



Hope Made Real

Scripture and Reflections

Scripture: Isaiah 63: 7-9 (The Message)

"I'll make a list of God's gracious dealings,
all the things God has done that need praising,
All the generous bounties of God,
his great goodness to the family of Israel—
Compassion lavished,
love extravagant.
He said, "Without question these are my people,
children who would never betray me."
So he became their Savior.
In all their troubles,
he was troubled, too.
He didn't send someone else to help them.
He did it himself, in person.
Out of his own love and pity
he redeemed them.
He rescued them and carried them along
for a long, long time."

Centering: Rev. Cindy Gregorson, Director of Ministries

"Hope" is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops—at all..." writes the poet Emily Dickinson.

The church has sung throughout the years: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus's blood and righteousness. When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay. On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand."

Where is your hope anchored? Where are you experiencing compassion lavished, love extravagant, that is carrying you along? Our five district superintendents will each be sharing a personal story of hope made real in their lives. We invite you to listen for what might become your guiding star in the year to come. Download a star template at the link on the screen, or draw one on a piece of paper, and as you hear each story, listen for a word that you want to hold onto as a reminder, and set it as your intention by writing it down in one of the points of the star. Let's listen together. Come, thou long, expected Jesus...born to set thy people free.

Rev. Susan Nienaber, Big Waters District Superintendent

Don't sweat the small stuff. Don't miss the forest for the trees. Keep the big picture in mind.

We've all heard this kind of wisdom before, and usually, I agree. However, as we all try to survive 2020, an unprecedented year of pain, pandemic, protest, polarizing politics, I personally cannot keep my focus on the big picture. It just got too overwhelming, and like many of you, I would get anxious, hopeless, discouraged, and depressed about all the things that were out of my control.

In our scripture reading for the service today, the prophet Isaiah declares, "I'll make a list of God's gracious dealings, all the things that God has done that need praising." What I've learned again this past year that has helped me the most is that it is okay to focus on the small stuff, looking for the ways in which God is showing up in my life every day and taking the time to count all of the little, ordinary blessings.

A few weeks ago, I was out cross-country skiing on a bright and sunny day. As I rounded a corner and saw the brilliant sun turning the snow into a glittering landscape, I said out loud, "Thank you God. Thank you for the gift of your presence to me this day."

I discovered this year that focusing on what was right in front of me, like my garden, my loved ones, cooking healthy food, going for a walk in the woods, taking time to provide support and encouragement to others, sustained me and gave me hope.

Christmas reminds us that when the world became too broken, too hopeless, too lost in sin, God started small with a baby in the manger. When God intervened through this tiny being, very few people even noticed at first. So it really is okay to focus on the small stuff for a while in order to gain the strength and courage to address the big stuff.

The work of artist Charlie Mackesy has gone viral this year. His work has brought encouragement to many during the pandemic. One particular drawing really spoke to me. It says "When the big things feel out of control... focus on what you love, right under your nose." What small thing in your life is giving you hope this year? What small word do you want to add to your star?

Rev. Dan Johnson, Twin Cities District Superintendent

Like many of you, I now look back on the year of 2020 with 20/20 hindsight. A year ago this time, I would never have imagined what a challenging year it would be amid global pandemic, racial protests, divisive politics, denominational strife, and individual losses of loved ones, health, relationships, livelihoods. As one of your superintendents, I want to commend the work and witness of our United Methodist Churches across the state for faithfully offering hope to the hopeless and light in the darkness.

Personally, my own family has experienced multiple losses this year. Three friends died of COVID-19, three extended family members were diagnosed with life-threatening illness, an aunt died with still no opportunity to gather, grieve, and celebrate her life. Within our immediate family of grown children, we've experienced job loss and divorce. Most excruciating was the death of our 13-year-old granddaughter Lauren, whose smile and song, love and laughter, lit up our lives. Lauren died unexpectedly, in her own bedroom, a couple blocks from where Deb and I live, in the early morning hours of August 25, due to complications from epilepsy that she courageously faced for most of her young life. So, this Christmas, where do I find hope?

The night of Lauren's death, I held her mother, my daughter Becky, in my arms. Through tear-laden eyes and a groaning spirit she pleaded, "Dad, how do we do This?" I said, "What is This?" Becky said, "All of This, how do we

do life?" I paused for a moment and then could only say, "Honey, I don't have a map for life; for This with a capital 'T'. Maybe we move toward the big 'T' by just doing the next this with a little 't'. For now, it's enough that we'll get through the night and the sun will rise again." Every day since, with God and with each other, we do the next this with a little 't', and the next and the next and the next...

On Christmas Day, my friends, it was the four-month anniversary of Lauren's passing. Every day has been a step into the final sentence of our text from the prophet Isaiah, the hope of God "rescued them and carried them along for a long, long time." Yes, these four months have been filled with memories of what was; pain for what is; and longing for what might have been; all the thoughts, all the feels... But these four months have also been filled with prayer, emails, cards, phone calls, shared photos and videos, comments around the edges of Zoom meetings, friends who asked an open-ended question and listened for an answer, surprises on our steps from friends, colleagues, and congregations. All of this (with little "t"s) become incarnate reminders that none of us walk "This" (with a big "T") alone. My hope this holiday season has been in Christian community. Isaiah 63:9 reads, "So he became their Savior. In all their troubles, he was troubled, too."

How are you a reflection of the Christ child? When have you stood with others in their troubles or when have you been troubled too? To do "This," where is your hope anchored? Where are you experiencing the passion of loving or the compassion of caring? What word would you write on the next point of your star to point your way toward hope this Christmas and Epiphany season?

Rev. Fred Vanderwerf, Southern Prairie District Superintendent

Twenty years ago this week, my wife and I landed in Ukraine, where we would be missionaries for the next eight years of our life. During long days of language study, I would take breaks, step outside, and head out to this little concrete park around the corner. I'd meet up with the neighborhood kids—they'd range about 8 to 12 years in age—and I'd see if I could join them in a game of anything.

I want to share with you a game that they played. I'm holding it in my hands, in fact. This is the top of a cigarette pack that's been folded ever so delicately so that it can lay flat and so that it can easily be flicked.

The game was not unlike marbles that my dad grew up playing. It would commence with a kickoff—where we would all flick our top as far as we could, and the furthest one got to go first. That person would pick up his top and flick it at others laying on the ground. If it hit one of the other ones, he got to take it—like for keeps take it—and he didn't lose his turn. In fact, even if you missed it a little bit and it skidded out on the pavement near an opponent's cigarette pack top, if it was close enough, it counted. What determined if it was close enough was by placing your thumb on your cigarette pack top, and then seeing if you could extend your pinky to reach another top laying on the ground in the radius of 360 degrees. And if it did, you could win that top and also keep on flicking. As you can imagine, these tops became collectors' items—some tops were deemed more valuable than others. You got your Ukrainian brands—Pruluki—but the more valuable ones were Marlboro, L&M, Salem, Winston, Camel, the imports. Now I want to tell you: I dominated this game, because namely I was 30 and my hand was much bigger than a 10-year-old's hand. This game though was brilliant.

Why am I telling you this story? Well, because this game captures for me what's been anchoring me in 2020, what I've been holding onto. It's three things really:

1. First, it illustrates to me the incredible creative nature of our God and that creative/innovative spirit that is being reflected by God's creatures. Scripture begins with "in the beginning God created..." The limitless God, forming the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and that same chapter culminates with the creation of humans made in his image, and boy are we creative! While this year has been full of limitations, but it has fostered amazing innovations in medicine, technology, business, education, art, philanthropy, sports, music, and even the church!

2. Second, in spite of all the limitations, tensions, frustrations of 2020, we have still found the gift of God's creation being able to sustain us—we can dig through the trash and find something. God's creation is incredibly bountiful, sometimes in ways we wouldn't even have imagined. I don't know about you, but I've spent more days outside this year than ever. And never more have I understood what the psalmist meant when he writes: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." The goodness of God's earth provides, because God provides.
3. Finally, when it comes to games, I've learned that some folks are more advantaged to win than others: My 30-year-old hand was at least 50 percent larger than my 10-year-old opponents' hands. It didn't take long before they asked if they could use my hand to measure their shots also. Frankly, I couldn't wait to help. It gave me joy to help.

I don't know about you, but 2020 has been full of life lessons that have been a gift—but one of the greatest ones for me has been an increased awareness that, for a myriad of reasons, I enjoy more advantages than others. The pandemic, racism, and in many ways our economy, continue to expose to me just how advantaged I am and how disadvantaged some are. Frankly, I'm learning a lot about this, and actually, many of our churches are learning this. And I feel God's call to us—well, to me—is to not only recognize that but to use that advantage and to find again the joy in helping others win. That awareness and that desire has been a gift from God to me.

Thank you, God, for your creativity, your creation, and your good gifts.

Rev. Laurie Kantonen, North Star District Superintendent

Where do I see hope these days? I've been thinking about hope a lot the last several weeks and months. And I believe I would have to say that I find hope, particularly in challenging times, in perspective. I find hope when I remember my history as a person of faith—the history we all share—when I remember the many promises and the fulfillment of promises found in the Bible. And I find hope when I remember my own story—when I remember how God has been faithful in my life through times of wellness and wholeness and in times of challenge and brokenness. This God who has been faithful in the past gives me hope for the future.

My hope is also bolstered when I consider other people who have held on to hope even in the most challenging of times. Years ago, as I was just entering ministry here in Minnesota, I was present when a colleague shared an Advent devotion in which he quoted a verse from the New Jerusalem translation of the Bible. That verse describes the Israelites of Jesus's day as being "on tiptoe with anticipation." That description has always stuck with me. Doesn't that sound like a description of people who know how to hang on to hope? When I imagine a people who were "on tiptoe with anticipation," I see a people who always carry a hope in their heart that keeps them wondering when and how and where their living God will act, because they know God is with them.

I have asked myself over the years—and again this year as we journey through the Advent and Christmas season—if I am that kind of person. Am I someone who is "on tiptoe with anticipation" for what God will be doing? And if I am, what is it that I am anticipating? What are we all anticipating as we enter into a new year? Many of us might say that we are hopeful that this new vaccine will help life regain some degree of normalcy—that it will give us back the opportunity to gather with people we love without fear of sickness. Some of us might anticipate seeing bridges built across the chasms of division that currently are affecting our nation, our communities, our neighborhoods, and in many cases our families in so many ways. Some of us might be hopeful for an economy that works for all people so that all people have enough. What might you and I be anticipating this year?

I've asked myself this Advent season: What were the people of Jesus's day anticipating? And while we may not know all of what they might have been anticipating, whatever it might have been, I'm pretty confident that the Christmas story, what God actually did, was far more than they had dared to hope. The verse that undergirds my hope comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "Now to God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we

can ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to this God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Our faith story is a witness to this God who does more than we could ever ask or imagine. The Christmas story we have just celebrated is a witness to this God—as is our Easter story and our Pentecost story. But so is the ongoing transformation that we see in the lives of people who enter into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. These are all a witness to the power of this God who does the most incredible things in unexpected and often overlooked ways, especially if we aren’t paying attention, if we aren’t on tiptoe with anticipation, straining to see what God is up to.

I do see signs of hope—even in a year as challenging as this year has been—and they are often mixed up in acts of love and grace that I see extended from person to person. When I think about hope, what I know is that I don’t want my hope limited to the brilliance of science, or a roaring economy (as necessary as that may be), or even the depths of our human ability to listen to and love each other, as beautiful as that can be. I want to carry a hope that keeps me straining to see the greater things that this God—who sees our condition, who hears our prayers, who knows our deepest needs, fears, and desires, and who loves us beyond measure; this God who has done and continues to do far more than we could even think to ask or imagine; I want my hope to be tied to this God. I want to be that person who lives with the kind of hope that keeps me on tiptoe with anticipation, straining to see what God has next. And my prayer is that God fills your heart with the kind of hope that keeps you on tiptoe with anticipation in this coming year as well.

Rev. Cynthia Williams, River Valley District Superintendent

On Saturday mornings, there is this educational TV show that airs on CBS called “Hope in the Wild.” The show centers around stories of injured and orphaned wildlife that are rescued, rehabilitated, and reintroduced back to their natural habitat.

When I think of this year, I believe it’s a place where we could use a bit of rescue, rehab, and a reintroduction to life on the other side of this pandemic. The year 2020 has also been a kind of wilderness experience. In Matthew’s Gospel, we are reminded that Jesus, after being baptized, was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. It was in the wilderness where for 40 days and nights he fasted and was tested by the devil. The wilderness is a place of deep vulnerability. The wilderness is where all the accoutrements, the extra baggage, the non-essentials are stripped away.

What I know all over again is that the wilderness, just as it was for Jesus, is the place where we get clear about who God is and who we are in relationship with God. The wilderness is a place where trust, dependence, and faith in God either moves you closer to God or takes you further away. I love that in Matthew’s Gospel, it reads that after Jesus had stood up to the devil’s test, angels came and attended him. Angels came and took care of his needs.

So what is giving me hope these days? What is giving me hope in the wild? I tell you, it is not anything dramatic or over the top. It’s the simple God touches that are like guiding stars to me. I recently woke up at 2:30 a.m., tossing and turning with nagging questions that had no easy solutions. After giving up on sleep, I decided to read my morning devotions. In Advent, I actually have three different devotional guides that are conversation partners. I picked up the first one. There was this, and it read, “Give me grace, dear God, to live with my questions until you are pleased to make my way clear.” I picked up the second devotional, and the scripture for the day went, “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and faint not.” Well, that resonated. And then I next turned to the third devotional, one by Walter Bruggemann, and the scripture for the day surprisingly read, “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and faint not.” I said to myself: Why is that repeated to me? That got my attention and what I will say to

you is you might call that a coincidence. But in the early dawn of the morning, with a sudden peace that soothed my mind and heart, I called that a God touch, I called that a guiding star to my nagging heart.

The gift of this awful pandemic, this awful wilderness experience, has been a sloughing off of excess noise and shiny objects that have improved my listening and seeing and my ability to connect the dots. When my neighbor showed up on my door with a loaf of Christmas bread on the same day that I received an Advent box from one of our churches, I knew too this was a God touch reminding me that I am part of many beautiful networks and communities of love. The creativity, the imaginative innovation, and leaning in that has been birthed in the wild in so many of our congregations gives me hope. Each time I see generosity and compassion and kindness flourishing in me, in my neighbors, in our churches, and in the world, I am moved to hope.

Howard Thurman in “The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations” best sums up what is giving me hope: “It is the brooding present of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.”

These truths, the God touches along the way—they are my guiding stars to remind me, and I believe they can remind you in small ways, that God indeed is still present and active and caring for each of us. During that, and after that, the angels came and took care of the needs of Jesus. During that, after that, beyond that, God is faithful to take care of each and every one of our needs. And so I ask you: Where do you see God’s guiding stars? Look and behold. Amen!