

Prayer: Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and Deliver us from fear.

Can you think of time when you heard a song, and it was so moving, it spoke to you so deeply, that you can right now, even in this moment, remember - even still hear the music and words? I remember the first time I heard the hymn, "My Hope Is Built." I'm sure I heard it before this. But the first time I remember hearing this hymn, I was sitting in worship at Duke Chapel. I was in near the front, in the chairs with the college students. That particular Sunday there was an African American boys choir. They started worship by singing an a cappella version of this hymn. I still remember the way the slowed down and sped up the tempo. How some phrases were softer and others reverberated with sound. I can close my eyes and listen - and still hear it - the spiritual power of the boys singing this hymn - My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay. On Christ the solid rock — they help out that word - rock I stand. And then faster, "all other ground is sinking sand, and then more slowly, all other ground is sinking sand. Today we are talking about hope - God's hope that does not disappoint us - God's hope that grows in the space that fear once lived.

In the ancient world view of the Bible, fear has two meanings. There is "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs 9:10) In this sense, "fear" means "awe" and "wonder." It's the absolute respect of God because we know that God is God and we are not. This fear of God - reverent awe of the Holy One - is a starting place that begins to open our hearts and minds to God, and to devote ourselves to God and to God's way. This is the fear of God that expands our hearts. ([Amazing Grace](#) p. 144-145 Kathleen Norris)

The word fear has mostly lost this ancient association. Today, people generally associate fear with harm. When we are afraid, we are worried and anxious that something bad will happen to us and to the people we love. Fear causes us to contract. We lock the doors, pull down the window shades. Fear shrinks our hearts, shuts us down and closes us up. When God says, "Fear Not!" the fear becomes not. Nothing. (KN, [AG](#), p. 144) "Fear Not!" the angel told the shepherds. "For I am bringing good news of great joy for you and all people." (Not some people. All people.) Fear Not! the angel told Mary. (Luke 1-2) Fear Not! The angel told Joseph. (MT 1) Fear Not reminds us to stand tall! Shoulders back! Head up! After all, You are a Beloved Child of God! L Fear Not! As we hear the words, speak and pray the words, release the fear. It becomes nothing. Gone. In fears place, hope begins to grow.

The Bible is big on hope. In Psalm 130, we prayed, "My soul waits for the Lord and in God's word I hope." (130) Other Psalms pray similarly. " Hope in God, for I will again praise him." (42) And now O God what do I wait for, my hope is in you." (39) I will hope continually and praise You yet more and more. (71) What is hope? It's defined as "leaping into expectation." ([dictionary.com](#)) For Christians and people of conscience, hope is a looking forward to that which is not yet realized, and yet will be. To hope is to look forward to the future God promises. Christians, people of conscience hope in the future that God shows us on Easter morning. People return to God's garden. The tomb is empty. Life overcomes death. The worst thing is not the last thing. (Buechner) This is God's future of shalom - instead of enemies - where the lion and lamb lie down together. This is God's future of abundance instead of scarcity - where the bread and fish feed everyone, leftovers to spare. This is God's future of forgiveness instead of vengeance, reconciliation instead of retaliation, enough for all instead of opulence for a few, community instead of isolated individuals. This future, God's kingdom vision, grounds our hope and makes it possible to trust and commit to what can be.

To hope in God's future, people of faith often have to repent. In both the gospels of Mark and Matthew God named Jesus begins his ministry with the words, "Repent and believe in the gospel." Repent. Literally, the word means to turn around, to go in another direction. Recently I learned the deeper meaning. To repent is to think differently. It is "[to embark upon a way that goes beyond the mind that you have.](#)" (Borg, [The Last Week](#), p. 25) Think about this. To repent is to go beyond the mind that you

have. For people of faith and conscience this is to go beyond the cultural mindset of fear - to chose again and again to live from God's love, in a community that practices forgiveness and is committed to God's future, hopes in God's future.

This is a future that in part people of faith and conscience make together with God and each other. God constantly invites and asks us to be co-creators with God to build God's kingdom on earth.

What does hope look like, really? feel like, actually? Perhaps this is a place for the tradition of witness. Of telling stories that describe the hope that does not disappoint.

Hope moves people to action.

After the November election, I read about a woman who decided to writer a letter to every Muslim in her town. In each letter she wrote, "You are a valued child of God. Here's my phone number. Let me know if I can be helpful to you in this time... I speak to you in the name of Christ who loves you and has given me responsibility for you." (Willimon, A Peculiar Prophet, 12/19/2016) It sounds similar to the Christians at Maple Grove UMC reaching out to their Muslim neighbors and having a potluck supper. Hope in God's future moves people of faith and conscience to reach out to all people.

Hope moves people to reconciliation.

Most weeks I read a magazine called, "The Week" a recap of the news from the previous seven days. Last week a story entitled, "Letting go of the hate." (exert from the Washington Post, The Week p. 40-41, 1-13-2017) It told of two people at a political rally last spring. One hit the other, and nine months later they saw each other again in court. But this time, it was different. When it was time to speak, the defendant said, "I'm extremely sorry this happened." and "You and me, we have to heal our country." They shook hands. Then they embraced.

To follow God named Jesus is to move from fear that terrifies us into love that frees us.

As we move forward, people of faith and conscience, citizens of this country, may we put our hope in nothing less than Jesus. In the morning when we rise, give us Jesus. When I am alone, give me Jesus. When I come to die, give me Jesus. May it be said that in this time, at this moment, we are standing on the solid rock of God's hope where we will act from love.

(Ezra ... Give Me Jesus)