

HOPE, the verb
UUF

Rev. Walter LeFlore
April 20, 2014

Piglet and Pooh were in conversation one day. Piglet, always full of questions, asks: "How do you spell love?" Pooh, with wisdom that exceeded his knowing, answers: "You don't spell it, you feel it."

With the presumed wisdom and knowledge I have, I believe the same can be said of Hope. It's not about how you spell it, it's about whether or not you feel it. Whether or not you allow it to work through you.

I think this is the message of Easter and the message of Passover. Hope. "Not *sitting around waiting for something good to happen*"; NOT, "*I sure hope someone takes care of this*" hope. But hope that **does** something. Hope that works through us.

Forgive me for the following long quote. It comes from a sermon delivered at the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield Ct by Rev Alida Ward. I wanted to cut it back or tell the story myself, but she does such a wonderful job I wanted you to hear her words. The story comes from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 32, verses 2-12.

*"Jeremiah the prophet is sitting in a jail cell in Jerusalem
And his cousin Hanamel comes to visit him with a financial proposition.
"Jeremiah," he says, "I've got this field I thought you might want to buy.
Nice piece of property, back in your hometown of Anathoth."*

*Now here's what you need to know about Jeremiah's situation.
He was in jail because he had incurred the wrath of every important
politician in Jerusalem, up to and including the King.
And he'd done this by having the courage to point out to anyone who'd
listen that the country of Israel was headed the wrong direction.
The poor were hurting, and hurting worse each year,
and no one was doing a darn thing about it.*

So Jeremiah had said this – [she paraphrases] –

"People, this country's days are numbered, Promised Land or not. Right over there are the Babylonians, looking to take over this place, and honestly, we probably deserve it. If we don't shape up, if we don't start treating people better, well, I'm telling you, the barbarians are literally at the gate, and Jerusalem as we know it is going to disappear."

Treason! *said the king, and threw Jeremiah in jail.*

*So here's Jeremiah, sitting in jail in Jerusalem, knowing, knowing that Jerusalem was about to be overtaken, knowing -- and he was right about this -- that his beloved country was about to fall.
And what does he do next?*

He buys property.

*He **buys** that field that his cousin Hanamel is offering for sale.*

A field in a land about to be conquered by the bad guys.

A piece of property in a country about to be no more. Jeremiah knows all this. But still he says "Sure. I'll take it. Seventeen shekels? You got it."

Now, the prison guards watching this, they're astonished. They gather around in amazement.

The Voice of Doom himself is investing in land in Israel? "Yeah, I'm buying that field," Jeremiah tells them,

"I'm buying that field because here's what I believe.

I believe that with God nothing is impossible.

I believe that one day fields and houses and vineyards will again be bought in this land."

When it comes right down to it, it wasn't so much a piece of **land** Jeremiah was buying as a piece of **hope**.

What he did proclaimed hope to everyone who witnessed it, and most of all, gave *himself* hope.

Gave himself hope for what someday would be.

Jeremiah lived on the vision of what God's world would be, just like Nelson Mandela centuries later, just like every freedom rider and civil rights marcher and protester brave enough to lay their lives on the line. Jeremiah -- and all who followed him -- lived and breathed hope.”

What a wonderful story! So many of the stories in the Bible continue to resonate with us today, centuries after they were written. They often represent values and principles we hold dear, whether or not we believe they are the literal words of God. Whether or not we believe in a personified God.

Hope is the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best. So in one sense, it’s “just” a feeling. But it’s more than just a feeling. It’s also the grounding for that feeling. In other words, hope is a person or thing on which we build expectations.

To have hope is to look forward to, with desire, with some sense of confidence. It’s something we place our trust in, that we rely on. It’s something that we make a choice to believe in. Beliefs are not inert. Beliefs have motion imbedded them. They are a driver, a motivator and guide. Beliefs have energy built into them. A favorite phrase of mine is “whether you think you can or you can’t, you’re probably right”.

Love, faith, belief and hope, all seem to be in the same kettle of fish for me. They all are ephemeral, poorly defined, hard to get our hands around. And because of that, our rational minds often have a hard time with these words. Yet, each, in their own right, have power...if we let them move us. And the rational mind is capable of discerning this truth.

Emily Dickenson tells us *Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words* — despite being stuck in a storm, despite the worst of conditions... *never stops at all*. That singing bird kept others warm, without asking for anything in return

When we let love, faith, belief and hope move us, we begin to gain spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity? That’s not a phrase we use very much, but we should. So what is it? To me, spiritual maturity begins with a recognition of a self beyond ego. Once there is a recognition of a self beyond ego, there arises an ability to see and accept that there is a “something” that is greater than self.

That “something” is both a part of us and we are a part of it, and yet, that “something” is at the same time, wholly other. Some call that “something” God or the divine. Others call it the unknowable, the ALL, the universe, nature, spirit, spirit of life, life-force or Chi. And there are probably other ways that “something” is named.

Whatever it’s called, at some point, spiritual maturity requires that we make a conscious choice to allow that ‘something’ to be of primary concern. We have to choose to have the unknowable be the window through which we view life itself. It becomes what the theologian Paul Tillich calls the ground of being.

And finally, I think spiritual maturity requires an ability to put words around one’s beliefs and relationship to that “something” Hope, the verb, in my view, is an essential aspect of spiritual maturity.

During recent years, we’ve heard a lot about the audacity of hope. President Obama, wrote about it and secularized the concept. He made it central to his presidential campaign. But lets go back to where that concept came from.

His minister, The Reverend Jeremiah Write---there’s that name again, Jeremiah--many called Rev Write a modern day prophet. He too incurred the wrath of many political leaders. Jeremiah Write gave a sermon, I think in 1990, called the Audacity of Hope. He built the sermon around a painting of a woman in rags, in poor health, with wounds all over her body. The woman played a harp, but it only had a single string. Yet, this raggedy, injured woman, played music, with one string, to honor and praise God. Rev. Write said *that* was a picture of audacity, the audacity of hope.

Once we accept Hope, the verb, that essential element in spiritual maturity, it makes demands on us. In many ways it compels us to action, to behave in a particular fashion. It guides us on our path. It becomes the ground of our being. It informs the way we see and interact with the world and those that inhabit it with us.

Hope is not inert. We plant seeds because we have hope. We plant trees because we have faith in the future.

Under the circumstances, the prophet Jeremiah could only purchase that field because he had faith, faith in hope, for better days in the future. That woman playing the single string harp could play her music because she had faith, faith in the word of God, which gave her not only strength but hope in a better tomorrow.

Remember the story of Pandora's Box? According to Greek mythology, Pandora was given a box. And of course, she was told not to open it. Already you know this is a set-up! No doubt, she followed instructions for at a least a little while.

Being human, curiosity got the best of her and she opened the box. Out flew the evils of the world. Why is it that women always get blamed for these things? Hate, pain, destructiveness, starvation, all flew out of the box. Seeing what she had done, she closed the top of the box.

One version of the story has hope getting out of the box too. In that telling of the story, hope immediately flies off to provide care and comfort to suffering. In another version, Pandora closes the box after everything **but** hope had flown out.

In that version of the story, only hope is left in the box. The very last thing that is left, is hope. I like that version. I like the idea that when all else fails us, when all else flies away, when we are left with nothing but an empty box... hope remains. Not hope the noun, that simply puts a name on things. Hope, that connotes action. Hope, the verb.

May you never be left with just an empty box. But if you are, don't forget, hope remains.

May we never let hope fly away.

Amen