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February 6, 2022

Hope in a Time of Hopelessness

In this morning's readings we observe two groups of human beings who've made sudden life changes. The first is Paul, who in his letter to the Corinthians reminds them of his tectonic shift from persecutor of the Christians to Christian himself. All because he met the Lord and in the process fell off his horse.

And in the Gospel, as some fishermen are returning to shore empty-handed and disappointed, along comes Jesus with a challenge, and then a life-altering invitation, and they go too, leaving behind their livelihoods, their normal. Just like that.

Had we read the Old Testament reading tonight we would have met a young Isaiah, called into service but refusing to go because he was a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. And a seraph took burning coal to his mouth and he heard a voice saying *Whom shall I send* and Isaiah said *Send me*.

These stories of a "Yes" to God stir something within all of us, I imagine. Especially after all these restrictions on meeting, on travel, we are all eager for change, for something new, for something

different. Andrew will be leaving for Southern California this summer after graduation. Melia will be heading to Wales, Matthew hopefully to Ireland. We've had enough of normal. We want something refreshing and new and different.

A few doctors from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence visited the chaplains last week and told us that mental health trends on campus are troubling. 42% of Yale undergrads report moderate to severe depression symptoms, 57% report moderate to severe anxiety. These issues are compounded by insufficient staff and long wait times to see a counselor. I have to believe these reports had a hand in Yale loosening restrictions sooner rather than later.

But no matter how bad things can get, how long that dark tunnel seems, how bleak the winter, buried within each of us is a burning ember of hope.

The truth of the human person is that we are, by nature, a people who cannot *not* be hopeful. It is part of how God made us. It is hope that makes us restless, hope that makes us — even in the midst of life's most brutal storms — scan the horizons for a lighthouse, for new shores. Hope stubbornly tells us that even when we are sunk in despair that it will not be this way forever, that better days are coming, that there is more to life than what is immediately visible and available.

Quick story: about 10 years ago a homeless eighth grade Kenyan boy caught the attention of a friend of mine who runs a Nairobi nonprofit because, despite missing months of school, Andrew got one of the top scores in all of Kenya on his exams. My friend Mark asked if I could help Andrew go to high school in the States, and together with a friend we found a Manhattan school that offered him a scholarship and an empty nest couple to live with. Andrew started in January of his freshman year in what they thought would be an acclimation semester before starting his real freshman year the following fall. But his grades were fabulous, and in just a semester completed what he needed for a full freshman year. We all celebrated three years later when Andrew received a full scholarship to Georgetown University and four years after that when he announced that he got into Georgetown Medical School. He plans on improving the lives of Kenyan kids, like him.

Andrew had watched his mother bleed to death after botched surgery in Nairobi, and it left him alone on the streets. And he says that even when he was sleeping outside or in abandoned cars, foraging for food on trash heaps, he says this: *I never lost hope. I don't know why, but I just never lost hope.*

He speaks a theological truth, and that is, he didn't lose hope because *we can't*. To refuse to hope is to reject our deepest selves, to tell a lie about who we most are.

Theologian John Behr writes, “Totally without hope one cannot live. To live without hope is to cease to live. It is no accident that above the entrance to Dante’s hell is the inscription, “Leave behind all hope, you who enter here.”

Hope is planted within us; it is how God made us. It helps us see the world differently and gives us new ground upon which to stand. Hope is not blind; rather, it changes how we see. It does this not by averting our eyes from a difficult reality, but by drawing our eyes to it so that something different can reveal itself.

St. Paul of Damascus, Isaiah the prophet, and Simon Peter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee — they could say Yes to this sudden invitation because they had hope. They knew already that life as it always is, the normal routines, was not all that there is, that there is more, that there is a God who loves us and beckons us forth, and sometimes that invitation — if we say yes to it — changes everything.

Whether we are see it or whether we don’t, hope is alive. Whether it embarrasses us or makes us feel foolish, it is alive, *in us*, moving our feet toward the promise of better days.

So do we dare to hope? It’s too late — we already do; it has already been unleashed in us by the God who made us. Deep inside of each

of us there is a force that looks for God, looks for the Spirit who is making all things new, looking for light and life.

It keeps a Kenyan boy dedicated to his studies long after he has been orphaned. It keeps all of us searching the landscape for the light at the end of the tunnel

Hope moves our feet; it is meant to be lived. So live in hope, my friends. Even when all that is visible looks bad, an invisible force for good lives on. God is good and God is everywhere. Amen.