

Our Hope Is In You, O Lord.



With the New Year and a new decade upon us, I have been reflecting on that word: hope. Hope is something that we are all invested in as pastoral care ministers, aren't we? So many of the people we visit are clinging to it. Sometimes it is hard to find, and other times it is so obviously present. What is it? It's really not that easy to define. Many people confuse it with optimism, but they aren't the same. Optimism has the expectation that everything is going to work out. Hope knows that everything might not work out, but moves forward anyway. Hope seeks the good that can always be found, even in the midst of all the bad. Hope is a lifting of the heart. It is an openness to wonder. Trees teach me this.

St. Bernard said, "Vines and trees will teach you that which you will never learn from masters." Yes! When we drove to my mom's house for Thanksgiving, I stared out the car window at all the grey, bare trees. Their branches were so open and raw and vulnerable. They seemed ready to receive. They stretched out towards that which is being given. And arched in the breeze, as if to bow and say thank you. *Thank you for this great gift. I get to be here. I get to be with all of you other trees, smiling and bowing together. It is good. Thank you. Let's keep being trees together.* Even the smallest branches strained outward. They might break. They were willing to take that risk, for this life of openness and reception and gift. Despite harsh conditions, trees stand as they are made and

live their lives fully with one another. What gift. How I wish we could all hold onto it - like these trees - but we seem to lose it a lot.

For no other reason except life can be hard, right? As pastoral care ministers, we hear so many stories about life being hard. Good health turning, bodies not cooperating, memories fading, a sudden twist of events going wrong...all of it tests our hope. For me, sometimes I even get angered by hope. Throughout Advent, there were all these readings from Isaiah that were filled with hope. "On that day your flock will be given pasture, and the lamb will graze in spacious meadows," Isaiah 30:23. But does that really happen in this lifetime? The perfect day where everything is fixed and the lambs get their hearts' desires? We have all hoped for things that never happened. It is when our hope seems lost that we make a decision. Do we decide to leave hope behind or plod onward anyway?

Br. David Steindl-Rast in gratefulness, the heart of prayer distinguishes between hope and hopes. He says, "List the various hopes you have. Next, use your imagination to picture every single one of those hopes going down the drain. You may want to dwell on that possibility just long enough to feel the degree of despair to which it would tempt you. The hope that is left after all your hopes are gone -that is pure hope, rooted in the heart," (p. 144). He goes on to describe how hopes don't give us peace but hope does. Hope liberates. Hope unites. It is a deep-down knowing.

Our hope is in you, O Lord. Hope isn't putting energy into something happening. The prophets, like Isaiah, had hopes that a king would come and make everything better. What did they get? A baby. That was later crucified. Not the king they thought they would get. In the literal sense of that time, Jesus didn't make everything better. There were still wars, bad leaders in power and division. Yet Jesus prevailed. Resurrected. It is still the human condition. Yet Jesus planted hope. He taught us how to bring that hope, love and peace into the world and into our hearts. It changes us. In a sense, hope isn't in what happens around us but what happens in us.

There is a profound, abiding hope - like the sap in trees, hiding underneath - that we must tap into to taste its sweetness. And the Lord puts it there. It is that posture, like trees, to stretch toward that which is being given. The bad things still happen. The rain and winds still pummel us. Hope doesn't get rid of them. Hope stands with them, open and raw and vulnerable, to accompany. A life of hope is one of openness, reception and gift. May we, and those we serve, be rooted in hope. May our roots go deep into that which gives us strength, hope, wisdom, and all that is loving and good...that which is God.

For a deeper experience, consider taking time to sit with God and reflect on the following prayer and suggestions (maybe while looking at a tree!):

Loving Creator,
We often place so much energy in our hopes.
We get stuck in our view of life not being the way we think it should be.
Open our hearts to all that is of You.
Our hope is in you, O Lord.
Like trees, help us to sway and move through life
yet still be rooted in You.
Give us the courage to be Your hope
In the world for each other. AMEN

- What already gives you hope? How does this help you move forward?
- How can you cultivate hope in your every day?
- Do others see hope in you? Why or why not? What steps could you take to grow hope within you?
- Where do you see hope in the people you accompany in pastoral care?
- If you lose track of hope, how might you make space in your heart again for it to be found?
- Go for a walk and look up at the trees. What else can they teach you?

- Kristine Rooney

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