

***Words for the Beginning: Hope Is Worth the Risk - Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:46-55***

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As we enter this week of Christmas, what's your hope level? Is it high or low? Is it strong or not-so-strong?

I wonder, as I'm sure you do, about our collective hope as people of faith, citizens of the United States and of the greater world. Are we very hopeful as a people, moderately hopeful, or marginally hopeful?

You've heard of these reports lately about all the drones that are circling parts of New Jersey? And nobody can figure out where they're from or from whom they came? It's really messing with some people's hope. There's uncertainty and even fear in some corners that make us wonder what Christmas is going to be like for people obsessed with these mysterious devices flying overhead.

Or what about the parents of the students at the Christian school in Wisconsin that were killed by an active shooter this week, a teenage girl? We can only assume that their hope has been deeply affected by the tragic and sudden loss of their children. Unimaginable.

To be clear, hope should be defined correctly. In her book, *Hope: A User's Guide*, author Maryann McKibben Dana distinguishes between optimism and hope. She writes, "Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way. Hope isn't mathematical; it's philosophical, physical, maybe even musical. True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcomes."

True hope has impact regardless of outcomes. Whether things work out or don't in our world, hope can endure.

Consider Joseph and Mary, as we consider the seminal event they were participants in that is the foundation of our faith and played out at Christmas.

Mary is told by the angel Gabriel that she will give birth to a child who will be the savior of the world. The problem: she's a virgin. How could this be? Moreover, she's unwed and now faces the cultural stigma of being an unwed mother.

Joseph is faced with the daunting reality that his fiancé is pregnant. It would bring shame upon his family and himself. He could've cast her out and moved on with his life, certainly bringing potential harm to Mary.

What do both Mary and Joseph do in this situation? Do they cower in fear? Do they flee the scene, traumatized with this new reality for the both of them?

Joseph and Mary may not have been optimistic about their futures. But they had hope. They hoped against hope. In the face of impossibilities, they believed in the possibility of a better reality. They placed their trust in God alone. Their stories from our two gospel narratives today are testaments to the transformative power of hope. Joseph acts with hope; Mary proclaims it. And their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo still.

When an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he is told not to fear taking Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Joseph's decision to embrace this divine assurance—rather than succumb to societal expectations to untangle himself from his pregnant fiancé—is a radical act of hope.

Joseph uses his position not just for personal faithfulness, but as an act of profound communal responsibility by choosing to protect and stand by Mary. Instead of living out of fear for what others may say or think, Joseph places his hope in something bigger than himself. He determined it was worth the risk.

Mary's response to her calling is equally revolutionary. In light of all that has been foretold, she sings a hopeful anthem for the ways God turns our world upside down and brings it right side up by bring down the mighty, exalting the humble, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away.

As she sings, Mary weaves a vision of the world as God intends it, stitching together a pattern of justice and mercy in her words. Her hope in the promise of God transcends time and space, extending a sacred invitation and inspiring us today to live out our faith in tangible, transformative ways.

Hope is the belief that, regardless of present circumstance or the prospect for improvement or success or prosperity, there is a force for eternal good, representing love and grace, that is worth latching onto. It's a force that propels us toward God's presence and redemptive plan for all creation, for all time.

The world needs more people who bear that hope. We can be not only people who have hope but who demonstrate it in how we live.

This fall, our Sunday morning class spent some time with a course called The After Party, which was a study of how people of faith can handle the volatility of a very divided political world.

One of the dangers of the politically polarized world we live in is the cynicism that is created by it. Election after election with the same rancor and heightened level of gridlock and disunity leads to a belief that nothing will change.

And it's at that moment we learned that what it will take to overcome this cynicism in our politics is a broad band of hope bearers demonstrating that another way is possible.

At the end of the course, the authors of the video study referenced the Civil Rights Movement back in the 1960s. Amid the great tension of race relations at that time (as those of you who lived through that period remember), it was churches in the South that launched a movement which prompted legislation back then that led to more equality and justice for minorities.

It was churches that demonstrated hope by taking action. It was the churches that didn't equivocate amid the cynicism and when times were bleak. From churches came the non-violent marches and demonstrations that led to positive change.

Churches and their members—stepping up and acting on the hope within them—sometimes at great personal risk.

Having hope means being hope-bearers that point us in a better way. And it was churches in the South who defied the odds and did just that during that very turbulent period.

Today, churches can play that same role.

There's a piece of contemporary art, formerly in the Chicago Museum of Modern Art, titled "America's Joyous Future." The artist Erika Rothenberg took a piece of everyday life, in this case a small church bulletin board, and turned it into a provocative work of art. In it, she spelled out life at one local congregation in simple white letters against a stark black background. The bulletin board was titled: EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL. Then, it listed the activities of the week taking place at that church:

Mon. Alcoholics Anonymous

Tues. Abused Spouses

Wed. Eating Disorders

Thur. Say No To Drugs

Fri. Teen Suicide Watch

Sat. Soup Kitchen

And then, finally, Sunday Sermon 9 a.m., titled, "America's Joyous Future."

Was "America's Joyous Future" an indictment of churches and synagogues that preach pie in the sky in their worship services while remaining oblivious to the real hurts and needs of people? Or was it a sign that congregations are deeply immersed in human suffering, that their doors are wide open to the trials and tribulations of the times? Was it a sign of local congregations in our land lifting brave hope out of the ashes of human suffering? -James P. Wind, "Places of Healing," Congregations, November-December 1997, 2-3.

Hope-bears take action in efforts to treat the addicted, the abused, the sick, lonely, and the hungry. They point us to a better way, one where life is made new and lies of shame and fear don't have the final say.

Our hope is a reflection of God's plans for the world—plans for renewal and restoration in the face of death and despair. Hope, more than optimism, is worth the risk.

This is a crazy week upcoming for most. There's family gatherings to prepare for, last-minute gifts to buy and wrap, there's travel perhaps for some of us.

The week can be exhausting in some ways. What doesn't get lost, hopefully, is the story around which we gather. And this story includes the brazen hope of a young couple who didn't back down in the face of daunting circumstances laid upon them. Mary and Joseph proclaimed hope and acted on it.

Henri Nouwen said, "Hope means to keep living amid desperation and to keep humming in the darkness."

Because of who grounds us in hope and inspires us to act on it, we, too, have hope. It's worth it.