

Hope Through Disappointment

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Lectionary Readings: 1 *Samuel* 1:4-20; 1 *Samuel* 2:1-10;
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18); 19-25; *Mark* 13:1-8

I know many of you are disappointed by the results of the 2024 U.S. national election (just as some of you were disappointed by the 2020 election). For some last week, the pain goes far beyond disappointment to the point of distress, and even despair. Some people in our congregation have good reason to think that life is going to become much harder for them in particular. For them, the election was like a punch to the gut. Just when it looked like America was turning the corner toward greater care and inclusion for all our people, it felt like the American public were voting against them as persons, as if U.S. voters were saying, “we care more about the things we care about than we care about you. We’re willing to diminish your rights so we can get what we want,” which, polls indicate, is lower grocery prices.

All of us experience disappointment. It’s unavoidable. You’re bound to be disappointed. You can’t live a human life without people and things disappointing you.

Disappointment occurs when we want something that we don’t get. You interview for a job but someone else gets it. You plan a nice dinner, but your spouse has to work late. You audition for a play but you don’t get the role you wanted. You study hard for a test but do worse than you expected. You work to get a candidate you really believe in elected, but your candidate loses to someone much worse.

Sometimes what disappoints us turns out to be a good thing. I’m thinking about one particular girlfriend I was in love with long ago. Now every time I think about it, I thank God she broke up with me. A marriage with her would have been a *disaster*. But, at the time I was crushed with disappointment.

Sometimes disappointments reorient us to achieve something better. The pain of a disappointment can prompt you to rethink how you’re developing in life. It can spur you to redirect your plans and practices. The student who feels

disappointed in failing a test might rethink his study habits and seek help from his instructor, and then do much better on the next test.

I don't mean to suggest that all disappointments have instrumental value or help us to improve. It's an open question whether a disappointment today will turn out to make something better in the future. And even when it does, that doesn't make the disappointment good in itself. All disappointments are bad because they're painful. And some disappointments seem final. Some produce prolonged suffering. Some prove very difficult to bounce back from.

One thing I like about the Bible is that it doesn't sugar coat our human predicament. The Bible is full of disappointments. I like to think about it as a helpful record of the many ways humans deal with disappointments.

Our Old Testament reading for today tells the story of Hannah, who was married to Elkanah; but Elkanah was also married to Peninnah, who had given Elkanah multiple sons and daughters. But, Hannah was childless, and Peninnah never let her forget it for years and years. Being childless was a source of bitter, repeated disappointment for Hannah. In her day being a childless wife was considered a great shame and even a sign of being a sinner. We don't know how Hannah dealt with her disappointment for all those years. But, we know she eventually went to the temple and poured out her misery to the LORD in prayer.

In Hannah's case, the LORD gave her what she wanted. We too are enjoined to offer our honest and heartfelt prayers to the LORD. Sometimes we're granted what we ask for, and our disappointment ceases. But, often we are not. Many childless women have prayed for what Hannah prayed for but remained childless. Stories of biblical prodigies are so wonderful and energizing that they might mask the mundane fact that most of the miracles people request are not granted.¹

How many times have you prayed for the healing of someone you love, but the healing did not come? How often do things that disappoint you remain fixed or unchanged?

I think that we as humans, and Christians in particular, need to come to grips with our frequent disappointments; for they are common even among good

¹ Stories like Hannah's make it into the Bible in part because they are happy exceptions to the much less happy rule.

people. Recall that St. Paul implored the Lord three times to take away a bodily ailment that tormented him, but even Paul was refused.² Jesus himself had plenty of disappointments. You can feel his frustration as he says to his disciples: “O unbelieving and perverse generation! ... How long must I put up with you?” (Mark 9:19). And imagine the agonizing disappointment that would stir Jesus to cry out from the cross, “My God, my God, why did you forsake me?” (Mark 15:34).

Speaking of Jesus, I hope you’ll pay attention to what he says in our Gospel reading for today from Mark. As Jesus and his disciples are admiring the magnificent temple, Jesus says one of the most disappointing things the disciples could have imagined, that all the stones composing the temple would be thrown down. This event would be, Jesus said, preceded by many false messiahs, multiple wars, earthquakes, and famines. So, Jesus is telling his disciples that his followers are going to experience disappointment after disappointment for their foreseeable future. Indeed, later he prophesizes that some of them will be martyred for following him. And they were.

Jesus does not call his followers to a comfortable, safe life without disappointment. We live in a world in which people have competing interests and incompatible goals. The physical world itself throws up obstacles to our movements and travel. History shows us that God is not in the business of forcing people’s goals to be compatible or zapping us so that we won’t hurt each other. Apparently, God values our autonomy enough not to force the world into making us all happy. So, we are bound to experience frustration.

Where is the *good* in all this disappointing news? It comes to us in our Epistle reading from Hebrews 10: “... since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”

What are we to do in a world beset with disappointments? We are to keep in mind that we have a faithful Lord who is working in history, through us, to achieve the fullness of God’s kingdom, a lasting, peaceful order among all creation. We

² 2 Corinthians 12.

don't know when that will be achieved in its fullness; perhaps far in the future. As C.S. Lewis said, it's not going to arrive until most of us really want it, and that won't happen until pretty much all of us learn to love our neighbors as ourselves, until we learn to love God by learning to obey God.³

The world may seem far from achieving this state. Nevertheless, as Christians, we are called to be people of *hope*: "Let us hold fast to the confession of hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful".⁴ What **is** this hope? Well, hope is a kind of feeling of expectation accompanied with a desire for something to happen. What do we as Christians hope **for**? Our hope is that God is faithful in leading creation toward lasting goodness.. It's a slow process that includes us. We are, Paul tells us, co-creators with God. What we're doing here and now is either contributing to the fulfillment of God's peaceable kingdom or it's working against it. Our hope is in the God who patiently woos us toward our own good. The good news is that change for the better is possible and we are agents of that change when we put our trust in the one who is faithful.

Not everyone has this hope. I recently got to see a musical play called *Hadestown*, written by Anais Mitchell. It's among the most magnificent works of theater I've seen. *Hadestown* is a version of the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus and Eurydice live in poverty, but Orpheus is working on a song of hope to make it Spring again. Hades journeys up from Hadestown to our world looking for people he can put to work in the Underworld. He offers Eurydice food and safety if she'll join him in Hadestown. She reluctantly agrees, but once in Hadestown she realizes that she's destined to be a slave forever. Meanwhile, Orpheus, now distraught by his loss of Eurydice, travels to the Underworld to rescue her. Now having completed his song to make it Spring again, Orpheus sings it in Hades's presence. The song reminds Hades of his love for Persephone, and Hades softens. He agrees to allow Orpheus and Eurydice to journey back to the overworld, but only if Orpheus leads, and only if he never, not even once, looks back to see that Eurydice is still following him. It's a long journey. Just as they are

³ Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*

⁴ *Hebrews* 10:23.

about to reach the underworld, doubt overcomes Orpheus. He looks back, and Eurydice is condemned to Hadestown.

At the end of the play, Hermes reflects on this sad tale and its importance, as we watch the play reset to the beginning and the theater company begins acting it out all over again, exactly as it happened before. We then realize that the Fates have determined what will happen with Orpheus and Eurydice. They never had a chance. But, the songs and music enjoin us to think, there is in the human story love, desire, and beauty; and so human life is worth it, even though we have no power to escape our fate.

Hadestown is indeed a deeply moving expression of the goodness of human life despite disappointments. But, it is *not* a story of hope. There's a good reason the play we watch on the stage ends by repeating only the very *beginning* of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. For, suppose we had to watch the same story over and over and over, without end. At some point, boredom would set in. And if this were to be the pattern of our own lives, if you were destined to repeat the same events over and over again everlastingly, with no possibility of a change or a better outcome, sooner or later hope would die in you.

Our story is a a more hopeful one, even if we have to spend some time in Hadestown. Although our society is far from the lasting reign of peace we as Christians hope for, there are hopeful signs. We've come a long way toward the good. Just in my lifetime we've seen an explosion of consciousness raising that has moved huge numbers of people, including many at St. Barnabas', to work for the inclusive, loving, society that Jesus modelled with his life and called his followers to achieve. When I was a boy, the vast majority of LGBT people were in the closet. Gay marriage was unthinkable. Today it's federally legal in all 50 states, and we're seeing a swell of inclusion in many parts of the world. Slavery, an evil plaguing humankind throughout history, has been abolished almost everywhere on earth. And even some of its lingering effects, such as Jim Crow laws in the South, which lingered until the year of my birth, no longer disgrace our country. We can now treat diseases with medical skills and therapies that far surpass anything ever achieved in the past. Our modern communication systems and technological

advancements make it possible for us to coordinate very large-scale humanitarian aid projects that were never before possible.⁵

Of course, we have a long way to go morally, legally, socially, and spiritually. Until we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves we will certainly have bitter disappointments. But don't let the problems that remain prevent us from appreciating the human progress toward the good that has actually occurred.

A question that remains is this: granting that there has been substantial human progress toward the good, do you think the future will be much better than the present? What can you put your trust in as you look to the future? What grounds your hope that goodness is on its way? These are serious existential questions that each of us would do well to spend some time with. Some people put their hope in a particular political party or in a populist politician. Some people put their hope in themselves to gain personal wealth or pleasures regardless of how others fare. Many people today are so caught in webs of poverty, disillusionment, and exclusion that they see no way out of their predicament. They have very little hope. Some people think that there is nothing worthy of trust guiding us toward the good, and they consequently have no hope at all for humanity's future.

Christian hope is grounded in the experiences of people whose hearts and minds have been touched by the divine. As we learn to hear and obey the divine promptings in our consciences, as we witness other people whose lives have been transformed, and as we find ourselves with increasing desire to do the good, we discover a power at work in us that can be trusted to lead us, in cooperation with like-minded others, toward our ultimate good.

Because we are people of hope, because our hope is in one who is faithful to work with us in achieving God's peaceable kingdom, we have the power to encourage each other, to help each other, to lift people up. We are not, like Orpheus and Eurydice, destined to a particular fate. We can give people hope by doing what we are called to do to change their living conditions for the better. We have the power of hope in the promises of God, grounded in our own experiences of

⁵ Technological advances have also made many new evils possible, such as global warming, nuclear war, and worldwide pandemics.

spiritual transformation. Through the disappointments that will come along the way, we can, as today's Collect says, "embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which God has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ."