



“Hope”

THE THING WITH FEATHERS

The first line of Emily Dickenson’s famous poem suggests that hope is “the thing with feathers.” Interpreters have argued ever since about what this line means. Is this that hope is ethereal, or light and insubstantial? Is it that hope rises above the storms like a feather on the winds? Is it that hope is strong and powerful, or simply an illusion? Not being very talented with poetry myself, I could not begin to tell you what she meant. But I do know that while hope is a powerful symbol in our modern world, it seems all too often to be coopted by political campaigns and marketing firms, and that for many, hope is finally illusive and disappointing. For many, hope just flies away like a feathered bird on the wing.

Why? The problem, it seems, is not with hope itself, but with what is behind hope, holding it up. What is behind the hope that we are urged to have? What is it about our world or our reality that makes hope more than just wishful thinking, or even worse, self-delusion about the realities of life? In a television show of some decades past, an older woman brings her pet to a veterinarian for treatment, serene in her confidence that the animal will get better. Saying that she is not a religious person, she does allow that her hopeful belief in Providence assures her that everything will turn out alright. Of course, when the pet does not respond to treatment and dies, the woman is both crest-fallen and puzzled—why would Providence do this to her?

What is it that is behind hope that might allow us to expect a better outcome to things than our reason and experience would lead us to believe? For some, the basis of hope is the belief in some unseen Providential force that will keep order and sanity in the universe, and reward the good. For others, there is a belief in some sort of Karma, that would balance out the evils and misdeeds of this world, by eventually visiting retribution on the wrong-doers. For yet still others, hope is an optimism that the essential goodness of people, and the world, will automatically move humanity in a positive direction. But can any of this provide us with a solid basis for hope in the midst of the traumas and disappointments of life, or is this hope merely ephemeral, and as Ecclesiastes judges it, vanity and nothingness? If you want to have hope, you need to possess something that is worthy of your hope. If you look around this world for something upon which to base your hope, you will not find it.

One of my teachers, Martin Marty, was known for saying that in looking around the world he had no reason to be optimistic—far from it. But he said that he did have hope. I think that because he is a good Lutheran theologian, Marty understands that hope must be based on a something beyond this world, in this case on the promises of God, especially the promise of salvation based on the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In a long discussion of hope in his 1531 Commentary on Galatians, on Gal 5:5, Luther ties faith and hope together as springing from the promises of God. God's gift of faith comes first, which assures the believer in the reality of God's promise. Out of faith in this promise, comes hope, as our means of continuing in that promise despite all that life and the world can throw at us. Luther continues:

Truly devout people have nothing dearer and more precious than the whole world than this doctrine. . . They know that they have eternal righteousness, for which they look in hope as an utterly certain possession, laid up in heaven . . .¹

Hope then is the power that sustains a believer in life, in sure and certain confidence that God can and will do everything promised for

¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1531) in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–) 27: 27.

us. This promise is an unwavering foundation on which hope can and will be built.

The old gospel hymn states it this way: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” This is nothing ephemeral, nothing insubstantial, but the absolute certainty that whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the risen and eternal Christ. It is something that, as they say, you can take to the bank. As a basis for hope, it is so much better than Providence, or Karma, or a naïve belief in human goodness, all of which are certain to fail. The promise of Christ is absolute hope for us. It is, also, a hope that we need to proclaim to the whole world, a world that is in desperate need of a sure and certain hope. That is the basis of our calling as Christians, to proclaim the hope of Christ to everyone. ⊕

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