

**Optimism and Christian Hope**  
**1 Peter 4:12-14 & 5:6-11, Easter 7, Year A**  
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**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

There is a hilarious viral video currently making the rounds of the World Wide Web entitled, “Ultimate Dog Tease.” It’s ridiculous. And hilarious. And, I have to admit, I’ve watched it about a thousand times. Here’s the premise: A man holding a video camera is talking to his German shepherd, who has the ability to talk back. The owner tells the dog about delicious meat dishes he’s prepared: maple bacon, steak, and cheese-drenched chicken. With each description the dog looks at the man with hope, but each time the man reveals that he’s already eaten all the food himself, without sharing. The dog—who can talk, remember—gets a hang-dog expression on his face and wails in disappointment. In the final instance, the man adds insult to injury by telling the dog he’s given the cheesy chicken to the family cat. But here’s the other thing: after each let-down, the pup nevertheless looks at his owner in hope that *next* time the man will give him a steak, or a ham, or a leg of lamb. His tail keeps wagging. He is forever the *optimist*.

In today’s epistle lesson, the apostle Peter writes to the struggling Christian churches throughout Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). His message, too, sets his audience up for joy and good things. He tells them to rejoice, be glad, shout for joy. But in the same breath, he explains that they will continue to face—as they are apparently already facing—revulsion and “fiery ordeals” because of their commitment to their faith. Lest Peter’s readers miss his point (which would be difficult to do), he adds, “Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”

Even so, Peter clearly expects the Christians to whom he writes to retain their optimism. After his warning about the devil, Peter adds, “Resist him; be steadfast in your faith!”

How *can* they? Given past ordeals, and the sure promise of others right around the corner, how can these earliest Christians maintain that blessed innocence, that pure optimism? How can they keep moving forward? How can they look the devil in the eye and not falter?

By either uncanny coincidence or divine providence, the newest issue of *Time* magazine asks these very questions from a scientific point of view. Neuropsychologist Tali Sharot identifies that human beings have what she terms an “optimism bias.” In our brains, the hippocampus, which *was* understood primarily as the core of our memory system, is now believed also to be the place from which we imagine the future. And in most people, Sharot

says, the hippocampus is hard-wired both to remember the past and envision the future optimistically, as half-full rather than half-empty.

With memory, Sharot tested her theory by identifying a group of people who had written down their experiences of September 11, 2001, immediately after the fact. She then had this same group recollect their experience almost a decade later. Overwhelmingly, the 10-year recollections included silver linings—like the person who provided them the thirst-quenching cup of coffee, or the brief ray of sun that pierced the concrete dust cloud...occasions of grace, we Christians might call them—that the immediate, in-the-moment chronicles failed to include. Distanced memory, in other words, recalled the events of 9/11 much more optimistically.

The same optimism holds when people imagine the future, even today in the midst of terrorism, financial meltdown, national debt, and natural disaster. When people are placed in functional MRI machines, their brains light up when they imagine positive future outcomes but stay still and dark when they imagine negatively. Polling data backs this up. Polls show that while 70% of Americans say families-in-general will be less successful than in past generations, when asked about their own specific family's prospects the numbers flip. 76% of Americans are upbeat about their future. We have, Sharot says, a bias toward optimism. But why?

Sharot offers an evolutionary hypothesis, in two stages. First, our ability to imagine a future at all gives human beings a huge evolutionary advantage. Because we can envision tomorrow, next year, and our as-yet-unborn grandchildren, we can plan for the future. We can build, develop, and save. We can endure hard work now—pushing ourselves beyond natural limits—in order to prepare for a reward far down the road. No other animal has this capacity.

But there is a downside. Creatures who can imagine the future can also imagine deprivation, illness, and loss. Sharot says, “Conscious foresight came to humans at an enormous price—the understanding that somewhere in the future, death awaits.”

Her conclusion is that, in her words, “The only way conscious mental time travel could have arisen over the course of evolution is if it emerged together with irrational optimism. Knowledge of death had to emerge side by side with the persistent ability to picture a bright future.”

Though this mental tool can sometimes cause foolhardy behavior where reason would counsel prudence, it also has miraculous effects. “Expectations become self-fulfilling,” Sharot says, for both good and ill. Optimists have better physical health. They live longer. And because they always look for the good even in the face of the bad, they tend more often to find it.

In the end, though, a puzzle remains for the neuropsychologist. “How is it that people *maintain* this rosy bias,” Sharot asks without answer, “even when information challenging our upbeat forecasts is so readily available...How can we remain *hopeful*?”

One paragraph from the bottom of a six page essay, and that’s the very first time that word appears: *hope*.

Tali Sharot and her team have done a laudable job identifying the functional source of optimism. The prefrontal cortex interacts with the hippocampus in various ways, firing a synapse here and there, and great expectations result. Sharot’s team also does a good job hypothesizing why this occurs: to counteract our depressing knowledge of our own impending deaths. (Life is a terminal condition, after all.) But neither the mechanics nor the evolution of our optimism explains its endurance in individuals whom the world has slammed, endurance which Sharot calls irrational. Neither accounts for our *hope*. For that, we return to St. Peter. In his letter we discover again what we here have known: That hope is irrational only if it has no foundation in a reality beyond the material world. But we affirm that our hope, our bias toward believing that ultimately good will prevail, is based in something infinitely more real than our own flesh and blood and the synaptic firings of our brains, a reality, I would argue, that those synaptic firings are designed to point us toward.

You see, the great evolutionary leap of humanity—that ability to imagine a future and then create it—also grants us the immeasurable gift of imagining, then intuiting, and then knowing the God with whom we share that ability, the God who envisions and then creates us and the world around us. For those with open hearts and eyes to see, we experience that God not as aloof, but as benevolent and interested in us. And so, St. Peter’s letter to the churches, in which he counsels and expects *hope* from those in whom the brute evidence of life should instill despair, includes perhaps the most endearing and poignant words in all of Holy Scripture: “Cast all your anxiety on [God],” Peter says, “*because he cares for you.*”

For 1<sup>st</sup> Century as well as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, that makes all the difference. The God who cares for us—who *loves* us—does not leave us alone in our pain, and therefore we have *hope* that pain, loss, even death itself will never, ever have the final word. “*After you have suffered,*” Peter promises, “the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support [and] strengthen you.”

So let the devil prowl. We, brothers and sisters, can look him in the eye with the glint of hope that withers demons. *Because the God of all creation cares for us.* He has given us brains

hard-wired not only to imagine the good future but also to *know him*. And with that knowledge, nothing the imagination can envision is beyond hope.

*Amen.*