

## **Tough Hope**

A sermon preached by Reed Taylor at Westminster Church July 19, 2009  
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:28-31 and I Corinthians 13:11-13

It was just after noon on Friday, May 22. I was driving with my daughter Amy to the Mitchell Campus of Hospice Buffalo to join my wife Glynda, who had preceded us by ambulance to be admitted to the Hospice Inpatient Unit. As we turned from Como Park Boulevard into the parking lot, we saw an amazing sight—a large bank of greenery with a single word prominently displayed in contrasting white flowers. The word that greeted us as we came to help Glynda die was HOPE! I turned to Amy and remarked how odd it seemed to feature hope as the central mission of an agency devoted to life's final chapter. I think I said something like "I can't believe it. They can't be serious!"

But serious these people at Hospice are, as we were to find out. In the days that followed, each detail of care was centered on enhancing the quality of the remaining moments of life. The doctor's interview led off with the question of what Glynda's greatest priority was. When she answered that she wanted to stay lucid and aware, even at the expense of perfect pain management, she and the doctor worked through several options that did, in fact, achieve that objective. As nurses, assistants, and volunteers came and went every 15 minutes or so, their primary concern was to make the patient comfortable—changing bedding, repositioning pillows, helping her turn for easier breathing, and massaging her arms and legs with fragrant oils. The staff provided a "boom box" on which we played some Gregorian chants that Glynda loved, and when evening came I was given a cot to sleep on right next to her bed. I could hold her hand and speak to her during the night; she never felt abandoned.

So where was the hope? This experience has led me to re-calibrate the meaning of "hope" in terms of comfort, dignity, presence of a loved one, transition without fear—truly honoring God's gift of life by ensuring its highest quality, even as its duration diminished. Thus within the life that was left, one had hope for the best that life could offer. Hospice was right—this was truly a place where "Hope Lives." I thought back to the hope-centered miracle of Roswell Park, where six years earlier the prognosis of incurable cancer was followed by an aggressive series of cutting-edge therapies all focused on maintaining quality of life and extending that life.

In the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Chapter 10, “that ye may have life, and have it more abundantly.” These lovely people at Roswell and Hospice were actually pointing to the re-calibration of “hope” proclaimed in Scripture. The once-inevitable link between disease and death, met for centuries by shunning and despair, has been broken for most diseases by our modern success in fighting illnesses—including many cancers. Today a patient may live in re-calibrated hope as researchers attack with serious hope even a cancer that has spread and is presently judged incurable.

What a revelation! I started to think about how easily and loosely we throw around the word “hope” every day—hope you feel better, hope it doesn’t rain for the Bills’ game, hope I get that job, hope the plane makes its connection, hope those church pledges come it, etc. Driving downtown the other day I saw banners along the street with the word “hope” in huge vertical letters. At a stoplight I read the smaller print, and learned it was the slogan for the Catholic Charities drive, implying that money would help provide hope by addressing needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Hope is, indeed, in the air. I thought a bit more about this idea of “easy hope” and discovered that in my own life I had entered the realm of its opposite—“Tough Hope.” Hope for the hopeless? Hope for those living lives of “quiet desperation,” as Thoreau described people in despair? Those like the antihero the French existential writer Albert Camus portrayed in *The Stranger* as “*desespoir*”—without *espoir*, hope? Hope, indeed, for one facing certain death?

We need to take a closer look at John 10, verse 10. Jesus says he came so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. Let’s not forget that the abundant life is tied to the coming of Jesus into our lives, putting us into the larger embrace of God our Creator. The prophet says in Isaiah 40, verse 31, “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.” These are some of the beautiful and comforting words shining forth from our faith tradition. We can cite many other ringing affirmations of hope in the midst of our despair. But is this an easy hope to bring into our broken lives? Can the person lost in addiction hope for such hope? Can the evicted homeowner, or the jobless or the bereaved? How do we get from existential despair to God-centered hope?

It’s not easy; it’s tough—like the tough tension of real faith and the tough love that challenges both the one loving and the one loved. The middle term of Paul’s triad in the Corinthians passage, hope, is just as tough as these

other two. Many of us are poorly equipped for this mortal combat, relying on the favorite hymns, aphorisms, and biblical snippets imported into our complex adult lives from a simpler childhood. It's time to "put away childish things," as Paul says in today's lesson. All of us need to upgrade our faith to strengthen our spiritual muscles. All of us need the discipline of regular prayer, the broadening of serious reflection and conversation with others in the faith, the prodding of adult education such as our wonderful Case Library Summer Series—where the message of hope as embodied in the book of Revelation is on the docket for next Sunday at 8:45.

Fifty years ago I got part-way through the Pastoral Ministry program at Yale Divinity School, until I got scared away by the demands of the then-current "neo-orthodoxy" that expected me to come up with a fully-articulated and deeply-held belief rooted in the formulas and doctrines of revered church fathers. I just couldn't imagine myself—then a "low-church, social-gospel Congregationalist"—standing before a congregation that expected me to believe on their behalf all the stuff that they couldn't affirm. One of the intellectual experiences that pushed me over the edge was the appearance in those years of theologian Karl Barth's exhaustive (and exhausting!) multi-volume treatise entitled *Church Dogmatics*. I was a nice guy who didn't think it was polite to be dogmatic about anything, and I was offended even before I tried to read my assignments. I opened the book and read the introductory statement, which went something like this: "For centuries we have looked at God from man's point of view. It is my purpose in these volumes to look at God from God's point of view." "Well," in the words of Huck Finn, confronted by his failure to receive fishhooks after he had prayed for them in a closet, "that let me out!" There was simply no room in my world from such arrogance.

What I failed to notice, probably because I read the rest of my assignments in these books "under protest," was that the shortfall in faith common to most of us—me especially—came from our insistence in defining our relationship to God in human terms. We defined the nature of God; we inferred from our human ways of hoping what it meant to have hope in God. We hoped for fishhooks—or that new job, or a miracle in medicine, or getting a grip on our addiction or on a failed relationship—and became vulnerable to disappointment when our "easy hope" expectations weren't fulfilled. Of course, what was wrong was that we were dictating the terms of success, we were doing the gripping. Still, we were disappointed that things didn't go our way.

But whose way is it, after all? Our belief should lead us to the conviction that God is in charge. “It is He who hath made us, and not we ourselves,” as Psalm 100 reminds us. I recall visiting in the home of a loved one who was celebrating nearly twenty years of sobriety in an AA program. She had little sticky-notes pasted up over the sink, on the refrigerator, and in the bathroom. Many of them simply said, “Let go, and let God.” What a wonderful summary of this meditation on tough hope. Just when we get to the end of our human-defined limits of hope, just when we are plunged into despair, into a life of quiet desperation, we are given the grace of the Holy Spirit to turn away from our childish ways, to re-calibrate our sense of hope, and indeed, look at God from God’s point of view. Early on in our cancer journey, Glynda and I learned—with the help of Doug King in many visits to our home and amid many bedtime tears afterward—to pray that God be with us, to trust in the comfort and strength of our Creator, and ultimately to let go, and let God. At the end, we were comforted in the Hospice room by Tom Yorty’s presence and prayers that invited us to relinquish the flood of fears and enter God’s realm on His terms, aware that the point of hope is in the having. May we all here this morning continue to grow in our capacity to hope, guided by our Creator as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.