

Abandon (nearly) All Hope?
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

As we may know, this is an important week for a number of world religions: Vaishkhi is coming up; Passover begins tomorrow evening; and today marks the beginning of the most important festival week in the Christian world beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with Easter. A word about this Christian liturgical week: Palm Sunday marks the entry of Jesus with his disciples into the city of Jerusalem—he and they were riding a wave in their own minds about coming glories, only to have everything go tragically wrong by week’s end. If we can trust the biblical narratives in the gospels, Jesus was arrested for attacking the financial exchange in the courtyard of the temple—which directly challenged the power structure of Roman rule over the remote province of Palestine—then he was arraigned before various tribunals, convicted of sedition and executed by the Romans, with his disciples scattering in fear and going underground.

Unlike Confucius, the Buddha and Mohamed, all of whom died natural deaths surrounded by adoring colleagues and acolytes, Jesus died at a young age, feeling so forsaken that he cried out in despair on the cross that even God has turned away from him. His male companions were stunned into denial, doubt and fear, not knowing what was going to happen next and whether they’d end up sharing their leader’s fate. Surveying the story to this point, a prominent politician and former game show host would have looked at all of this and called the small band of religious believers and their crucified rabbi a bunch of “losers.”

Religions can be rather mystifying, like when they say the first will be last and the last first; darkly humorous when they ask us to imagine threading the eye of a needle with a camel; and beggar belief when they assert the near impossible like a people enslaved by the most

powerful empire on earth being liberated because an unseen god cares for them in particular, that love is stronger than death and not a mere conjuring trick with bones, and that losers can discover something about themselves that winners can't appreciate—that they are loved and wanted simply for who they are and not for what they can achieve—that worth is not indexed to worldly success. No wonder we often find *hope*—that combination of expectation and desire for a certain thing to occur—residing at the heart of religions whose believers so-often envision the promise of a more compassionate world.

But there's something about hope that needs to be interrogated. I'm trying to think about this because on the one hand, we're in the midst of a season of renewal and we have these religious festivals taking place, *and* on the other hand, *hope?!*, if all we had to go by were media headlines screaming at us—things look really dire: it seems like the world has become quite hopelessly unhinged and we're in imminent global peril. To ratchet this up just a notch and bring it home—look at the *Principles and Sources* of our Unitarian religious faith, the *Vision Statement* of Canadian Unitarians and the words of the *Vision Statement* being proposed to our congregation for approval—I don't find the word “hope” in any of them. Why?

Hope is one of the three cardinal virtues of the Christian faith, along with faith and charity—have we been shying away from the word because of its place in Christianity, and dropping it out of our affirmations as a way to differentiate us? After all, in his letter to Christian communities in Rome and Corinth the apostle Paul wrote: “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal....In this hope we are saved and wait for it with patience.” This view of life, the blind hope for the eternal not-yet for which one must patiently cool one's heels, is something quite alien to us.

Or have we distanced ourselves from the notion of a hope as a prized virtue as a reflex on our part, a stance against the inflated rhetoric of contemporary politics in our southern neighbour which has migrated and metastasized in that nation's psyche—have we become weary with the audacity of hope? Are we cankering with disappointment? Or was it that world wars, the unforeseen terrors of technology and science, the rapid cycling of our financial systems, the threat of climate change, and other apocalyptic horsemen chastened us—and I'm speaking of Unitarians—chastened us, disabused us out of our once-upon-a-time, rosy futuristic, gee-wiz optimism that turned Martin Luther King Jr. away from joining us 65 years ago?

Is hope always such a wonderful thing?—or a form of sentimental complacency, something that prevents us from seeing things a right, and then with clear eyes, advocating and acting for justice here and now? “I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness,” wrote Anne Frank in her diary. “I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too.... It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals.”

From Ancient Greece, there's an ancient myth that found its way into a play by Aeschylus called *Prometheus Bound*. We may recall how Prometheus the Titan was punished by Zeus and the gods on Olympus for having given human beings the gift of fire, and with it the capacity for craft and technology. Zeus chained Prometheus to a cliff side in the mountains, where each day an eagle descended on the chained giant and tore out his liver, only to have the organ grow back in the night, and the eagle return the next day to continue its punishing work. I saw this play once many years ago up in a canyon and with the rising of the sun. In the play, an assembled chorus interrogates the chained Titan: did you give human beings anything else, something beside the gift of fire? Yes, he says, “I stopped mortals from seeing doom by sowing in them *blind hopes*.”

This ominous view of life is echoed in the first part of a pivotal passage in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—(You can't read a 1200 page book and not have it affect you; someday soon, I'll step out from its spell—but before then: here's the story.) One of the main characters of the book, Andrei Bolkonsky, is riding through the woods in the early spring. Nothing about the new season, its aura and fresh spray of greenery touches him. He's grown up without a mother and under the tutelage of an austere and harsh father; he's deeply disillusioned by his experience in the military—the incompetence of military officers and the willful arrogance of the Tsar; and to top it off, he's being eaten up with remorse: his young wife, who he'd treated with cold disdain, died in childbirth. He's thirty-one and thinks his life is over, his prospects and the future hopeless.

Confirmation of his being nearly dead to life and without hope is reinforced by the sight of an enormous, leafless, gnarled oak tree towering high overhead. Andrei thinks he hears as though the oak is speaking to him: “Spring and love and happiness! How is it you're not bored with the same stupid, senseless deception. Always the same, and always a deception! There is no spring, no sun, no happiness...I don't believe in your hopes and deceptions.” “yes, it's right, a thousand times right, this oak, thought Prince Andrei...Let others, the young ones, succumb afresh...but we know life—our life is over!”

“It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical,” wrote Anne Frank, as the dragnet drew near in which she and her family would be swept up and carried off to the camps. But those were not Anne Frank's last words on the subject. That fifteen year old young woman, went on to write: “And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end...I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are good at heart.”

And Andrei Bolkonsky, the young man in *War and Peace* who believed he was past hope, that his life was over, and that spring was a stupid, senseless deception?—he too had looked into the skies—in his case, as he bled on the battlefield at Austerlitz: “How quiet, calm and solemn....How is it I haven’t seen this lofty sky before? And how happy I am that I’ve finally come to know it.”

More to the point, after having visited the Rostov family and encountered their daughter Natasha so full of life—an experience that, in spite of himself, stirred the well of deep feeling within him—he later returned to the same forest and looked for the giant oak. He hardly recognizes that ominous, gnarled tree, so recently without leaf, that seemed to confirm Andrei’s being beyond hope. “The old oak quite transformed,” we read, “spreading out a canopy of juicy, dark greenery, basked, barely swaying in the rays of the evening sun....Of the old grief and mistrust, nothing could be seen....and suddenly a causeless spring-time feeling of joy and renewal came over him....No, life isn’t over at the age of thirty-one, Prince Andrei suddenly decided definitively, immutably.”

We make meaning of our lives; we may even find hope beyond hope, in spite of everything. Not that I would suggest re-enshrining it among our principal catalogue of virtues—still, are there not compelling reasons for us to not abandon all hope after all? On the eve of Passover, at the seder dinner, a place is reserved at the table and the door opened for the Prophet Elijah—he who stood courageously against injustice and spoke out for the poor, the sick and the downtrodden. A place is reserved, the door is propped open, in hope that he will one day return—but that day depends on us and not on complacent, patient hope, but our actions to bring about a time when all will live in freedom, peace, justice and joy.

There's something that happened just last week here in this city that kind of puts me in my place, and says something about just how unwarranted resignation, the abandoning of hope, before the overwhelming perils of our day may be. I'm thinking about the extraordinary *Reconciliation Pole* created by Haida artist James Hart that was transported from Haida Gwaii and raised up at the Main Mall and Agronomy Road on UBC campus on April 1st. You can see a photo of the installation of the Pole on the insert in our order of service.

First, note the monumental size of the pole. It was carved from an 800 year old red cedar from Haida Gwaii and stands over 55 feet tall. Second thing, though hard to tell from this photo, it's an artistically beautiful, stunning piece of work—you have look at its details from news websites, and better yet—go up to UBC and see it first-hand. In sum, the *Pole* represents, in three stages, the strong origins of First Nations people, the tragic legacy of the Canada's residential schools, and the hoped-for process of reconciliation of indigenous and non-indigenous people across the country.

Turn the page of the insert, and let's look at a diagram of the *Reconciliation Pole*. The bottom third of the pole represents the time before contact with Europeans: it swirls with salmon and the cycles of life, above them a shaman raises his arms in ritual blessing for their return, while Bear Mother, her cubs and Raven look out into the world.

The middle third of the pole is the Great Rupture, Canada's assault on First Nations and Inuit peoples carried out through residential schools. Between 1890 and 1996, over a 150,000 children were taken from their homes and forced into a systematic program of assimilation and cultural erasure. 6800 copper nails have been driven into the carving of a residential school symbolizing the estimated number of children who died in that brutal era. Above the school house, are children dressed in European style clothes and haircuts—they represent the survivors

and have been carved by various indigenous artists from across Canada: an Inuk child by Zacharias Kunuk, and east coast child by Shane Perly-Dutcher, a Musqueam child by Susan Point, and other children carved into the pole by Tsimshian, Cree and other Haida artists. And above the children, representing ancestries, realms and cultures from which the children came—Four Spirit Figures: killer whale for water, bear for land, eagle for air, and thunderbird for the supernatural realm.

The upper third of the pole, topped by a magnificent eagle, represents our present and future. Here we have a family—dressed in full, traditional regalia—symbolizing the strength and renewal of a people despite all odds and the catastrophe that befell them. And above them, finally, three more figures: a long boat and canoe side-by-side—prows facing the same direction. Here autonomy and respective governances are represented. Differences are honoured, but as James Hart, the artist, says: “It’s about understanding and moving forward together. We want to be part of Canada. We have lots to offer. Every nation has been here for thousands of years and centuries. The canoe—representing our First Nations, and the long boat—representing the rest of us—are placed side-by-side, moving together as Canada—meaning toward reconciliation.” With outspread wings, the eagle crowns the pole clutching four Haida coppers painted in different colours celebrating cultural diversity. And the eagle?—Hart says it’s about power, togetherness, determination and a sustainable direction forward.

If after all our First Nations and Inuit have gone through, all the challenges and opportunities they face, if our nation remains half-built, as-yet unachieved, and still this *Reconciliation Pole* was created, and with such pride and strength and will for the bringing to an end such violence and estrangement—if there can be such grave honesty and generosity—how can I, how can we abandon hope?

As we mark these days in the week ahead, let us remember the bitter herbs on the seder plate, the darkness of candles extinguished during Holy Week, the copper nails driven into a school house carving on the *Reconciliation Pole*—yes, there is a shadow side. But may we also remember and not lose sight of the eagle’s outstretched wings, the story of love stronger than death, and the place we reserve at the table, the door we leave open for the coming of Elijah. It’s not yet time to abandon hope.