What Hope is Not
Job 11:13-20
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Every new year brings with it a slate of new expectations. Without doubt, we've launched ourselves into 2023 with some dreams, thoughts, and resolutions to make the most of the new year. Last week, as we celebrated the Epiphany, you received a star word to be a guiding force for the year. Perhaps that word has already offered some new direction or some revelatory insight for the year that lie ahead.

It's also possible, as we reflect back on the past few years, that our focus in this new year isn't on what we want to *do* or *see happen*, but instead on what we'd like to *prevent from happening;* perhaps we are focused on stopping the things we've lamented from the past years of local, national, and international turmoil. Can we make it through 2023 without any more insurrections by disgruntled patriots, or any new pandemic strains of COVID, or without any more school-related mass shootings?

The word we often use at the start of the year, whether it's about what we want to see happen, or what we pray doesn't happen, is the word ***hope***. The word *hope* is thrown around a lot every time there's a new beginning or a change in the air. Perhaps this year, we hope to travel more; we hope to have a successful surgery; we hope our partner proposes; we hope to get promoted; we hope for an end to the pandemic; we hope for a nation that agrees on the principles of democracy; we hope for an end to racial- and gender-related violence; we hope for more love and community well-being.

For these, or any litany of other things we declare hope for, I think it is worth asking, do we really know what *hope* is? Do we use the word hope with blind expectations for what may, or may not, become?

To help us focus our hopes for the new year, over the coming weeks, we're going to learn about *hope.* What is hope? What is hope not? How does hope lead us? How do we participate in our hopes? How do we hold on to hope when that for which we hoped seems lost? These questions, and more, are addressed in a new book by the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana titled, *Hope: A User's Manual.*

I'm going to invite you to read the book with me; please, pick up a copy and read along. The book is broken down into about 50 bite-sized readings, with each topic being only about 3-4 pages long. It could easily be used as a daily reader over the next 6 weeks. To offer further conversation than I could possibly touch on in a Sunday morning sermon, I'm offering two small groups for additional dialogue. One will be a hybrid meeting, where you can gather in-person or on Zoom, for person-to-person conversation. We will have our first meeting after church next Sunday. The other group will offer an on-line written dialogue, where you can participate anytime during the week, and engage as your schedule allows. You will be able to share in conversation by writing and responding to posts with

others. You can sign up to participate in either group through the digital bulletin this morning, just visit wsumc.live and click “bulletin.”

Before we talk about what hope is, it would do us well to be clear about what hope is not. We need to separate hope from some other feel-good entities that are often confused or substituted for hope.

To look at what hope is not, I want us to consider the story of Job.

A quick recap of Job’s story for those who may not recall the full arc of the narrative.

Job was a man of great faith. As the story is told, the Lord boasted about Job’s faithfulness before Satan. Satan argued that Job couldn’t be that great, and that through challenging him, Satan believed Job would turn away from God. The Lord gave permission for Satan to test Job, so long as Job was not killed.

With God’s permission, Satan went to work, and Job experienced great hardship. Job’s children were killed, he lost his livestock, and his health weakened. Everything material Job had was taken from him, and much of his physical well-being was taken as well.

Job had three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Throughout the book of Job, these three friends take turns trying to convince Job that the hardships he is facing are the result of his lacking faithfulness in God. They are convinced, as a theological strain of Christianity still teaches today, that someone’s suffering is due to their personal failure to trust and follow God … thus, Job’s friends try to convince Job that he must repent of his lacking faithfulness, and “get right with God.”

Our scripture reading today, found in Chapter 11, recalls the conversation Job had with Zophar. This is the third friend to explain to Job why he is experiencing such hardship. Listen to Zophar’s words, beginning in verse 13, “If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands toward [the Lord]. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and do not let wickedness reside in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure, and will not fear.”

Zophar is convinced that as Job stands before God, his hands are filled with iniquity. Zophar believes that the reason Job is experiencing such hardship is because there is wickedness in Job’s house (referred to here as his “tents”).

All Job has to do, according to his friend, is lift up his face *without* blemish to find security in the Lord and to have no fear. Zophar believes that Job has both the wrong attitude and has committed wrong actions, and these are the reason for Job’s suffering.

Zophar then offers that by turning toward God without blemish, and again, I’m reading from the text, “[Job] will forget [his] misery; [he] will remember it as waters that have passed by. And [his] life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness will be like the morning; and [Job] will have confidence, because there is hope.”

As he references hope, Zophar ties hope into the confidence of life without pain, which will be the result of turning toward God without blemish. Zophar indicates that hope will only be possible if Job turns from his supposed wrong-doing to claim a new life of faithfulness.

These sentiments are echoed in verse 20, in which Zophar says, "The eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last." Zophar believes that the best a wicked person can hope for is death, "to breathe their last."

Now, we are privy to information that Zophar and Job's other friends don't have. We know that Job is blameless, and that his suffering is not the result of anything he has done wrong. But a few things are clear: Zophar and friends believe hope is tied into righteousness and life without pain. They believe hope is only available to those who are not suffering, or are not living a life of *supposed* unfaithfulness. They also believe that the only hope a person who is suffering can have – that is, the only hope an unfaithful person can have – is the hope of death.

If you read the whole of the book of Job, you know his friends are wrong. (It's clear, no one needs friends like that.) As they lecture Job, the narrator makes sure that we, the readers, know that the friends are in the wrong. They don't have the full picture, and their address to Job is constructed on faulty theology and wrongful convictions.

To address the fault in their reasoning, let's talk about what hope is not. What the friends got wrong.

To begin, Rev. McKibben Dana also offers that **hope is not a prediction**. One can be hopeful without having a specific vision of what hope may bring about. In other words, McKibben Dana writes, we must divorce our hope from any resulting expectations. "Our first step," she says, "is to divorce "hope" from "that" (like saying, I'm hopeful that …) to embrace hope as mysterious and open ended and see where that takes us." If we have a specific and dedicated destination, if we set in place a personal plan, our error is to rely on the cause and effect mentality. We may never embrace the fullness of hope because of the limited path we've allowed ourselves in our over-planned and predictably-limited outcomes.

This is, at least in part, because **hope is not cause and effect**. Hope is not a simple equation that says, "if you do this _____" (fill in the blank for whatever *this* may be), "then this other thing will be the result." Life may be much easier if hope were tied into some line graph that shows a correlation between doing the thing and getting the anticipated results … but that's not how *hope* operates. McKibben Dana writes, "I'm realizing how much we substitute confidence for hope. Hope acknowledges how much is beyond our control, and how easily cause and effect can slip out of gear."

Hope, as is written in the book of James, is not tied in to our "doing the right thing." We cannot earn our hope; our hope exists because God exists. Nothing we do creates or manifests hope. Regardless of our capacity to do right or wrong, hope exists because God exists.

In a similar way, McKibben Dana says that **hope is not future-proofing**. I know that, especially for many of our local government related occupations, many in our community have a job that requires an attempt at future-proofing policies, procedures, and equipment. We are expected to address all

possible outcomes in our SOPs. And, I imagine that many of us prefer such a detailed list of certainties. But doing the work ourselves to ensure a certain way or path forward is no different than relying on cause and effect. McKibben Dana writes, “If we have it all figured out, if the future is full of certainties we’ve sketched out on our whiteboards, we don’t require hope anymore.” It is in our pursuit, not in the forgone conclusions, where hope breaks in. Job’s friends were certain that Job had no hope for a future because they didn’t see a path that wasn’t filled with disobedience and punishment. But their whole concept of what defined security was wrong. It wasn’t that Job had no hope because of his suffering, it was that hope was all he had left in the midst of his suffering.

Which leads to the next statement: **hope is not optimism nor toxic positivity**. Too often we think of hope as the promise that everything is going to be ok, but as soon as it looks like things are going awry, we give up. Hope is not lost, like optimism and positive thoughts, when things don’t look good. McKibben Dana writes, “Optimism does its best work in the Before – when the evidence points plausibly in a positive direction, when you can still anticipate the best possible outcome, when things could work out OK.” But what happens when things don’t look so good? If hope and optimism are the same thing, we lose them both as soon as things begin to go awry.

It’s worth noting, McKibben Dana argues, that optimism is a largely privileged phenomenon. “It’s easy to put your trust in things working out OK when they typically have.” But for those who have never had reason to be optimistic, hope has been a required foundation. For those who have relied on the willingness of others to give them freedom, votes, civil rights, or citizenship, optimism is not sufficient, for history declares it is not a forgone conclusion. Yet, hope remains.

For Job and friends, there was little to be optimistic about. Job had lost everything. While things looked great in the beginning, before life went awry, the friends lost their optimistic expectation as soon as things fell apart. But for Job, who had a hope in God beyond his current situation, there was still a reason to press on. Death was not the only wish for Job, much to Zophar’s error; Job held a hope in God’s good and faithful presence even amidst personal misery.

And this leads to a final observation: **hope is not the opposite of despair.** It is quite common that despair and hope walk arm in arm, like a pair of unexpected companions. As Paul writes in Romans 5, “suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” Even in the face of death, hope is often found. It may come across as a platitude, but saying to someone, “you’re deceased loved one is surely in God’s arms,” is built upon the foundation of hope in the midst of despair. For many, in the face of desperation and despair, hope may be all that remains.

That is the promise of Job. While Zophar and Job’s other friends thought that Job had no hope left, because they saw no positive outcome that didn’t require a complete reversal by Job, a deep and sorrowful turn of repentance, it was hope that kept Job going. He had was no optimism that things would correct themselves, because things kept getting worse. There was no cause-and-effect, for Job knew, and God had proclaimed, that Job had done nothing to deserve such hardship in the first place … there was nothing Job could do to escape such hardship. And there was no future-proofing to avoid further disaster. Just as Job’s deep faithfulness had not prevented the hardship that befell him, no

greater faithfulness would prevent further harm. Job had no predictions on what would happen, or how God would lead him through. And yet, even in the midst of his despair, Job had hope that God would be with him, sustain him, and somehow, someway, offer him new life.

As we enter this new year, as you set for yourself expectations and resolutions, as you name your hopes: begin by separating the promises of God from the enticements of the world. Hope is not a prediction; it is not cause-and-effect; it is not future-proofing; it is not toxic positivity or optimism. Hope maintains belief even in the midst of despair. Hope is not a cheap substitute for the greater promise of God that we are called to receive: to love and live, to justice and to mercy, to righteousness and reconciliation. So claim your hope and know that God is faithful. Amen.

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* All quotes from Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana come from *Hope: A User's Manual*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2022.