

Why are the alleluias still in the living room?

That was a question I got the other day from my spouse. Fair enough to ask-- Easter is long over. I've taken back most of the program items I had brought home during the shutdown. But the alleluias are still sitting right there. Occasionally the dog pushes the gold chest somewhere, using his nose (he has a big nose). But mostly they just sit right next to the desk, right next to where I knit and read in the evenings.

We took our family vacation a few weeks ago, driving thirty miles to the coast. Outside, walking by the ocean, I found my mind drifting to the program for the fall. I imagined obstacle and obstacle, blocking what I had imagined we'd be doing. Obstacles blocking our programs, obstacles blocking my own life in the church, obstacles in the way of my family's dreams for this year. Like many parents I've talked to, the COVID epidemic has really tested me. I often feel like I am just not doing enough, or the right things, and that I'm failing my kids. On a normal day, I think we've done just fine (well, even!) but these haven't been normal days. One thing I often feel I've failed at for myself, as well as for my kids-- is the practice of hope.

Holding onto hope is such a struggle. Not ordinary little hopes or wishes, not optimism, but deep abiding hope, like what Julian of Norwich teaches us when she says "All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." It takes work to experience that hope, to maintain the surety of the presence and love of God, despite the brokenness of the world around us. Transforming hope is a repeated task along life's way-- the way we change hope when someone we love is dying, and we no longer hope for a cure, but for deep healing, for peace, for the absence of suffering. It takes practice, and it takes showing up and being present. I have no idea what Mary Magdalene hoped for, exactly, but I can imagine that she might have hoped only to be present with Jesus again, to carry out the last works of love by preparing his body for a proper burial. She had to show up, she had to be present-- but she was there when her hope was fulfilled in a way that surpassed all imagination.

Hope is complicated for children too. The culture we live in really doesn't center around hope and it can be kind of a shallow word at times, easily confused with wishing or dreaming. I hope the weather will be good. I hope I'll make the team. Those little hopes are important, but they are not the real thing, and they don't satisfy us the way true hope does, even when we see it only in glimpses-- through the suffering we experience, through the love we experience through God and through one another.

I'm having trouble with hope a lot during these COVID times, during these times where we are becoming more aware of injustice-- during these times when we have no idea what's coming next. I think about next year, and in my head, I see a blank page. I have to work to see God and feel God's love through this. I have to work to help my children see God and experience those little glimpses of the Kingdom, the certainty that in time, all shall be well. I need the alleluias to be in the living room, a tangible sign of hope right there sitting next to the dog.

So, we are keeping out the alleluias this year. Our plans for our children and family program this year are unfolding and there's more in this newsletter about that. But one thing we are going to emphasize as we learn together is hope, viewing our stories and our lives together through the lense of the certainty of God's love. It's not okay. But it will be. All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.