



The Place of Hope Between Progress and Pessimism

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Many hope, groaning for redemption in and beyond the wilderness! John the Baptist's cry intersects all of these places, pleading for the kingdom of God (Mark 1:3; Rom 8:22). Many cry out of the many present calamities, whether those of a warming world, of nationalisms, of authoritarian retrenchment, or of the demand for genuine hope and the remediation of despair. Sadly, longing for something does not make it so. Perhaps there is no novelty that we might expect, just the repetition of what we have and lament. Yet we live each day, between sunset and sunrise, the climb and the descent of the sun bringing us into the next hour. We live.

A present without any future, a return to the same seasons—these attitudes toward the world express the kind of iron necessity

Christian hope exists because of the gift of God in creation and the continuing promises of the creator in and through prayer and the Lord's Supper. Hope is created in the context of God's continuing presence with us, through Christ's presence in our communities, and in the gifts of bread and wine in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

that hope speaks against. If we lack reason to hope that these bones might live, that the seed might grow, or the tree flower, we look for a possibility that does not, by any account, offer itself to us. In such a situation we trade, then, on a kind of impossible hope.

This kind of hope seems to be what we learn from Paul. In the course of examining the remarkable adoption of the nations to be children of God and the desire of all things for their revelation, Paul wrote that hope “that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” (Rom 8:24). Origen of Alexandria interpreted Paul's definition of hope to mean that genuine hope not only cannot perceive its object at present but also that that this hoped for reality can never be made visible.¹ This prevents hope from being a longing for something not yet present, as one might long for the next day since that day will dawn. By this claim Origen means that hope cannot be for a specific future or state of world, perceptible things. Instead, hope can only be hope in God. Hope in God differs categorically from other sorts of hope.

Origen's point matters since hope in God differs from hope in the power or agency of the world around us, the networks of life that we inhabit, or the flow of history at which present moment we stand. Origen's interpretation of hope as that for which cannot be seen means that we cannot take God as a simple given, as a resource to be extracted, a principle on which to lean, or one who we can take as simply there, going about the business of making the world just, to paraphrase Voltaire, “that's just God's business.” If God were merely given, then God would enjoy presence in everyday life, taken for granted so that we can simply treat God as part of the scenery.

Therefore, theological inquiry into hope is needed to develop hope in God and its relation to specific hopes. Our point of departure for these questions is the Lord's Prayer, since this prayer gives hope not only its orientation to God, entering the relation of Jesus to God in calling God Father, but also because of its exceedingly specific

¹ Origen, *Commentarii in epistolam ad Romanos 7, 5; Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6–10*, trans. Thomas P. Shek (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 78–79. Michael Wolter argues that by “unseen” Paul means “not experienced” as a kind of idiom: Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an Die Römer: Teilband 1: Röm 1–8* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 520. But also: “The very definition of hope, Paul says, requires that it remains unseen,” Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 520.

petitions.² The Lord's Prayer joins hope in God together with other hopes, concluding in the Lord's Supper.

Beginning with the petition for daily bread brings the problem of visibility and invisibility to the fore. This petition seems more revolutionary than mundane if those who pray it indeed ask for what Luther understood daily bread to mean, which was "everything needed and included for the nourishment of our bodies;" he elaborated as a synecdoche: good government and food, clothing, shelter, work, a good name, and the like.³ To have daily bread would bring about a radical transformation of life if all had everything they needed.

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That God's will is "indeed done without our asking," seems to have no upshot for daily life since the bread we require infrequently appears with the morning dew and is still missing at dusk.⁴ Perhaps hoping for daily bread belongs to a different world than the one we seem to have. If God gives bread without any trace then God seems a superfluous addition to the very real work of plant, water, soil, and farmer who conspire together. Perhaps God does not give at all, and projects, inspires, or otherwise lures creatures to work to provide daily bread for all.

These neuralgic points need to be made explicit in order to justify a systematic-theological investigation into hope. Identifying a

² Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain* (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 329–422; David Clark, *On Earth as in Heaven: The Lord's Prayer from Jewish Prayer to Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

³ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 357.

⁴ BC, 357.

problem raises the need for thinking, to draw attention to our beliefs, background knowledge, and practices in order to pursue life. In this case I propose that the problem has to do with what kind of hope in God can be justified. This focus distinguishes between kinds of hope. Asking God for daily bread seems to be asking for something that completely transforms life. The petition for bread would seem to require that we progress from hunger to satiation. It seems then, that hope in God is split between the progressive and the pessimistic since hope in God should improve our lot yet it must remain fixed to God.

This split threatens to render hope empty because one oriented by a progressive aspect of hope expects the world to be made better, improved, or otherwise saved by God while the pessimist sees no future except complete and utter recreation, the transition from death to life. This radical change is the entrance of creatures into God's life, which is unbounded. God cannot be gotten in parts or portions, unless we break the bonds of love that make God Trinity or divide God into gifts created and uncreated, or other variations. Thus, there cannot be any progress in God's life.

This redemption cannot be such a sheer break of old and new that have nothing to do with each other without introducing a cleft in God and in the world. The same hope cannot be pessimistic since it neither wholly accepts nor rejects the hopes and cries of this world. What the Triune God promises could be so entirely alien to this world because this world has become so utterly alien to God. Owing to its captivity to sin, such a hope for the world in God always marks an uncrossable chasm between this world and any that God might redeem. This attitude can be called pessimism because it sees no future for the world except its dissolution and destruction. Apocalyptic expectation does not have to follow this pessimism, but it can embrace the catastrophic register apocalyptic harbors if it considers the world to be so bound and corrupt that no way can be found through its thicket except to completely burn it down. Or it might compel us to take the act of God's redemption to be an event and never a person, a history, a story, or a community since no one can ever grasp or objectify an event since an event just happens, never fully known, or otherwise taken in hand.

Paradoxes loom in the suspension of hope between progress and pessimism. I intend to sustain them by considering three common place theological matters that have appeared only implicitly in this discussion so far: divine agency, gift, and place. Agency matters here

because theological pessimists do not find any possibility in the present that might renew, change, or otherwise alter it to fit its entrance into the life of God. They offer a change without any participation of the one to whom change is offered. If God alone acts and does so entirely without the world, then the only thing that matters is what God does to make things new. By contrast, those committed to progress invoke the very change that the pessimist denies while understanding that it is the world that is renewed and comes to new life.

The most specific need to consider hope is to find what breathes it into life: gift. Hope in the Triune God is hope in place because the Triune God deals with us everywhere and always in gift and in promise: creation, wisdom, Torah, and gospel. The petition for daily bread exists in the wake of God's promissory work in Jesus, drawing together a network of God's gifts.

A promise follows some of the logic of gift exchange but warps it in important points.⁵ Gifts can be taken as pure gifts, such that they have no strings attached. An important body of work has provided some rudimentary cautions about this gift: a gift that is so pure that it cannot appear to create a sense of obligation, it can have no giver for otherwise we would be indebted to that person, and it cannot ever be received, for then there would be a need for us to reciprocate, whether in proportional gratitude or thanksgiving.⁶ Put simply, a free gift cannot exist. Promises differ from gifts because they are both something and nothing: to promise means to give an initial token of some sort, whether one's word or down payment, and then a span of time takes place until the promise is finally fulfilled. Promises give time while gifts demand it. Promises require trust in order for them to have any effect before their fulfillment. Thus, a promise exceeds what is initially given as much as it makes no demands other than that of trust. Attention to hope requires consideration of God who promises and who gives, two kinds of logic, two sorts of theological economics.

⁵ This paragraph summarizes Gregory Walter, *Being Promised: Theology, Gift, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 1–13.

⁶ Sarah Coakley, "Why Gift?: Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 no. 2 (2008): 224–235; Risto Saarinen, *God and Gift: An Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005); Karen Margaret Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology: An Introduction to Critical Theories of the Gift* (New York City: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005).

Thus, the one who promises is not simply given in our lives, is not casually there in the world from which we might always draw hope. Hope exists because it lives in the promise of the Triune God, which orients events and agents in the place which already is God's creative gift. Daily bread belongs to the place to which God's promise comes.

The relationship between the two, between gift of creation and promise of God, is trenchant, governed by the relationship between nature and grace. Johannes Scotus Eriugena explores this question in his examination of the return of creatures to God in the final book of his *Periphyseon*. To consider how creation goes beyond itself into God's life, Eriugena uses the conceptuality of gift. He holds that creation is a *datum*, given, and grace is a *donum*, gift: "It is nature which brings things out of non-existence into existence; it is Grace which brings some of the existents beyond all existents into God Himself."⁷ The entrance of creatures into God's own life continues the already given sustaining gift of existence itself. When God draws creatures into God's own life, creatures do not cease to be creatures even as they enjoy "perfect deification, or Theosis."⁸ Eriugena, like others, holds that grace is in some sense a repetition of the datum of creation since God's gift is one, making it somewhat difficult to see any meaningful difference between the given and the gift.

What sort of hope is possible depends upon the interrelationship of the gift of existence and the promise of God. This event occurs in the emergence of a specific place.

Another rival interpretation, characteristic of theologians under the influence of nominalism or naturalism, takes God's grace as extrinsic to creatures or a superaddition to their existence, thus creating a competition between God's gift of grace and God's gift of creation. This would mean that in the prayer for daily bread, so far as God acts, the creatures who make bread do not. Others could also consider that grace is nothing more than a return to the creation that

⁷ Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*, trans. I. P. Sheldon-Williams and John J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oakes Publications, 2020), 577.

⁸ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 576.

is already given, which would eliminate future-directed progress since it would entail a return to the given instead of any advance, whether this is given in the sense of the kind of nature always existing. What sort of hope is possible depends upon the interrelationship of the gift of existence and the promise of God. This event occurs in the emergence of a specific place.

Gifts interact, make, shape, and take place.⁹ Considering place demands that our discussion of hope consider not just ways human beings have imagined and understood place, which of course are parts of any place, but also the way that all creatures gather to and disperse from a particular locus. A topological focus does not only consider the human imagination or contribution to a location but also includes the various actants and forces that come and go alongside.

Places gather things but also themselves make other events possible.¹⁰ Further, places need to be distinguished from space, or extension. Though many useful conceptions of space exist, they all share in common the notion that space is a kind of container or indifferent point onto which human imagination is painted.¹¹ Approaching the world to inquire after space requires abstracting from place, as a measure is indifferent to color or texture of a wall when reading the length of its tape. Landscape and terrain often figure prominently in place owing to the persistence of their giving to it. This lake, this hill, this ditch all constantly offer themselves together with other things to constitute a specific place.

Place also needs to have priority in our thinking over events.¹² Events themselves take place, occur within a particular location that makes them possible. The emplacement of events does not mean that events that exceed their place cannot occur; novelty of all kinds may emerge from a place when those there gather.

⁹ Annette Weiner pioneered discussion of space and gift in her *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Giving-While-Keeping* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁰ On this conception of place although without attention to the gift, see Jeff Malpas, *In the Brightness of Place: Topological Thinking in and after Heidegger* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022).

¹¹ Max Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History and Theories of Space in Physics* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1954).

¹² Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2009).

Gifts make place by going from somewhere to another and in their offering sustain a relation.¹³ To give to another makes, alters, or destroys a relation between giver and recipient that initiates the time in place which lurches toward the recipient's act to either give back, give on to yet others, or refuse to accept the gift offered in the first place. The gift, the third, then mediates the two, the giver and the recipient, in order to then discover the place constituted by their relation and activities. The recollection of a gift given draws a relation that constitutes a place between the two, no matter if separated by spatial distance or by generations. Thus, the Evening Star, despite its distance from the Earth, illuminates walkers at twilight, opening a specific place. Others can join that place; indeed, the Evening Star can offer itself again but that place when without one's companion may never arrive again.

Promises give place differently than gifts because they require the testing and trust of the agents in the location. Promises are not the sort of gift that is given without address indeed, are merely words or that specific offering, if those promised do not trust. The Lord's Supper is the preeminent place of promise: in this gathering, Jesus gives his own body and blood, which are themselves the token or downpayment by which God promises the joining of heaven and earth. They are a foretaste of the feast to come.

The place of the Lord's Supper joins its promise to the gathering of the baptized with their gifts and offerings, wider places connected. The Supper renews and sustains the relations constituted by the act of baptism. To adapt Eriugena's formulation to fit promise, the place of the assembled baptized is the place of the many gifts of creation and existence that are then gathered into the promise that God makes in the Lord's Supper. Gift and promise circulate together since God addresses this promise to the world, to creatures, to the cosmos. After all, the Supper takes place in the act of betrayal, on the eve of Jesus's crucifixion. Cross, trial, Gethsemane, and the singularity of each and every place meet in the place made by the Supper's promise.

The Supper is a place that gathers creatures to share in Jesus's relation to God. This relation, which consists itself of the multiplicity of affections, events, and actions that constitute Jesus's own history, is promised in the Lord's Supper. By eating and drinking in trust, one is

¹³ Walter, 81–87.

promised God's own life, itself no longer outside of a place but directly traced within it by virtue of the Supper and the assembly of the baptized. This promise is not fulfilled immediately, for if it was, the Supper would be simply a gift. Rather, the Triune God's own unbounded life as promised addresses and engages the variety of relations that occur in that place, constituted by the various gifts and creatures there assembled. This embrace occurs with more and different places, place to place as God's promise is recollected, repeated, and offered again.

Hope therefore gets its orientation in the place constituted by the promise God makes in Jesus. It exists in and from the various networks of relations that make us up in a particular place. It belongs to the gathered voices crying out. Places are not merely benign since the various travails that they suffer cause harm as much as weal.

Hope begins in the relation that Jesus bears with him in his body and blood. Hope comes to pass in place by its call to the Triune God trading on that God's promise. I intend this reversal of call to attend to the way that the place of hope not only gets substance by the Spirit of God but also by the call made by those in a place to the Triune God. This call is made in the petition for daily bread. It is a plea to God from within the life the promise God offers. In no way is this unusual to call on God in this way. Such cries are not alien but proper to the relation of the Son to the Father. Jesus calls on God to the point of weariness, indeed even expressing the freedom to petition God to release him at Gethsemane and the cry of dereliction when dying on the cross.

Since the promise of God joins a place with all its history, sorrow, and joy, it does so as a promise among gifts but in an exceedingly weak way. The promise of the kingdom of God does not compare well to other gifts in a place because though what it promises exceeds creation, the tokens offered are meagre. God's act in giving the body and blood of Jesus does not overwhelm the already extant gifts nor magically transform them. God's promise is but one offering among many. That means that it joins the dispute and cacophony of demands, gifts, and hopes in a place. To treat it otherwise would embrace an authoritarianism or pretend it was a gift that leaves all in God's thrall.

While the specificity of relations and place make for a singular determination of the kinds of hope fit hope in God, several hermeneutical consequences concerning hope can be made explicit. First, as Origen pointed out, hope is hope in God. That hope depends upon the credibility and plausibility of the God who promises. While God

may indeed give without our asking, as Luther explained, in order for that God to have consequence for and in us, God has to fit the place. The fittingness of God to a particular place does not simply mean to satisfy the desires or fulfill the specific hopes of the human beings who dwell there. It might mean that but since a place is a gathering, that place accommodates many different arrangements of God's address and the many claims about God implicit in that address. God's promise in raising Jesus from the dead depends on the love that God is. That claim that God exists and that God is love are no doubt contentious in a place. God's promise is given to those who gather in the Lord's Supper, and its speaking allows baptized to test the promise, try it out, and consider their experience in light of that promise. This means that the credibility of God's promise depends not just on the promise considered as a past event or as background scenery. Its credibility depends upon the act of recollection and announcement of that Supper, Jesus promise and testament of himself. Hope depends upon liturgical practice to address affective life as much as on theological argumentation.

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Second, a proper hope offers the conception of a world created by God to its recipients that is both a single and open world. The God who promises is the God who gives. Thus, the world is creation and is itself constituted both by the plethora of places that connect, overlap, and disperse and by their all existing as a gift of God. Places that have no connection whatsoever, constituted by entirely unique and singular moments of time that pass away, utterly private places that have emerged are all connected to each other because of God. Sharing in the relation of Jesus to God the Father means that the promise of

the Supper indeed gathers all to Jesus and therefore all to God just as disparate locales are all joined by their shared life as gift of God.

No matter what possibility exists in a place, whatever constraints exist in the form of social forces, nature's laws, or the kind of time one has to act, that possibility rests in another kind: that of God as creator and God as promiser. Hope depends upon what might be, including in a paradoxical sense, what is impossible. When God promises Jesus's body and blood, that promise allows for a different map of the locale, however that locale could be previously outlined. Thus, to hope affords one three possibilities joined together: that in a place, that made explicit in the contingency of the Creator, and that made possible by promise. Indeed, Sarah and Abraham encounter all three when they are visited by three strangers and are promised a son (Genesis 18:1–15).¹⁴ Their estimation of what is possible with YHWH is confronted by their contingency as creatures as much as the promise of a child.

Finally, our pleas for daily bread may be answered. But it remains to be seen whether others agree, how that plea might be answered, or if God might fulfill that petition.¹⁵ Such is the life of promise and of hope. ⊕

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¹⁴ Walter, *Being Promised*, 14–36.

¹⁵ I have explicated how theological claims and hopes enter public discussion in Gregory Walter, "Problems of a Theology of the Cross" in *Theology and Ethics for the Public Church: Mission in the 21st Century World*, eds. Samuel Yonas Deressa and Mary Sue Drier (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 189–204.