

Why Hope?

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Story

Jane Goodall, perhaps the world's most famous living naturalist, is also a cheerleader, you might say, for hope. In her new *Book of Hope* she shares this true story (adapted from her words):

There are two men who live in a small rural village in China. Their names are Jia Haixia and Jia Wenqui. They have been friends since they were boys. Haixia was blind from birth in one eye and lost his sight in the other in a factory accident. Wenqui lost both his arms in an accident when he was three years old.

When Haixia lost his sight in that accident, he became depressed; and Wenqui thought he needed something to do to give him purpose, a reason to keep on.

Well, the land around their village had become degraded from pollution, and Wenqui wondered if they could plant trees as their project. But how could they do this, one of them blind, the other with no arms? Yet they found a way.

First, since they couldn't afford to buy seeds or saplings, they cloned new trees from branches cut from saplings. Haixia did the cutting while Wenqui directed him to the right place... Haixia holding on to one of Wenqui's empty sleeves.

It didn't work out very well at first; the trees were dying, and the two friends needed to figure out how to get water to the new trees. Well, they somehow solved that, and kept planting trees. By now, just the two of them, one blind and one without arms, have planted over ten thousand trees; not only that, but the villagers, who at first were skeptical of this project, now help to take care of the trees.

There's a lesson there, it seems to me, for us whenever we might be feeling we can't keep on, that we have no hope. If these two men could do what they have done, in their circumstances....

Reading from "The Book of Hope" by Jane Goodall and Douglas Adams

...remember that we have been gifted not only with a clever brain and well-developed capacity for love and compassion, but also with an *indomitable spirit*. We all have this fighting spirit – only some people don't realize it. We can try to nurture it, give it a chance to spread its wings and fly out into the world giving other people hope and courage.

It's no good denying that there are problems. It is no shame if you think about the harm we've inflicted on the world. But if you concentrate on doing the things you *can* do, and doing them well, it will make all the difference.

Let us use the gift of our lives to make this a better world. For the sake of our children and theirs. For the sake of those struggling in poverty. For the sake of the lonely. And for the sake of our brothers and sisters in the natural world – the animals, the plants, the trees.

Please, please rise to the challenge, inspire and help those around you, play your part. Find your reasons for hope and let them guide you onward.

Sermon

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he writes poetically about the nature of love, affirming that whatever else we have, whatever gifts and talents we have, if we have not love we are like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal, or worse: nothing. He concludes with these often-quoted words:

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

So... hope is there, prominently... but less important than love, you might even say subservient to love.

What might that mean?

Could depend on what we mean by hope and what we mean by love.

If hope is no more than wishful thinking and love no more than passive sentiment... then it seems to me we've got noisy gongs all around.

But if hope for how things might be, how our life might be, how the world could be, is grounded in love as an active verb... well that's another matter altogether.

And this is what Jane Goodall, though not using the language of the Bible, is preaching in the *Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times* from which we heard earlier. Yes, have your vision, your hope of how things might be, could be, how you would like them to be... *and* then do something about it!

When it comes to our personal lives, this is clear, isn't it?

If you're taking a test, it's fine to say you hope you'll do well. But if you haven't studied and prepared, what good is your hope?

And I can hope I do well in a race, but if I haven't trained properly, hope alone won't get me to the finish line – at least not very fast or in very good shape.

We can hope we will recover from the flu, but if we don't rest and drink plenty of fluids and so on, our recovery will be slow and we might even get sicker.

And so on.

In her book, Jane Goodall makes the same point when it comes to matters as challenging as two global crises that are close to her heart: the loss of biodiversity and climate change. And this general principle of hope paired with love leading to action applies to *all* the huge issues we face – racism, poverty, hunger, and on and on.

We can hope, but not much will happen unless we pitch in, powered by love.

And here's the thing: Once we pitch in – on whatever project or issue or task, small or large (could be as simple as folding the chairs at the end of a meeting) – others will likely see us and be inspired to join us, just as in that rural village in China we heard about in the story.

Then, before you know it, you've got a movement!

For instance: In August of 2018 – you know this story – Greta Thunberg started spending school days outside the Swedish parliament demanding action on the climate crisis. One person. A fifteen-year-old to boot. After a while, other students in her community and

surrounding communities joined her. Then this school strike spread throughout Europe, eventually around the world!

A year later Greta was speaking before the United Nations General Assembly! And she's still at it, now at the current UN climate summit in Glasgow. Further, she is far from alone. Her love of the planet and of life moved her to action, with the hope, even expectation, that she could make a difference; and her example moved others to put their hope and love into action... not just a few others, but millions... making a difference.

Back to Jane Goodall, at the other end shall we say of the age spectrum, closing in on 90. She is probably as aware as anyone on the planet of the array of challenges we face on the planet today – from the suffering of poverty to the crisis of climate. Well, if Jane Goodall still has hope for our ability to meet these challenges, who am I to sit on my hands and despair?

Her reasons for hope? In her book she cites four:

She names our amazing human intellect... the incredible resilience of nature... the determination and energy of young people around the world... and our indomitable spirit coupled with our capacity for love and compassion (as we heard in the reading).

But none of these four reasons will *magically* bring about changes we so desperately need in our nation and around the world.

Remember one of Pete Seeger's songs, "God's Counting on Me, God's Counting on you"? It was written late in his long life of activism. We've sung it before – here are a few of the lyrics – precisely in the Jane Goodall spirit:

When we look and we see things that should not be.
God's counting on me, God's counting on you.

Hoping we'll all pull through,
Hoping we'll all pull through,
Hoping we'll all pull through,
Me and you.

Don't give up, don't give in, working together we all can win...
There's big problems to be solved, let's get everyone involved...
What we do now you and me will affect eternity...
When we sing with younger folks, we can never give up hope,
God's counting on me, God's counting on you.

All this said (and sung), as I was musing about hope for these past couple of weeks – after I gave myself the assignment of this sermon title, "Why Hope?", for a while I found myself thinking we should forget about hope altogether and just get to doing what needs to be done – whether in our personal lives or our shared lives in community and on the planet.

But that would, actually, be impossible. It is so human to hope – to hope for our sick loved one to get better or to not suffer, to hope for our own personal challenge of whatever kind – financial, physical, spiritual – to pass, and on the larger scale of things to hope for an improvement in the political climate in our nation, to hope for nations to adequately rise to the climate crisis, and so on and on. Of course we human beings hope!

And if our *hoping* can give rise to a *vision* of how we want things to be, then that vision can lead us to *doing* what needs to be done: Again, powered by love, whether for our suffering partner or our suffering planet.

So... back to the Bible, the Book of Proverbs this time: “Without vision, the people perish.” Just as without hope, we are liable to despair, to perish spiritually you might say.

A vision, a hope, gives us something to reach for, and something to do to get there.

This said, one last and I think important thought: Wisdom from many sources, expressed with particular clarity in the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, reminds us to act... but without attachment to the fruits of our actions. Yes, have a goal, a reason to act, something to strive for. But then just do what you feel called to do and what you are able to do in that direction, however small or large... while letting go of complete control of how it will all turn out.

And you know, I’m struck by the fact that Jesus himself said very little if anything about hope. His followers did, the Christian churches do. But Jesus mostly simply and directly talked about how to be in the world, how to treat one another, how to love one another.

That’s all. And it is just about everything.

In this spirit may we do our best to live: With one another in our families and circles of friends... in our various communities, assuredly including here at Old Ship... as citizens of our nation... as travelers on Earth.

We don’t and can’t know what the future will bring – about pretty much anything...

But we do know what we can, with hope in our hearts, bring to the future... and to one another in this shared journey of life and love.

So may it be.