

The Rainbow

Genesis 9:1-17; Acts 17:22-31

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm.*

*I’ve heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.ⁱ*

Emily Dickinson’s poem captures something of the fragility and persistence of that quintessential Word of Life: hope. In the gale, in the storm, in the chilliest land and on the strangest sea, hope, like a tiny bird perches in the distraught soul, singing the wordless song of hope, singing without ceasing.

That is surely what hope is. Fragile, but never, ever giving up. Fragile but resilient. Hope tells us that God does not give up; God does not let go. God finds different ways in different times to stir God’s people and make them question and wonder and think and disagree and act.

At this stage in the lockdown, I suspect each one of us could do with something of that hope in our lives. Which is why that wonderful passage from the Book of Genesis, talking about the rainbow, remains one of the most hopeful things in the whole of the Bible.

The creation story of the flood ends not in destruction but in hope, and the rainbow is a sign of God’s hope. The Noah story is about despair and hope. It is a parable of condemnation and redemption; of rejection and welcome. God’s judgement is overridden, the floods abate, and a hopeful creation emerges out of the chaos and judgement. Hope comes.”ⁱⁱ It can be read as a parable for our time, in the relentless flood of Covid-19 and lockdown. Stuck in the arks of our homes, day after long day, night after longer night, when will release come? That’s what comes before the rainbow of hope.

Humanity is often without hope. Hope depends entirely on a move from God. God resolves to stay with, endure and sustain our world, notwithstanding our brokenness. God takes as God's ultimate vocation not judgement but affirmation. After the unrelenting grim time, in the parable of the flood, in the present reality of Covid-19, hope will come. It is God's way.

God makes an irreversible commitment and says, "Never again". On this basis the rainbow sign is established. The bow is a promise. If the bow is remotely a weapon, it is an undrawn bow. God will never again be provoked to use the weapon of total destruction against humanity. The arc of the bow is rooted in the earth but reaches up to heaven, connecting us in a bridge of mercy, and grace, and hope. The God Who is revealed here remains willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. Hope will never be cut off because of us; hope continues despite us.

We are not immune to future crisis; bad times will come again to envelop the earth, but as they do, when they do, God's hope will come again, and we will win through. We will meet again. We will overcome.

Just along the River Forth stands the Queensferry Crossing. I try, and fail, not to think of it as 'my bridge'! Faith and love, through hope, are in the business of connecting worlds. We are in the business of building bridges of hope, not walls of exclusion and judgement and separation. If our churches need walls and roofs and foundations, let them also have doors and windows that can be opened. Let them have tables where people can be welcomed and fed, and stories of sadness and joy, fear and hope be shared. The bridge stands for connection, like a rainbow of connection across our land, and that continues to fill me with hope.

Hope for the poor, hope for the rich, hope for the squeezed middle, hope for the forgotten immigrants still homeless in our world, hope for the Jew and the Muslim, hope for the Unionist and Nationalist. Hope for the young man contemplating suicide because he cannot accept himself for who he is. Hope for the mother whose perinatal depression has robbed her of the joy of her new-born child. Hope for those who find this lockdown's continuation almost unbearable.

What does the body of Christ look like in the light of the rainbow? What would it mean for our Church, every Church, to put God's rainbow at the hopeful heart of all that we say and think and do?

Today should have been Assembly Sunday. A few years ago I was in the Assembly Hall recording the voice-over for a photography project for the Church. I noticed in the Lord High Commissioner's Gallery the stained glass window behind the throne. It has three parts: on its left an image of the nativity scene; on its right an image of the body of Jesus being loaded into the tomb by Joseph of Aramathea and Nicodemus. In the middle is Christ in majesty, with the Judgement Book open upon His knees; but He is seated on a rainbow. There is a rainbow of hope in the heart of the General Assembly Hall. It is not dissimilar to the stained glass window in the South Morningside Church, you can see an image of it on our Facebook page. Christ, seated on a rainbow.

We could do with a few more rainbows in the Church. Jesus might want you for a sunbeam but I suspect He is rather partial to rainbows too. The rainbow is a symbol of hope; a symbol of our remembering God. It is a central message of God's love and hope to us and to all God's children. As we wonder about the possibility of the end of lockdown, whenever that comes, we need to debate our future, but we must create it in hope. Those rainbows we've been putting in our windows need to be put on our churches.

Hope remains an inconvenient challenge. Each one of us has our agenda; each one of us has our world-view, and our blind-spot. If God's rainbow of hope is set within our hearts and homes, our Hall and Church, our community and country, it will be a profound challenge.

The Church needs to become a porous community within our nation. Through our sometime brokenness, from our porous Church, with its open windows and doors, the light and the rainbow of hope will arc out into the world. Our hope is to become an example of what is possible when people agree that wealth and poverty, age and gender, race and sexuality, strength of faith and strength of doubt are not barriers but bridges; not storm clouds of judgement but rainbows of hope.

Hope is not the fluffy option; a wistful, hand-wringing exercise for the incurably unrealistic. There is a cancer alive in our world today. It can be heard in the voices of those who feel they have been ignored. It can be seen in the faces of those who no longer find a place at the table, in public life and in church life. We should be coming in – with our message, God’s Word of Life that is Hope.

The world is in transition, it always is. We are not watching its collapse but its recreation. The Church is in transition, it always is. An American colleague said a couple of years ago that the Church is not dying; it is reforming. John Cleese said in the film *Clockwise*: ‘It’s not despair I mind; it is hope I can’t stand.’ Hope challenges our fatalism, which is why it is so unsettling.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul, preaching in the Areopagus in Athens, seeing the altar to the unknown god, tells the crowd of the God He knows, revealed in Jesus, making all people one nation, who also seek after God, “in the hope that they might feel after Him and find Him. Yet He is not far from each one of us.”

Hope, even in a time of pandemic. As Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi wrote, “All I know is that the greatest achievement in life is to have been, for one person, even for a moment, an agent of hope.”^{iv} As the American writer Maya Angelou once said, “Try to be a rainbow in someone’s cloud.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, p116

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p80

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid* p23

^{iv} Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p270