

“Seeds of Hope”  
May 17, 2020

Ezekiel 17:22-24  
Mark 4:26-34

To the list of things we once took for granted that are now in scarce supply during the pandemic—toilet paper, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, flour, and yeast, to name a few— we can now add seeds. It seems that many people have decided that the best way to insure food in the coming months is to grow their own. So there has been a run on seeds.

I guess that’s a good thing, in a way—self-reliance, an independent, robust agrarian spirit even in the city and the suburbs.

But as with so many things in these days, it seems to be driven more by fear of scarcity than in expectation of abundance.

There was an old member of the old church I served in Connecticut who lived in the middle of town on what used to be a farm. He still had a good amount of land around his house and all summer long he sold plants out of a barn that, surprisingly, didn’t collapse when the wind blew on it. One year in the early spring I was visiting him and he said, “Let me show you something in the basement.”

Now, he dealt in antique glass and rare books, so I began to image the wonder that he might show me—a beautiful vase, some ancient tome.

We went down this rickety staircase into what was one of those New England basements that had only a dirt floor. In several musty rooms there were lights glowing above tables that were filled with various sized flats filled with potting soil. A few already showed signs of life pushing upward from the countless seeds he had planted. Both of us were delighted at these harbingers of new life.

He had “faith in a seed,” as Thoreau put it. He looked at seeds and was “prepared to expect wonders.”

What are we planting in this pandemic spring?

What wonders do we expect?

Certainly these are times when we question what God is doing, when we puzzle over what we might do.

Discerning what God is doing in the world and in our lives and our congregation is difficult work. Try as we will, as the author of Ecclesiastes tells us, we cannot find out what God is doing from the beginning to the end. We have to be content with seeing only a short distance ahead, like traveling in a car down a winding road at night.

When asked about God, Jesus wasn't direct, but instead pointed to those things that were known, those things that were seen, those things that were common to everyone's experience. More often than not, this meant that Jesus spoke about things in nature.

The first step in our search for God is not to remove ourselves from the world, but to immerse ourselves in the life that is all around us.

Jesus tells of a sower spreading seed on the ground, something many of us have either done or watched. We hear of the earth, how, with the blessing of the rain and the sun, it produces "of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

Just as slowly and surely the tiny mustard seed grows to become the greatest of all shrubs, providing shade and shelter for even the large birds.

Common, ordinary events. Yet in watching these events we begin to see the slow but sure work of God in the world. Seeds are sown and a plant grows—constantly, usually imperceptibly.

What do we do in times like these?

We hope.

In these difficult days, I remember the words of the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel: "An individual dies when he or she ceases to be surprised. I am surprised every morning that I see the sunshine again. When I see an act of evil...I'm still surprised. That's why I'm against it, why I can *hope* against it. We must learn how to be surprised, not to adjust ourselves. I am the most maladjusted person in society."

Our governor tells us repeatedly that we must "learn to live with Covid-19."

Heschel calls us to being maladjusted, not to "live with it."

Heschel calls us forward into hope.

It is time once more to recover hope in a world that can seem hopeless.

It is time to recover hope in a time that is creating so much despair.

Hope asks the question: "What kind of future are we building for ourselves?"<sup>1</sup>

In other words, hope is not about positive thinking or wishing hard that something might happen.

Hope asks about what we are *doing*.

There are many people who are not wasting time during this pandemic. They are working relentlessly to build the kind of world that they want. Each day they seek to roll back the regulations that have given us clean air and clean water; each day they seek to take away health care from millions of people; each day they seek to eliminate the protections of Social Security. They are acting.

So the questions come to each of us as individuals and all of us as a congregation:

What seeds are we planting and tending in these days?

What kind of future are we working toward today?

What action can we take—even now—to make real the great hope within us?

What seeds are you planting in these bleak days?

What is your hope?

Hope is the vision of what *can be* in the future that empowers us to act in the present. In hope we show just how maladjusted we are to the hatred and the death that is so apparent right now.

Hope is tenacious, enduring—it lives with promises deferred out of the faith that a small seed planted will grow and flourish.

In all the chaos and upheaval and turmoil in our individual lives, in our national life, and in the lives of the nations, hope is always a possibility for our lives.

When developing hope in our lives, we begin in the present.

In difficult times we ask a lot of questions. I once read a list of what were called the “four *worst* best questions.” These questions are:

What are my problems?

What are my needs?

What are my concerns?

What are my weaknesses and shortcomings?

Start by asking these questions, and you’ll end with a bountiful harvest of despair, depression, and despondency.<sup>2</sup>

When looking for a way through these very difficult days, I invite you to start instead with your strengths, with what you have, with your opportunities. In difficult times, these are the things you most need to know: your strengths, what you have, your opportunities. With them in mind you can ask the question of hope: “Where am I headed?”

Hope has a destination, an end result toward which we work.

“Hope does not disappoint us,” Paul writes. He doesn’t say: “Our hopes are not disappointed.” He knows, as you know, that they can be and often are. Quite often we are disappointed. But as the theologian Patrick Henry reminds us: “Genuine hope, even if it is crushed, does not disappoint, however, because it is grows from the conviction that we have what we need—that we are at all times held in the love of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Hope, as one of our members says, is not a strategy.

But hope as a way of life does not disappoint.

We are invited to live in hope—to live with the conviction that there is a future to build; with the conviction that we *are* going somewhere.

Hope begins in the present.

Hope sets our sights on the future.

When the present is filled with shadows, we look into the distance.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman tells the story of a man who had a rare form of cancer and needed surgery. The survival rate for the surgery was twenty percent. The patient said that he wanted to be part of the twenty percent. He proceeded with the surgery without prior consultation with family or friends. He was back at work in a month.

Friedman asked the man if he had ever heard about the USS Cruiser *Indianapolis*. He hadn't. Maybe you have. After delivering the atom bomb, the cruiser sank in the Pacific. Suddenly struck by enemy fire, the ship went under, sending 800 sailors into the ocean. Before long, sharks encircled them. Every so often a sailor would swim toward the sharks and give himself up.

How, Friedman asked, could the man explain why some survived. "Those guys who swam away," the man replied, "They didn't have a future."<sup>4</sup>

When the waves and the sharks are fierce, hope gives us a horizon on which to set our sights. When we seem to have nothing at all, hope gives us the future with its limitless possibilities and opportunities.

Hope is the bird, the saying goes, hope is the bird that *feels* the light and sings while the dawn is still dark.

Hope sets our sights on the future.

Even now, especially now, we can choose to be people of hope and plant seeds for the future that we want. We can gather up our strengths, our resources, and our opportunities and move toward the future God desires for us. The seeds that we are planning now, in our pandemic spring, will grow toward a harvest when we emerge from these long and uncertain and isolated days.

Somehow, we as a congregation know this. The conclusion of the history of this congregation that was written a couple of years ago puts it this way: "Our legacy is not about rigid traditions, dogma or rituals. Our legacy...is organic, a living entity, a tool for the future."

Organic. Living. Looking toward the future.

Seeds are scarce.

Have faith in the seeds that you have.

Expect wonders.

Let us wisely plant and tend the seeds of hope that we have.

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<sup>1</sup> Page: 1

Kennon Callahan, 'Hope, ' in *Twelve Keys for Living*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Page: 1

Patrick Henry, *The Ironic Christian's Companion*

<sup>4</sup> Page: 1

Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*