

*Demanding Hope*  
Rev. Cindy Maddox  
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Ephesians 1:15-23

One of the things I love about children

is their unwavering belief that they can make a difference.

I remember a conversation I had with Amelia when she was nine or ten.

She told me that she loved the pet store at the mall

where she could see the animals for sale.

I agreed that it's fun to look at the animals,

but I said I wouldn't buy a pet from such a place.

We talked about animal shelters and abandoned pets

and about how many rescue animals need homes.

Then I told her about unethical breeders and "puppy mills,"

and I said that even if I wanted a pure breed,

I wouldn't buy from a pet store.

I could find an ethical breeder on my own,

but I don't know if the pet stores have the same standards that I do.

Amelia told me that when she grew up, she would get a job in a pet store

and she would tell the owner not to buy animals from bad breeders.

End of subject.

That was the solution: Amelia would tell them to stop, and they would.

She didn't yet understand about corporate systems and positions of power  
(or powerlessness).

She didn't understand about greed,

how much of our culture is defined by it.

She didn't understand that corporations can know what they're doing is wrong  
and still do it because it's profitable—

or, that they can convince themselves it's not wrong.

I miss the days when my daughter thought she could change the world  
simply by telling truth to power.

Sure, it was naïve. Pollyanna, even. But it looked a little bit like hope.

I've recently been binge watching old seasons of Grey's Anatomy.

Back in the 11<sup>th</sup> season there was a storyline about Dr. Nicole Herman,  
played magnificently by Geena Davis.

Dr. Herman had a brain tumor.

She had seen doctors across the country,  
and they all had given her hope,  
until each had determined that the tumor was inoperable.

Dr. Herman came to Grey Sloan not to seek a cure or even treatment,  
but to pass along her knowledge before it was too late  
and she took her immense expertise to the grave.

But her student stole her scans and showed them to another neurosurgeon  
who came up with a plan for defeating the tumor.

Dr. Herman was furious—first because of the invasion of her privacy,  
but even more because they were trying to get her to hope again.

She said that every time the hope goes, it takes chunks of you with it  
until you can only find comfort in the knowledge  
that the cancer will kill you.

Herman said that hope is the most malignant symptom of terminal cancer.

Is that hope? If so, what good is it?

Writer, artist, and theologian Jan Richardson wrote this about hope:

*“Hope is a hard word for me these days.*

Last Friday marked a year since [my husband] Gary had the surgery  
that would begin to bear him away from us.

I think of those who waited with me with such hope throughout that surgery,  
throughout the two emergency surgeries that would follow,  
and throughout all the days we kept vigil with Gary  
until it became clear our vigil was at an end.

What is the use of hoping, when hope comes to such a pass?”<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago John Jenkins, the President of the University of Notre Dame,  
wrote an article in which he talks about optimism.

According to Father Jenkins,

“Optimism is . . . the conviction that whatever the challenges,  
the situation is not really deeply problematic or grave.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/11/19/so-that-you-may-know-the-hope/>

No matter how bad the situation, a solution . . . is just around the corner.”<sup>2</sup>  
 He then goes on to talk about the events leading up to World War II.

He says, “It is striking how many leaders were committed to  
 a kind of dogged optimism in the face of looming disaster.

Hitler and the Nazis could be mollified,  
 they assured themselves and others;  
 they were not a serious threat.

Such optimism might have been justified when Hitler first took power.

But as promise after promise was broken,  
 as Jews were more and more victimized,  
 as one small nation after another was overrun,  
 as the preparations for war advanced,  
 it is hard to understand this attitude.

Some seem to have been committed to an optimism that led them to believe  
 that the threat was not so serious and disaster could be avoided,  
 until the bloodiest and most destructive war in human history  
 was upon them.”<sup>3</sup>

Sheer optimism can be a dangerous thing.

It convinces us there is no problem and so we do not work for a solution.

The opposite of optimism is, of course, pessimism.

If the optimist believes the problems aren’t serious,  
 the pessimist believes the problems aren’t solvable.

And if a problem isn’t solvable, then response is futile.

We just need to accept the doom that is upon us.

Both extremes lead us to the same place.

They excuse us from serious thought and courageous action.

Fortunately, there is a better way: it is called Hope.

Hope does not excuse us.

In fact, hope demands.

“It demands first of all that we see the world as it is.

It demands that we assess, seek to understand, analyze, think, argue,  
 seek solutions, overcome frustrations and failures.

And, most importantly, it demands the courage and commitment

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, John I. “The Demands of Hope.” *Thirty Good Minutes*, airdate December 21, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

of common action.”<sup>4</sup>

Blind optimism is easy.

Sheer pessimism is simple.

But hope? Hope is hard.

Hope says, “Yes, I see this problem. We can defeat it.”

Hope proclaims, “Yes, I know it’s a demanding/grueling/heart-wrenching problem. We will rise above it.”

Hope exclaims, “Yes, I know we’ve never done it this way.

We will change . . . and be better for it.”

Hope demands. Hope insists. Hope calls us and claims us for its own.

What we need is a little hope.

After Dr. Herman received life-saving surgery, she thanked her surgeons for infecting her with their “stupid hope.”

When Jan Richardson, who I quoted earlier, lost her husband at a young age, she admitted that hope was a hard word for her.

But she went on to write these words:

“In the midst of my grief, what I know is that hope, inexplicably, has not left me.

That it is stubborn.

That it lives in me like a muscle that keeps reaching and stretching, or a lung that keeps working even when I do not will it, persisting in the constant intake and release of breath on which my life depends.”<sup>5</sup>

And then she wrote these words:

So may we know the hope  
that is not just for someday  
but for this day—  
here, now,  
in this moment  
that opens to us:

hope not made of wishes  
but of substance,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Richardson

hope made of sinew  
and muscle  
and bone,

hope that has breath  
and a beating heart,

hope that will not  
keep quiet  
and be polite,

hope that knows  
how to holler  
when it is called for,

hope that knows  
how to sing  
when there seems  
little cause,

hope that raises us  
from the dead—

not someday  
but this day,  
every day,  
again and  
again and  
again.

We are facing yet another election with dire consequences  
for our freedoms, for our planet, for our democracy.  
I have no crystal ball, no polling data that is better than the pundits;  
I am no Steve Kornacki.  
I don't know how we will feel gathering next Sunday.  
But I can tell you this: there will be cause for hope.  
Because hope is not regulated by politics.  
Hope is not determined by election outcomes.  
Hope is not defined by the Supreme Court.

Our scripture today says  
“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ

may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,  
 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,  
 you may know what is the hope to which God has called you.”

This is not the time for pessimism.

This is not the time for optimism.

This is the time for hope.

We need to be able to believe that things can get better,  
 even if the prospects seem dim.

We need to believe that we can change the world, even if one life at a time.

We need to believe that God can change us, so that we can change the world.

Emily Dickinson has a famous poem that defines “hope” as  
*the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.*

I like this definition because if it has feathers, it can fly.

It can take us to new places.

It can lead us on new journeys

to unknown shores and to solutions not yet even imagined.

Hope lies within us, already perched in the soul.

We are not, however, the source of our own hope.

We cannot create it or manufacture it.

We can only give ourselves over to it in thanksgiving,  
 with gratitude to the One who is our hope.

What is the hope to which God is calling you?

The hope of being freed from the power of your past?

The hope of being freed from the tyranny of tomorrow?

The hope of remembering without regret?

The hope of finding joy again?

The hope of living life unafraid—or at least unencumbered?

The hope of liberty and justice for all?

What does hope taste like?

For me it tastes like the bread and wine of communion and community.

What does hope smell like?

Like yeast newly rising, bearing the promise of growth.

What does hope sound like?

Like silence punctuated by birdsong and laughter and a newborn cry.

What does hope look like?

Like a community of faith and doubt, standing in solidarity  
(even if not in agreement).

What does hope feel like?

It feels like the moment right before you spread your arms  
and discover that they are wings.

What is the hope to which God is calling you? calling us?

Don't settle for optimism.

Don't give in to pessimism.

Give yourself to the hope. Embody the hope.

Possess it, and let it possess you.