

Living in Hope Amidst Trials: A Woman's Voice from Central America

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I am very grateful for the invitation to write for the *Journal for Preachers* in the wake of my experience in Atlanta as a Campbell Scholar. In our theological and pastoral reflections on the mission of the Church in an age of religious violence, the dynamic between despair and hope appeared as a very strong element.

In Central America, preaching hope is very important, occupying a central place in worship and feeding the life of the congregation. Preaching provides hope to men and women whose priority is to survive. The last decades have affirmed that preaching impacts the transformation of communities. That means preaching must motivate us to change our vision of the world (local and global) and it must also conduce us to take action. Our actions or praxis have a political dimension in our context. Real preachers live in a real world with hope in action (it is impossible to understand hope without praxis) proclaiming together with their congregations that another world is absolutely possible. To preach hope in the midst of trials such as those in Nicaragua or other countries that are living in danger has a social and communitarian dimension. This is the reason hope is our theme for preaching, focused and shaped by social reality. But preaching about hope also gives shape to this social reality. From my experience as a theologian who preaches, I would like to suggest some insights in relation to hope.

Hope Amidst Uncertainty

Human life unfolds in the midst of uncertainty, in spite of our search for whatever certitude and safety the prevalent political-economic system might offer. For believers in Nicaragua—men and women—faith plays a leading role in helping us in our personal and collective day-to-day living. We have confronted very many difficult events: civil strife, earthquakes, commercial blockade, floods, droughts, and hurricanes, all of them with tremendous social and psychological consequences. That is the reason our hope—in God's company and justice—is lived in the context of experiences of love, pain, fear, joy, and sharing. Freaser Watts brings us a wonderful description of hope: "Hope characteristically occurs in situations of darkness or uncertainty in which optimism would be impossible or out of place. We normally only hope for what is important for us." But what is important for North American churches? What is the source of hope for your congregations and your leadership?

I suggest two theological resources in relation to these questions. First, people of God have a powerful paradigm of a pilgrim church that is walking to redemption in God. This is not an escapist attitude or installed vision; it is a people walking with other people in hope in the midst of darkness. We are walking and we are proclaiming reconciliation, peace, and justice for a broken world. But we need hope to proclaim and to act in a new world. Without hope, it is absolutely impossible to maintain our struggle in the midst of violence, indifference, and other wrong choices that seduce us to turn back. To be a pilgrim church exposes us to misunderstanding and marginalization, but it is a church that walks peacefully because we follow Jesus Christ, our reason for

hope. Second, a tapestry of hope instead of a tapestry of fear is a beautiful and attractive image to express communitarian hope. Communities in the global and local context have different colors, texture, and design. In a time of universal fear we are invited to proclaim hope. We are challenged in the midst of fear to weave a tapestry of hope because Jesus told us, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn 15:7b). The most basic human actions, from loving to expressing feelings, are directly inhibited by fear. Some have called this the age of fear, of paralysis and anxiety. The places where women and men live their lives are turning into spaces where identity is denied, where relationships are not formed, into communities that are a-historical, i.e. without memory or values. To weave a tapestry of hope, it is necessary to build a memory of hope. This memory is not only constituted by biblical paradigms but also by the concrete lives of men and women living in hope and acting based on the grace of God for humanity. We are talking about a tapestry of hope tied by solidarity; this solidarity helps us to "synchronize" ourselves in time and space with those who suffer. This struggle to create spaces of solidarity and commitment is exhausting; we have the right to feel tired in our weaknesses and frailties (I Co 1:26-31).

Hope as Memory

Telling our stories and sharing personal descriptive histories are valuable ways to build our memories and hope. A great number of women and men among us have learned with vehement perseverance to build, through the constant exercise of test and trials, a hope that is against every hope. I want to share the story of Elba Maria. She is fifty-five years old, but she has become old prematurely, and looks as if she were ten years older than she is. A widow with six grandchildren, she sells fruit and candy in my church's school. She has an illness that produces ulcer scars on her legs and does not permit her to stand for long or to walk very much. Her sales job requires lots of energy, but nevertheless she lives hoping that God accompanies her in selling fruit and candy as well as consoling her in the illness that seems not to have any cure. How can she do that? Elba Maria is a woman who hopes, as Paul's and Peter's writings tell. Her hope is a vehement day-to-day hope, because many painful years have taught her to persevere with hope: through love lived in the midst of our faith community, through our prayers for her health, and through her sharing of her own meager resources since she is the first person in the congregation who always is a contributor when a solidarity offering is called forth.

Like many other women, Elba Maria teaches us that miracles are lived daily in order to sell and get money, to ask for community prayers for her health, and to get consolation when losses are lived. The witness of women hoping even against all hope nurtures the faith of the community and encourages us to enjoy daily the fidelity and the responsibility of our lives as believers in a context in which hopelessness, disenchantment, and renunciation of dreaming for the future usually become the imposed order of the day.

A Pedagogy of Hope

I think Romans 5:1-5 contains a pedagogical process for understanding hope in God. I agree with Justo González, who says hope is rooted in the authority of Scripture. This pedagogical process presents us with the following: "We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God...we also boast in our sufferings, *knowing* that suffering

produces endurance. And endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us." Paul deals with issues of suffering and hope. Paul begins, "Therefore, since we are put in right relationship to God by faithfulness, we have peace with God." Paul's combination of righteousness and peace is familiar from Psalms 72:7 and 85:10, and from Isaiah 32:17. God's righteousness in Christ not only leads to peace with God but also means reconciliation, to hope and rejoicing in the midst of suffering. I emphasize "knowing" because this cycle is pedagogy for life, pedagogy of suffering that produces endurance, character, and hope. It is grace! But this pedagogical process or pedagogy of heart, as Paulo Freire could call it, is made possible by God's love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Simone Weil said: "It is not because God loves us that we must love him. It is because God loves us that we must love ourselves...How can one love oneself without this motive?"

Conclusion

Our lives may change in a moment. In order to recognize the temporality of our existence, even with its limits, we require hope, which is an indispensable factor, in order to continue struggling. I have been learning to persevere and to affirm that in the midst of pain. I can also find joy and can continue reaffirming my "believer woman character," looking forward to a just future. I mean that my existence is open to life itself even in the face of its unpredictable aspects.

The aboriginal Aymaras from Bolivia use the term *pachacuti* to explain this abrupt change in time and space. Believers everywhere are challenged to accept that *pachacuti* in hope. That hope that is lived against all hope is a hope in God's justice and mercy and the possibilities of humankind's solidarity. In the midst of tests and trials we live in hope, affirming a vehement and compassionate faith. Perhaps our prayer as the Church ought to be, as the Latin American song tells us, "Let us not make faith fall, let us not make hope fall."