

Foundational Essay

HOPE

BY CHARLENE JIN LEE

INTRODUCTION

In the bleak winters across the Great Plains, blizzards came with little notice, so right before the long winter, farmers would tie a rope from the back door of the house to the barn. They knew of too many who were caught in a whiteout on the way home from tending to tasks in the barn. They would search their steps on the short and familiar path, whirling and winding here and there in the frigid cold. Their aimless search left many frozen to their death—lost in their own backyard.¹

The rope became a lifeline for the farmers. They would hold onto the rope to guide them through the blizzard. Though they could not see the ground beneath their feet, they could feel the grip of their hands on the steady strength of the rope. Though they had no sight of their destination, as long as they had the rope, they knew they would make it home.

How many of us know people who have lost their way? How many find ourselves on the weary search for home, having lost our orientation from a storm that left us depleted, unable to go on by our own strength?

When chaos imposes fear on our unsuspecting lives, it is hope that pulls us up and guides us forward. And in those helpless seasons when we find there is nothing left within ourselves to rely on, we encounter the depth and fortitude of “hoping against hope” (Romans 4:18).

We cannot hope for what we already have. If we have what we need and want, what would we hope for? The apostle Paul’s noted expression in Romans, “hope against hope,” is clearer in a translation closer to the original language: “hope beyond hope.” It is when we find ourselves utterly empty and without options that we search for hope beyond what we can attain on our own. When our hope collapses, hope that is beyond *earthly* hope will save us.

When our own resources of will, courage, material possessions, or powers of positive thinking are not enough to carry us through the opaque chaos of life’s inevitable storms, we learn that hope is not something we can conjure up from within—no matter how naturally an optimist one might be.

I needed hope beyond hope when a helpless season billowed into my life several years ago. I stretched out my hands in every direction searching for a

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1. Parker Palmer applies this metaphor of the farmers’ lot to illustrate the restlessness of our soul’s longing for home. See Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

steadyng rope to hold onto. Unable to see the ground where my next steps would land, I became intimately acquainted with helplessness in ways that my able life had never known. Yet, during this time, I also became intimately acquainted with hope. The hope you find in God after you have exhausted all the hope you can muster on your own is a hope that is untouched by the chaos of darkness.

God's warm light drew near in a dawn hour of a critical night after an extensive surgery. In a dim, cold hospital room, the Word became flesh and came to dwell among my spouse's frail body and my feeble hope. (Isaiah 60:19 reflects this hope.)

THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

Those who searched for God's presence would be met by God searching for them, ready to comfort and renew their strength.

The Bible is full of searching people yearning for home, searching for a secure place of God's protection and provision. Along the winding way, people wandered through regions of desolate landscapes where their hearts withered. Yet, they persisted in professing their hope in God who is close to "the brokenhearted" and saves those who are "crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). Though they were weary, they placed their hope in God who does not slumber or sleep (see Psalm 121:4) and collects all their silent tears in God's bottle (Psalm 56:8). Those who searched for God's presence would be met by God searching for them, ready to comfort and renew their strength.

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

—Isaiah 40:28–31

The exilic community rested their hope in God who accompanies the weary. For the people who had known the travails of homelessness in hostile lands, hope was as necessary as their breath, as real as the strength returning to their legs and keeping them on the way.

The biblical tradition speaks of hope in practical and concrete terms. In the Hebrew Scriptures, hope is expressed with a number of variations of Hebrew words that share the same consonantal root. The word commonly used for *hope* is *תִּקְוָה* (pronounced *tikvah*). A verse from Jeremiah cited in times of uncertainty provides an example:

Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope [*תִּקְוָה*, *tikvah*].

—Jeremiah 29:11

An interesting word study pertinent to this reflection is that תִּקְוָה *tikvah*, in the noun form, literally means rope, a strong cord. This shared meaning is poignant in the narrative of hope told through the decisive action of a courageous woman who found herself in an urgent situation, recorded in the book of Joshua. Rahab let down the תִּקְוָה *tikvah* to help Joshua's men reach safety after completing their mission in Jericho (Joshua 2:15,18).

The rope provided an escape route for the spies to return to Joshua with hopeful reports that would lead the Israelites to the land promised to them. The rope became a lifeline for Rahab's household for generations to come.

CHRISTIAN HOPE

Christian hope is not wishful thinking or a feathery thing perched delicately on our souls.² Hope beyond hope is like a strong rope that pulls us up and guides us to safety.

Christian hope does not rely on our human will and insight, good luck, or a thousand positive thoughts to keep us buoyed when pain lodges in our path. Hope beyond hope comes from the faithfulness of God, as near as a taut rope gripped by a farmer searching for home in the deep of winter's storm.

When we are lost and can't feel the ground beneath us or see the destination ahead, we will find hope when we turn to our right and to our left, look above and beneath us, gaze ahead and look behind us. We will see God. We will meet Christ—God with us. We will stretch out our searching hands and find that Jesus has already taken hold of us.

We will consider the expansive contours of hope, as we follow Jesus with four practices for cultivating hope in our lives:

- Hear Hope
- See Hope
- Offer and Receive Hope
- Proclaim Hope

HEAR HOPE

Waiting for something you know will happen, like a birthday or summer vacation, is at once bearable and unbearable. It's bearable because you know, in due time, you will indeed arrive at that soon-coming day. It's unbearable because you have vividly imagined the joy of that day, and the anticipation makes you impatient in the many ordinary days still to pass. Both dimensions of this kind of waiting teach us about hope.

Hope is waiting in faith. Hope is not merely wishing for something to happen, or simply *hoping* everything will work out if the stars align, fate favors, and good deeds are rewarded. Hope is waiting with anticipation—at times, with impatience—for what you know and believe is coming.

The people of Israel waited, waited, and waited—not for weeks or months or a few years. Their wait spanned from generation to generation. They waited in expectant hope for the day of their salvation. They knew and believed in God's unfolding plan of redemption spoken through the prophets. This was their hope.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;

2. A common image of hope depicted in Emily Dickinson's famous poem, "Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers" (1861).

Hope beyond hope comes
from the faithfulness of God,
as near as a taut rope gripped
by a farmer searching for
home in the deep of
winter's storm.

In the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth. . . . Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

—Genesis 1:1, 3–4

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. . . .
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

—Isaiah 9:2, 6–7

While the people of Israel declared and dutifully taught this hopeful word from one generation to the next, they did not see signs manifesting that promised future.³ In fact, most of their days and years were clouded by trials and tribulation, long-suffering and lament. They wandered through parched lands, waded through deep waters, and stumbled through dark valleys.

Yet they persisted in hope. They imagined the jubilee of that future day when their gloom would be lifted by the Prince of Peace. This future joy fueled their strength and renewed their hope through the weary years. They waited in hope for Immanuel God to come and be with them:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

—Isaiah 7:14

During the season of Advent, the church declares these same prophecies that long gave hope to ancient communities. We participate in the waiting, waiting, and waiting in hope for the God of heaven and earth to draw near to us in radiant glory.

The liturgical days preceding Christmas are narrated through the centuries-long anticipation manifest in a humble manger. The story of Jesus' birth told in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke take center stage during Advent. Yet the hope of Jesus—Immanuel, God with us—is most dramatically and poetically announced in the first chapter of John's Gospel, commonly referred to as John's prologue.

Most readers wouldn't, at first glance, associate John's prologue with the Christmas story. It is not much of a story at all. There is no mention of the familiar nativity scene set under a guiding star, surrounded by angels and shepherds, visited by kings with their gifts. But the good news so wondrously announced in John 1:1–14 includes the most theologically consequential sentence, which marks an eternal new breath from one testament to another:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.
—John 1:14

The hundreds of years of waiting on the prophecies about the coming

3. Psalm 145 is an exquisite picture of a community passing on their faith to the next generation: “One generation shall laud your works to another, / and shall declare your mighty acts” (v. 4).

Messiah culminate in this moment that changes the story for all creation. It changes the story about humans and God. It sings a new story about the ordinary and the sacred living together.

Our Advent hope is the gospel of Jesus Christ, Immanuel God, who came to say, “You are not alone.”

If I could distill core theological insights and spiritual resources to equip my children for their way in the world, I would arrive at the hopeful words offered in this study: You are not alone.

Since they were babies, I would simply—and always—tell my children: God is with you always. At school drop-off in the mornings, I would holler “God is with you . . .” and they would—sometimes with smiling eyes, other times with eyes rolling—complete the sentence “. . . always.”

If this bit of Christian education plants and takes root in their hearts, it will be enough. When pain and loss collide in their lives—as they inevitably will—when they are depleted and unsure about how to move on, I pray they will hear: “You are not alone.” I pray they will collect enough hope as they remember (and repeat, as I required them to do when they were little and compliant!): “God is with me, always.”

SEE HOPE

John’s prologue places Jesus squarely in the Genesis account of creation. Jesus is the Word through which all was made. Jesus was in the beginning, with God, and was God.

The imagery of light in John 1:1–5 helps us to see hope made incarnate in Jesus Christ. The first words of John’s prologue will immediately ring familiar to most readers: “In the beginning” (v. 1). The same three words begin the story of creation recorded in Genesis.

The Word that spoke the first light into creation was Jesus. Now the Word becomes flesh to live with the people. Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes as light shining in the darkness.

Prophets of old had envisioned this light coming to bring hope to the wandering people:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

—Isaiah 9:2



If I say, “Surely the darkness
shall cover me,
and the light around me
become night,”
even the darkness is not dark
to you;
the night is as bright as
the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
—Psalm 139:11–12



When our hearts are troubled and lost, empty and grief-stricken, it can feel like we are stumbling through a hopelessly dark path. We look desperately for relief, for a sign of light ahead. We look for that proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel.” Light, even from a far distance, gives hope to the darkest present moment because we can see that the agony is almost over, that we have to hold on only a little longer.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has known the hopelessness of apartheid’s destruction, professes, that “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”⁴ He is proclaiming a kind of hope not reliant on earthly conditions or visible signs. It is a hope that withstands the dark nights that abound without a speck of dawn’s break in sight.

How does one remain in hope through the long night? For the ancient

4. Deborah Solomon, “The Priest”, *New York Times*, March 4, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07fob-q4-t.html.



pilgrims wandering in exile, their hope was placed in the covenant of God's plan of redemption. They returned to the temple as a weary and repentant people who clung to the hope of God's promised deliverance.

As Christ followers, our hope is in the new covenant of communion with God through Jesus Christ. Our hope is in the good news that God has come to live with us. We are not alone. Christ dwells among us, and in him is life, and the life is the light of all people. "The light shines in darkness, and the darkness [does] not overcome it" (John 1:4–5).

The poet Gerhard Frost helps me to see hope in the power of Jesus' light. In a poem, he grounds his hope in his belief that light is over darkness and life conquers death. He writes of two rooms, one light and one dark, adjoined by a door; opening the door makes the dark room light without diminishing the light in the lighted room.⁵

Though you do not see yet light at the end of the tunnel, Jesus Christ is light abiding with you. Even before you look up to search for hope, behold, the light has come.

SHARE HOPE

In Mark 2:1–12, we find Jesus teaching in a packed house. A terribly overcrowded event, even the entry was blocked by people still inching in closer to the sound of Jesus' voice from the center of the house. What is about to unfold in this place offers us a powerful glimpse of God's economy of hope.

Imagine being among the lucky ones who made it inside the house to see and hear Jesus up close that day. All of a sudden, you hear loud thumping from the ceiling, then the thud of a man's weight hits the floor, right before Jesus' feet, dirt and straw still cascading down from the torn ceiling above:

Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

—Mark 2:3–4

As the commotion and shock settle into silence, and dust billows up all around, the story unfolds with a curious verse:

When Jesus saw their faith, he said the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

—Mark 2:5

When Jesus saw the faith of the now sweaty and hopeful group of people looking down from above, Jesus turned to the man on the ground and spoke the words of forgiveness.

5. See Gerhard E. Frost, *Homing in the Presence: Meditations for Daily Living* (New York: Harpercollins College Division, 1978).

6. "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*, © 1990 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, bit.ly/FMSitAtWelcomeTable. Referencing the marriage feast of the Lamb in Rev. 19, the resounding hope of this song has accompanied generations in the long struggle for racial justice and equal human rights, most notably in this adaptation of the original spiritual, sung throughout the civil rights movement.

The faithful hope of a community lifts this man from despair to wholeness. Four people among the community picked up the corners of this man's mat and placed their hope in Jesus. They believed in Jesus' power so wholeheartedly that they organized a radical plan to bring him to Jesus' feet. When this man's hope had run out, the community shared their hope with him and literally picked him up from his helpless condition.

Nothing in the text gives us a clue about the personal faith of the man on the mat. The man says no words seeking Jesus' mercy. He does not profess, "Lord, help me!" There was no condition given to the man on the mat; no interview to measure his merit for a miracle. There was no examination about his correct beliefs or even that he had placed his hope in God. For it was when Jesus saw *their* faith. Their faith was enough. Their hope in Jesus was enough. Enough to share with this man, enough to fill the gaping hollowness swallowed up by years of crushing pain.

God calls us to be beloved community, to carry one another's burdens, to see one another's pain, and to generously share our prized treasure of hope found in Jesus Christ.

Some years ago, a pastor friend visited a church member's son who was in hospice care. The young man was dying of AIDS. His body frail and weak, he looked to the pastor and confessed, "I've lost hope, and I don't think I believe in God anymore." My friend, moved with compassion, reached out his arms and said to him: "That is OK, son. Lean on my faith. I have been walking closely with God, and I have sure hope in God who is watching over you, so take my hope and lean on my faith. . . . God who sees you and calls you Child."

PROCLAIM HOPE

One of these days, we will take our place at the feast of God's favor. And the welcome will be wide. We will each take our seat without doubt of our belonging. We will turn toward one another without fear, without shame, without judgment. We will take our time to receive with love those who are making their way with wobbly legs, those who come disheveled and tired from labor, from righteous resistance, from struggle, from surviving. We will wipe away their tears, and we will weep instead. For here at this table, we are knitted together in the dream God has for all creation, where the weakest and the strongest among us live together offering love upon love, grace upon grace, shalom upon shalom.

In Luke 4:16–21, Jesus told us about this coming day of God's favor when, during his inaugural sermon before the congregation in the synagogue, he preached from Isaiah's prophecy about the unfolding plan of God's redemption.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

—Luke 4:18–19



For here at this table, we are
knitted together in the dream
God has for all creation, where
the weakest and the strongest
among us live together
offering love upon love, grace
upon grace, shalom upon
shalom.



This is the good news Jesus came to preach: to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Under the Sabbath laws, lands were to remain fallow and



Kin-dom—a term coined by mujerista (woman liberation) theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz—is now more widely applied by Bible scholars who attend to the cultural hermeneutics of language. Isasi-Díaz explains her intentional usage of the term kin-dom—rather than kingdom, the common word employed by English-language Bibles—as a rejection of both the mistaken presumption that God is male and hierarchical connotations of the concept of kingdom in today’s power systems. “The word *kin-dom* makes clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other.”⁸

all labors cease every seventh year—the *shmita* (שְׁמִיטָה), literally meaning release. This was so that the poor in the community might eat from the previously harvested fields, and so that the workers and foreigners might rest, free from the pressures of those who hold power over them.⁷ How the weak in the community would wait with hope for the year of mandated relief!

Jesus preached the good news about the peaceable kin-dom of God to come, when God’s justice will dismantle structures of dominance and division, when grace will cover sin and wounds, when love will repair the breach between people, between all creation and God.

According to Luke, when Jesus read from Isaiah’s prophetic word (Isaiah 61:1–2) in the synagogue that day, he intentionally omitted the second half of verse 2, “to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, *and the day of vengeance of our God*” [emphasis added].

We practice our hope in the kin-dom of God when we make visible the coming reign of God’s justice, love, and grace in the world today. As we partake in the holy labors of comforting the brokenhearted, caring for the poor, standing with those who are weak, and helping to free those held captive by every kind of dominating power, we incarnate the hope of God’s coming reign in our midst.

One of these days, we shall sit at the welcome table of God. As we wait in hope for that glorious day of complete redemption and perfect joy, we are called to proclaim the good news of the Lord’s favor fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Imperfectly, yet faithfully, we continue the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ by shining the light of hope for the searching and weary among us. And we pray in our hearts and out loud with our deeds:

Your kin-dom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlene Jin Lee, PhD, is a practical theologian whose research and teaching center on identity, voice, and context in spiritual formation. Attending to the middle space between reflection and action, her work engenders integrity in theological claims grounded in lived-experience and public witness. Charlene is a community advocate involved with equitable housing solutions and workforce development for underserved populations. She is a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and serves as a mentor for RISE Together National Mentorship Network of Women of Color in Ministry. Charlene teaches practical theology at the University of Redlands Graduate School of Theology.

7. For amplification on the sabbatical year, see Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 25:1–7.

8. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), xi, n1.