



The Practice of Hope

1 Peter 1:13-21

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By now, many of you may be thinking, we're talking about *hope* again?! Perhaps, by this seventh week of the new year, you've already abandoned your resolutions, and you're convinced that 2023 will be like every other year before it – where you don't maintain that new exercise regime, or eat your vegetables, or lose those 25 pounds, or take that trip, or get the promotion, or make it through the year without getting COVID (... perhaps a second time). I'm here this morning to say to you, that's ok! Because those fading improvements of life are not the hope we're talking about ... at least not directly.

The hope we're talking about, the hope to which I'm inviting you to grasp onto in this new year, is something far more permanent and wholistic than any one professional achievement or bucket-list accomplishment. The hope we're talking about as we start this year off is the ever-lasting hope we have in God through Jesus Christ, which offers us an assurance of a future that is defined by community health and wholeness, everlasting justice and peace, and equity and reconciliation among all races, nations, religions, gender-identities, and any other social stigmas that are commonly used to define us.

Perhaps you consider this a vague invitation, for the hope that we're talking about, the hope we hold on to and that we can proclaim because of the love of God in Jesus Christ, is somewhat indefinable. It is hard to know the exact words to speak, or the right brush strokes to sketch, because the hope that leads us has not yet been perceived in full. Though Christ taught us to pray for it, we have not yet experienced the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven in its full glory.

Though, while we haven't seen it in full, we should acknowledge that we do have a frame of reference that gives us glimpses of what that world will look like, because the hope to which we cling is witnessed in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is what the apostle writes in our scripture today: "set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed." Though Christ has not yet come in full, which is what the apostle is referring to, a second coming as defined by the book of Revelation, we have seen the person of Christ in flesh through the Gospel accounts of the New Testament – in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We get a glimpse of the eternal presence of God's love in Christ as he proclaims and teaches about God's will and God's desire for humanity; we see God's love in Christ as he heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and casts out the demons that had ostracized individuals from their communities; we see God's love in Christ as he challenges the church's hierarchy and reorients the faith of even the most biblically trained temple leaders; we see God's love in Christ as he stands up to the empire of Rome, and belittles their most heinous of capital punishments, rising from the grave after being hung on the cross.

The witness of Christ offers us a glimpse of the hope to which we cling, a hope that connects us to the eternal presence of God.

This morning's text in 1 Peter offers us an imperative – a leading word of instruction – as to how this hope should impact our daily living. Understanding our hope to be a leading motivator and the assurance of a future in the full and embodied presence of God, we must commit ourselves to the *practice* of hope.

Hear the words of the apostle, “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves.”

Anytime we hear a conjunctive word in the Biblical text, we must, and I mean we **MUST** go back to figure out what the author is connecting. We cannot understand the words that follow conjunctions like “therefore,” “but,” and “yet” without first knowing what was said before the conjunction. So, real quick, a summary of 1 Peter 1:1-12.

As stated by Scholar and Professor Lewis Donelson, prior to the word *therefore* in verse 13 is a recap of what God has done through the resurrection of Christ.¹ It offers us a promise of new birth, of a living hope, and of an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance. It names that because of Christ, we have salvation for our souls.

The first 12 verses of 1 Peter 1 name the foundation of our hope – they name the glory and promise we have because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It tells how it's *possible* to have such a hope.

And then in verse 13, we read, “*therefore ...*”

Therefore ...

“*Therefore,*” because of the glory of God as revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...

“*Therefore,*” because of the promise of new birth and new life ...

“*Therefore,*” because of your imperishable inheritance ...

“*Therefore,*” because of the salvation that is secured by the work of Jesus Christ ...

“*Therefore,*” **because of all these things**, “prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves, set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.”

Get ready for action. Discipline yourselves. The Greek verb for *discipline yourself* more literally means, “be sober” as in, “don't let yourself become idle and useless.”

What the apostle is saying is that because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, we have this hope that leads us, and that this hope is not a static entity; the hope we have is not something we sit around idly waiting for; the hope we have is not some pie in the sky aspiration that invites us to kick up our feet and twiddle our thumbs as we wait for the hope to be revealed. **No**. The hope we have is real, it is tangible, it is actionable, it is practical, it is something we work on, it is something that drives us, it is

something that keeps us from being idle, or bored, or isolated, or unengaged. Or, again as Scholar Lewis Donelson offers, “To have hope is not simply to feel a certain way or to think certain things or even to trust in God. To have “a living hope,” people must behave in a certain way. Hope lives in deeds that display who these Christians believe God is.”ⁱⁱ

The apostle continues to reiterate this point as we keep reading: “Like obedient children,” he writes, “do not be conformed to the desire that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

Keep in mind, the apostle is writing to a newly formed Christian church. The readers to whom this letter was written were infants in the faith – recent converts who had newly come to profess Christ the Lord as the incarnate presence of God, both living and resurrected. He’s offering them instruction that will guide their living. Because of the hope you have in Christ, the apostle says, your hope must be visible in action, and that action, the way in which you will live because of the hope you have, will be holy for the hope that leads you is defined by God, who is holy.

In other words, if you really believe in this hope, if you really believe in all the promises God has made about how the world will be, you will live in a way that exemplifies this hope, for this hope is defined by the one who is holy, and therefore, the way you live will be holy.

Now, I have a colleague who likes to say that we as preachers have to be careful about the word “should.” “Don’t *should* on the church,” he likes to say. The call of the gospel is freeing and invitational, not restrictive and exclusive, and so the invitation to the gospel should be freeing and invitational, not restrictive and exclusive.

With that in mind, understanding that the apostle fully believes that any hope held in God will lead to hope in action, I want to invite you to consider a few possibilities of how you might practice hope – how hope might be present in the midst of your daily living. I’m not saying this is how you *should* or *must* practice hope, but I’m offering possibilities that might help us claim the hope we have in God through Christ this year.

For those following along with our reading, I’m offering these ideas from the 5th section in Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana’s book, *Hope: A User’s Manual*.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first practice is to orient yourself as a compass orients a navigator. We are not the Creator, and thus, we cannot create this world as if we are God. We cannot do everything that needs to be done in one swift action to turn this world into the world that God desires it to be. But, we can orient ourselves in that direction. We can ensure that we are headed on the right path. We can pray, we can read, we can study, we can congregate, we can isolate, we can let go of and take on, we can listen, we can discern and we can learn – we can get ourselves focused on what needs work, so that we might be ready to take the next step in living the hope we hold onto.

And as we say often here at Washington Street, your own passions and gifts, your experiences and expertise, they will likely play a part in the direction your compass points. There are a lot of things that

don't look the way God would have them look – so point your compass in a direction that gives you energy. If you don't think public school education is good enough for every student in the community, point your compass toward the school board. If you think housing costs are unfairly driving your neighbors out of the neighborhood, point your compass at the City Council. If you think our local policing policies needs reform, point your compass at the Community Policing Review Board.

I'm not going to list all the possible directions that your compass could point, but it may help you, before you take the next step, to first figure out in what direction that step needs to be taken.

As you are orienting yourself, as you get the compass pointed, the next practice is to pull up the anchor. Now, I'll get there in a minute, but this is not to say, "take the next step." By pulling up the anchor, I'm not saying, get yourself moving. Instead, pulling up the anchor is an invitation to find a new path forward.

Do you know what purpose an anchor serves? From a nautical perspective, an anchor can keep you from floating away – it holds you firm in the sea floor to keep you from drifting afar from your desired location. But from a practice oriented perspective, anchors keep us from trying new approaches to old problems. As a people who prefer comfort, we like anchor thinking, because it invites us to do what we know how to do. But anchor thinking, as Rev. McKibben Dana names, "severely limits our options and stifles creativity."

If the world had already achieved all that our hope believes the world can and will achieve, it would make sense to keep our anchors grounded, because what we've been doing would have been working. But as it stands, there are a lot of anchors securely holding this world in its current place – in places of injustice, in places of gender-discriminated wages, in places of unclean water, in places of hatred and isms, and those anchors need to be removed. We need to practice pulling up the anchor and giving ourselves the freedom to engage in new solutions that might actually lead to changes that fulfill the hope we have in a God who cares for all of God's created.

And once the anchor is hauled in – once we've given ourselves permission to think and do new things, well, then we have to take the next step.

Rev. McKibben Dana notes just how hard it can be to know which step to take, because every step seems daunting. In whichever direction we've pointed our compass, it seems as if the path before us is nothing but uphill climbs. To help us with such seemingly unmanageable challenges, Rev. McKibben Dana offers that we can try the "practice of ten things."

In my house, we don't use 10, we call it the Power 5. When the boys have been playing all day, and the basement is a wreck of toys, legos, games, and magnetiles ... the mess is daunting. It's stressful just to look at all the things in all the places. It's like a real life game of the floor is lava – there's only so many small places where the carpet shows through to step. If we tell them to clean the basement, they don't know where to begin, because it's too big of a task. So we ask them to do a Power 5 – find 5 things to clean up right now: 5 thing in 5 minutes. The job isn't a big job – it's intentionally small; it's manageable. Do 5 small things right now, and do it quickly. It doesn't clean the whole room up, but if

they do a Power 5 every day of the week, the room stays relatively clean. And, if we have family or friends coming over and need the room to be really clean, it doesn't take that much more to finish it up because the daily Power 5 offers enough cleaning on the regular to keep the larger task within reach.

This is what Rev. McKibben Dana is talking about with the Practice of Ten Things. What small, bitesized pieces can we take on that can move us forward, even if slowly. She offers, "numbing out is a luxury we cannot afford. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something."

And finally, as you're considering those ten things, try the practice of going back to the basics. When you're not sure what to do, focus on the things you know how to do best. Smile at yourself in the mirror or at a stranger on the metro. Take deep breaths and give yourself moments of pause. Have a coffee with a friend, or go out with your coworkers to celebrate a completed project. Work locally, work in the small places, practice hope in the normal and mundane. Not everything you do has to enact wide sweeping change in policies and systems.

Sometimes, the most important thing you can do is write a thank you note, or sign a pre-drafted letter to a senator, or make a donation to an activist NGO. Rev. McKibben Dana offers, "Hope is built on this – not on romantic notions or lofty goals but on keeping our form in tiptop shape, so we can be of best service to ourselves, our loved ones, and the world."

Hope is not just a vision for what the world might be when God is revealed in eternal glory; hope is a motivator that leads us to action. It is something we practice and live out. It is what drives our every step. If we hold on to this hope, which says we will know the fullness of God in Jesus Christ, which says the world will sing as one chorus in adoration of God's love, then let us practice our hope: let us point our compass and pull up the anchor, let us take those small steps, even if they are the simplest of steps, because our hope will not let us sit idle. No, our hope drives us from these century old pews out into the world to proclaim in word and deed that God's love is for everyone. Let us practice our hope, that everyone may know the love of God. Amen.

ⁱ Lewis R. Donelson. *I & II Peter and Jude: The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Donelson.

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