

The Ground of Hope

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Our hope for the future is grounded in what God has done in the past

We have kept Advent, the time of waiting, of expectation. We have rehearsed faith's vision in the midst of the puzzle of history. In this time between the times we live by the vision, trusting that the King will come and we will understand.

The King will surely come; that is faith's vision, a vision grounded in the fact that the King has come. If Advent is the time of expectation, Christmas is the time of fulfillment. Into the puzzle of our history a child was born, and in that fully human existence a light penetrated our darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it. Our hope for the future is grounded in what God has done in the past.

To celebrate Christmas is to discover the ground of our hope as we grope through the darkness which is the puzzle of history. The King who is coming is the King who has come. We are a people of hope, a hope grounded in the past enabling us already to appropriate the future that still lies before us, living in the assurance of things hoped for.

Christian hope is hope in God. Stating what may seem obvious is an attempt to distinguish the Christian hope from today's cheapened hope, a worldly term for wishful thinking regarding a thousand matters from the ridiculous to the sublime: Will you win the game? I hope so. Will you have more sales in 1986 than in 1985? I hope so. Will your health improve? I hope so.

Hope has become a catch-all word for all sorts of situations and conditions that we would like to see happen or become realized. Hope in this sense refers to an uncertain outcome. We do not know; we cannot tell; we "hope so." That is not Christian hope. Christian hope is hope in God. It is certain.

There is another distinction. We use hope in its cheapened sense to express our wish that something happens but about which we are uncertain. We also are then using it to refer to a favorable outcome which lies within our capacity to bring about: Will you win the game? I hope so—but the outcome is uncertain. Yet, I do have it in my capacity to win the game if I play well, if I practice and am ready, if I do not make the big mistake. Will you have more sales in 1986 than 1985? I hope so—but I am not certain. Yet it is very possible, if I work hard; if I make sufficient calls; if production is there. Will your health improve? I hope so—but I cannot be sure. We enter a gray area because my health is not wholly within my power. Yet, if I eat properly, get proper rest, exercise, and avoid stress, I can certainly influence the outcome. Thus, in the cheapened sense of hope in contemporary usage, hope refers to that which is uncertain, but is within my power to effect.

Biblical hope is something quite other. Biblical hope is in God; it is the present certainty of what will be a future possession; it is certain of that which is impossible in terms of human capacity.

As far as the quality of certainty is concerned, I simply refer you to the testimony of Scripture. Biblical religion is a religion of certainty. I am not speaking now of dogmatism. Surely there has been far too much dogmatism and far too many dogmatic people in the history of the church. There is a lust for certainty in the human heart and certainty about things that remain veiled in mystery. The Bible is no answer book for all the questions of the less than serious curious ones. Too many religious people “know” too much.

The Bible is, however, a book of certainty about the matters of ultimate concern: That God is. That God is gracious. That God's kingdom will fully come. Biblical religion in those ultimate matters is serious and certain. It is hope-full, not “hope so.” It is the present certainty of what will be a future possession.

Further, it is certain of what is impossible in terms of human capacity. Let me raise some questions to demonstrate that biblical hope is fastened on that which lies beyond human capacity to effect.

Will there be a new creation as spoken of by Isaiah and in the Revelation to John? Our Advent affirmation was yes. Will it come through human planning and ingenuity? Will it come through human goodwill and harmony? Will some president, king, or dictator arise who will effect it? Will it come through the progressive education of the race, some evolutionary development?

Only the naive, the simple, the one ignorant of the human story could answer affirmatively or even “I hope so.” Will there be life after life? The biblical faith says yes. Will it come through medical research and the development of new technology? Will death be defeated by future breakthroughs in science?

I need not go on. What all that conjured up is not only scarcely thinkable, it is not desirable. It is apparent that biblical hope is certitude about a future reality which

lies beyond human capacity to achieve. Hope reaches beyond what is possible. Hope claims a future that can come only as the result of an act of God.

Living in hope means living in the tension between now and then. There is a great difference between present experience and the future for which we hope. This gap between the vision and reality, between the ideal and the real, becomes understandable in terms of the hope of which Scripture teaches. That hope is grounded in the Christmas event.

Life is difficult. Human experience is thoroughly laced with suffering. Many have had their faith in God shattered on the rocks of human suffering and evil in the world. Such people have never been taught the true biblical faith because biblical faith will not be eviscerated by suffering but is rather the means for understanding precisely the hard reality of human experience. Our life is caught in the tension. The darkness is not denied, but the darkness is not ultimate; the Light has come and the light shines in our darkness. Therefore we endure; we live in hope.

Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God which came to expression at Christmas. God has acted. Hope has been vindicated. God has visited his people; the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

We have seen the heart of God in the face of Jesus. Generations waited through long centuries and then—Mary had a baby. Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise and in him redemption was accomplished—we have been saved. There is a history to look back upon and a dramatic intervention in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to remember and in which to trust. God did move in faithfulness to his promises, and that move at history's midpoint proved the ground of a new promise, a new expectation, a new hope.

God's redemptive plan has touched down. He has connected with our history. He has shown himself faithful in our past. Therefore our hope is grounded in history and we have an anchor to which to hold as we wait in expectation. As we celebrate another Christmas we acknowledge that we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but our hope is renewed as we remember his coming and we wait in hope for the day we will see him face to face.