

Hope for What we Cannot Yet See

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Christmastide

For most of the world, Christmas is over. All the presents have been opened, and whether we are delighted or disappointed by the gifts we have or have not received, many of us feel a kind of let-down. After all the tidings of comfort and joy, after all the familiar feasting of Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, the twelve days of Christmastide seem to fall a

little flat. Here on the altar, the Christ child is in the manger and the wise men are still making their way from the East to Bethlehem, but the angels and shepherds seem to have fallen silent. We struggle to keep celebrating while all around us, the news is just as bad as ever. If the savior whose advent we longed for has really come, why does everything seem just like it did before the big day?

That letdown is increased for me today because yesterday, as I was writing this sermon, I learned that my friend and colleague Ruth Duck died the day after Christmas. Ruth was a person of deep faith, an outspoken feminist, a scholar of hymnody and liturgy, a teacher beloved by her students, and the writer of many books on worship and over 150 hymns, many of them in the New Century Hymnal which was published by her beloved United Church of Christ. When thinking about what to sing for today's service, we had planned to follow our long Seekers custom of Christmas carols during Christmastide. However, we have instead sung "We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky," in gratitude for Ruth's long commitment to elegant, gender-inclusive language in worship; her love of the earth and all its creatures; and her advocacy for peace and justice. The Church Universal is the poorer for her passing.

Anticipating the sense of malaise that seems to be inherent to this peculiar season of Christmastide, a few weeks ago I sent an email to several Seekers asking them to help me create this sermon for the last Sunday of the year. Not wanting to ask about resolutions for self-improvement, nor for a list of bests and worsts, I wanted today to be an invitation to us all to consider our dreams and yearnings. And so, I asked each person to write one paragraph about what they hope for in the coming year, focusing on their personal lives, without reference to politics or large-scale issues.. While I have very lightly edited most of what follows, and intentionally

left out any identifying names, you can probably figure out who wrote most of what follows. Here are the responses in roughly the order that they landed in my inbox. As the first writer made clear, our individual lives are inseparable from the larger world.

Like everyone, I too hope for good health, for our children to be happy, for time with loved ones and friends and for the ability to keep moving and keep learning. Those are important hopes for me, but only in part. I was quite puzzled by your request to separate my personal life from "politics or large-scale issues." I don't know how to do that. It's like asking me to describe the sunrise without mentioning the sun. Politics and big issues are simply a part of who I am and part of the air I breathe. They are inextricably linked to my passions, pains and hopes. So, my personal life's hope is for all of God's people and all of God's creation to be free from harm, fear and suffering. Too big? Yes, that hope covers a lot – locally, nationally and globally. It is audacious and seemingly inaccessible and yet working towards that hope gives me a sense of purpose and fulfillment, a sense of connection, a (tiny) sense of influence, and a significant sense that I am taking small steps toward a more equitable and more caring world. After all, isn't pursuing the audacious and the seemingly inaccessible the very definition of hope?

Another Seeker kept closer to my request by writing simply:

I hope for academic success and good mental health for my son as he discovers himself. I hope for painless happiness for my sister. For me, I hope to be a calm presence for both of them as a dad and a brother.

And another wrote:

What I hope for in my personal life is to move into retirement in the coming months so that I have more time to engage in meaningful and fun things. What comes first to mind is being

available to spend more time with my grandson (who is about 2-1/2) and to have more time for my favorite pursuits, without having to struggle to fit them around my work schedule. My grandson has become accustomed to going with me in his stroller on my daily walks as often as possible, ending up at the park where I swing him to his heart's content! I'm also looking forward to having more time for being in nature, from silent retreats at Dayspring to wilderness camping, hiking, kayaking and other activities in the seclusion of nature. I am also hopeful of fun times with my wife as we move into a travel phase and see what may work best for us in coming years. In addition to our usual late-winter Mexico trip, we're added an autumn trip and are set for a trip back to Japan next October. This is against a backdrop of expecting to join a Parkinson's support group in the coming year and my hope/intention of taking more time daily for prayer and meditation.

Intentions and resolutions for change seem to be intrinsic to hope, as in this desire to making room for others to gather:

For my personal life in 2025, I hope to hold approximately 6 to 8 simple dinners during the year for up to 8 people. I love to gather people together in small groups. When my adult life began, I enjoyed gatherings. All the way through my days as a professional, then as a mother of small children, I loved to gather folks together. In California I had cousins and aunts, uncles and cousins, and a wider range of friends in the neighborhood in Oakland. But somewhere along the last 15 years, I lost that focus, I lost track of the joy that came with gathering folks together. It is not clear to me how or why that happened, but it did. Now in 2024, I hope that I will gather groups from our community, our churches and our family again in 2025.

Travel and health and openness to what comes is another theme:

I hope I will be living somewhere else by the end of the year.

I hope everyone I love is still alive. I hope to visit a European capital and a beautiful coral reef. I long for less busy-ness, more spacious idleness so that there's room for creativity and room for the Holy Spirit. I hope for good health, or a good death.

And, speaking of death, another said:

I hope my friend will experience a healing presence in her suffering and fear as she makes her way, like a rock rolling downhill, toward death. I hope she sends me some communication from the other side, a thread from the vast tapestry (this of course is self-centered and more like longing). I hope the love I feel for her doesn't get lost in the jumble of life, and remains as vivid as it is today. If hope is trust in grace unseen, I hope to stop trying to keep grace at bay because I think, from long habit, that I don't deserve it. I hope that before I die I may learn to have the confidence in myself that I already have in the smallest seed, and to feel that my part in the tapestry is as indispensable as every other part.

Someone else offered a definition of hope, and some examples:

Hope is a Divine mystery fortified by faith and love. Growing Catholic I believed that one's wishes, wants or needs are not a guarantee, yet it is based on my trust/love of God's plan for fulfillment. Here are a few examples: when I was much younger I used to hope to pass an exam, at the same time I was expected to do my part, which was, study. In my adult years, these hopes are closest to my heart. I hope that my niece whose desire to get married to a man whose intentions are shaky, makes the right decision. My hope is that my husband will work only 1-2 half days weekly (if important to him), enabling us to put order in our lives, have fun and travel, entertain, prepare our last wishes, and to both observe healthy and spiritual practices regularly. Finally, and importantly, I hope that every person will use or learn communication skills to resolve any conflict. I hope this

happens soon, as we are no longer in our 40s.

Returning to the connection between the personal and the political, one person wrote:

Hope is an elusive thing for me of late. I've heard it said that hope is the cruelest emotion, because it means you've refused to accept things the way they are. Recent events in this country and across the world have left me heart broken, but giving up the work is not an option.

In a personal sense I feel like I am in the process of losing things in my life, not gaining them. So it feels like the best I can hope for is not to lose them too quickly.

Instead, I have had to turn my hope outward. Seeing Syria overthrow a tyrant, and South Korea nip another in the bud proves it can be done. I know that our country has endured worse oppression, and overcome most of it. I see solar panels being installed everywhere, and I know that they will inevitably displace most fossil fuels because they are cheaper. So in a longer view, I have hope for the world at least. And sometimes, in the morning while I taste that first sip of coffee and the world hasn't yet intruded, I have a little hope for myself.

Yet another writer makes even more clear that our personal yearnings are deeply connected to the earth and to human community:

I yearn to inspire and participate in the rising up of awareness toward loving action to heal and protect the unraveling web of life upon which all life depends, now threatened by systems of greed and dependence on fossil fuels. What small or large forms this will take I hope to be revealed by the Spirit of Wisdom to guide my commitments to my call to support the community of Creation and the human community of Seekers. This discernment will be cultivated by a necessary commitment to nourish my spiritual, emotional, and physical

well-being, allowing more space for creatively expressing my griefs and joys. I also pray for the Light of Life to grow, manifested by our collaboration with the original peoples of this land. I envision opportunities to learn from and be in solidarity with those who hold Earth sacred and populated by all our relations in the one family of our common Creator.

And, finally, another reminder of how our little part of the Body of Christ helps each of us in our journeys:

I hope to stay present to my life and to my call as a part of Seekers. That means staying conscious of my limits and my longings for spiritual growth, active justice and tangible mercy for all of us. More aware now of my age, I savor intimacy, thoughtful questions and fewer distractions. Simplicity and directness have become my guidelines. I want to laugh and sing more and I want to spend my life energy on things that make our life together both healthy and joyful, knowing we are part of God's story unfolding in this time and place.

I suppose that after all of this, I cannot end without speaking of my own yearnings for the coming year, so here is what I can say in this moment: I want time to play my harp, to have lunch with friends, to talk with my children and grandson more-or-less regularly, and to continue to walk alongside Glen wherever and for however long the journey may take us. I want Seekers to thrive, to be a place of haven and support for all who desire to love and serve God in our odd, non-hierarchical, contemplative-activist style. I pray that my life will add more beauty, joy, compassion, and laughter to the world, wherever and however God leads me.

While nothing seems to have changed, hope is the yearning for what is not yet seen. My hope is that, despite all the evidence to the contrary that we hear in the news, God will bless us and keep us, and grant peace and goodwill to all beings everywhere, as we move together into the New Year. I

pray for peace in the name of Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.