.

⁴ Brian K. Blount, *Go Preach! Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 55-76.

⁵ Christopher Rowland, "Reflections on the Politics of the Gospels," in *The Kingdom of God and Human Society: Essays by Members of the Scripture, Theology and Society Group*, edited by Robin Barbour (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 232-33.

At length, the master of James Smith sold James Smith to a slave trader, who separated James Smith from his family and carried James Smith deep into the State of Georgia. Despite all that was happening to him, James Smith's parting words to his wife were words of hope. In a world mad with slavery, James Smith hoped that God would bring him and his wife together again in a more free land than Virginia.⁶

What slave fool hopes like that?

And yet. And yet. Seventeen years after they were so ruthlessly split apart, in Canada, a land freer than Virginia, James Smith and his wife were reunited. They were free.

To hope.

Live today as if you are already living in the age to come. That is the essence of apocalyptic hope. A people powered by apocalyptic hope don't just envision God's future. In the lived experience of their worshipping, they do everything within their power to create God's future in their present. An enslaved example would be Harriet Tubman. An example from the period of segregation would be Martin Luther King, Jr. A contemporary example could be any one of us. The Bible gives us a glimpse of God's future. Our calling is to break as much of that future as we can into our present. Doing so, we not only recognize apocalyptic hope; we become agents of apocalyptic hope.

⁶ John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 276-77. The hoped for reunion did happen 17 years later in Canada.