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AWARE OF HOPE "In his word I hope....Hope in the LORD!" (Ps.130 NRSV)

A sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost '97,
using these ecumenical readings for that Sunday: Ps.130; 2Cor.4.13-5.1; M.3.20-21,31-35

One day last week, as I was looking down gardening, I heard just above me the loudest, most lovely birdsong I'd heard this spring. A Baltimore oriole, hopping from branch to branch, was expressing in beauteous song whatever birds have that parallels what in us is joyful HOPE. (An odd ornithological fact: An oriole is a relative of the crow, which has no song but a squawk that only a mother crow could love.)

Immediately I thought of Thomas Hardy's late-life poem "The Darkling Thrush" that as a cold winter night came on sang heartily & happily, chosing "to fling his soul / Upon the glowing gloom" in nature & in the heart of the gloomiest of England's great novelists. These are the last two stanzas: "So little cause for carolings / Of such ecstatic sound / Was written on terrestrial things / Afar or nigh around, // That I could think there trembled through / His happy good-night air / Some blessed hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware [my underlining]."

Those two birds, together with Hardy's confession of unawareness of any "blessed hope," got me started on this sermon, whose theme idea is that we ought to use the brains & heart God has given us to examine not only hopes but also hopelessnesses.

1 To begin with, consider the fact that on the subject of this sermon, all of us who are past pimply puberty are experts. We have hoped aright, & it's come out right. We have victimized ourselves by unrealistic hopes: my homely Aunt Gert, a typist, set her cap (as the saying was) on the boss' son, who was tall, dark, & hardsome as well as rich; she never married, & died in a mental institution: she literally went crazy for the guy, instead of realistically concluding that her situation was hopeless, that her romance was all in her head as a Moloch-like devouring idol. How sad when your situation is hopeless & you can't or won't see it! Sometimes, paradoxically the rebirth of hope awaits the realization & admission that a particular situation or relation in life is hopeless.

But we have also victimized ourselves by concluding that some situation was hopeless, when redirecting our attention from supports for that belief to supports for its opposite would move us from despair that there's nothing we can do to seeing something hopeful we can do. Because the Bible is in the business of seeing something hopeful we can do, it often tightly ties hope in with faith--as Heb.11.1 puts it, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for" (NRSV; or "Faith is being sure of what we hope for" [NIV]). And as we all know, the Bible completes the trinity of Christian virtues by adding love--in the famous passage, 1Cor.13.13: "These three abide--faith, hope, & love; & the greatest of these is love." Why greatest? Because if our love energies are misdirected, as in the case of Aunt Gert, faith is deformed & hope dies.

Again, we've all had the experience of realistically hoping for something we shouldn't have--realistically, because if we hope hard enough, & align our other energies behind our hope, we'll get what we hope for, & it will curse us. Or perhaps it's something we should have later, but we spoil the whole thing by hoping without patience: we want the instant gratification of hope fulfilled here & now (contrast Ro.8.25: "wait for it with patience").

I suggest that you write a brief autobiography of hope, your personal history of hoping, & use it for prayerful self-examination. Using a copy of this sermon, list on the left side of a vertical sheet of paper all possible experiences of hope--those I've listed so far, & any others that come to mind. On the right hand side, next to each possibility, list, by cue words &/or dates, your parallel actual experience(s). Which were "global" *dreams*, which were focused *prayers*? When was it right/wrong to be hopeful/hopeless? When were you stuck on some old hope & were delivered by the expulsive power of a new hope? In each experience, what effect(s) did your hoping, or not hoping, have on other people?

2 Frequently I say to someone--sometimes someone I've just met--"How is it with God & you?" What ensues is never a dull conversation! My question for you now, as you look over your personal history of hoping, is this: *How has it been with God & your hoping?* In the Lord's Prayer, what does Jesus teach us to hope for, dream about, pray for? Now take each petition of the Lord's Prayer & think through your life-list of hope experiences. You'll find it a humble, but hopeful, exercise.

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3 Let's see where we are now on this sermon titled "Aware of Hope," a sermon on responsible hoping, a sermon on what we Christians are to hope for, & work toward, for ourselves & one another & the world. Often the NT says in various ways that Jesus Christ is our hope (Col.1.27; 1Tim.1.1), & sometimes it even says that we are "saved by hope" (Ro.8.24), though more often it says we are saved by faith & in faithful obedience to the double commandment of love--again our triad of Christian virtues--faith, hope, & love.

Responsible hoping includes attention to the pathology of hope, sick hope. In this century, over 100 million people have died from ideological diseases, especially communism, which fostered & forced **awareness** of its hope, which was found to be a mirage, an illusional oasis in a philosophical desert--&, by suppressing Christianity, hoped to produce **unawareness** of the reality of God & the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Scientism is another sick hope, that technological fixes will some day heal all our diseases & fulfil all our dreams. Carl Sagan, till the day he died, said he would believe in God if convinced by evidence; but he was running around in a circle: the only dimension of evidence he would accept was the one confirming his materialism & thus his atheism. Like Thomas Hardy, he was "unaware" of any "blessed hope."

4 The first scripture I read in this worship, Ps.130, is called "De profundis," the words with which the Vulgate version begins: "Out of the depths" of trouble the Psalmist cries out "In God's word I hope!" & preaches "Hope in the LORD!" God is his hope's focus, & God's word is its locus, the place to look for God & learn hope. Christians who do not daily expose themselves prayerfully to the Bible are in danger of weakening or even losing hope, of being overwhelmed by disappointment, doubt, & despair. Christians who gather to study the Bible together find their hope strengthening, their joy increasing, & their desire to witness to God by their words as well as their deeds coming alive....The second scripture I read, 2Cor.4.13-5.1, sounds the world's strongest note of hope, namely the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose death for us we have salvation & by whose resurrection we have the power to enter daily, & forever, through the gate of new life. (Alongside it, read Ro. 8.18-39, a familiar hymn of hope; & 1P.1.3.)....The third of today's scriptures, M.3.20-21,31-35, finds Jesus redefining family as the community of those who live hope by seeking & doing the will of God. Like joy, hope comes from caring action informed by the memory & retelling of the Great Story of God's power & purpose & promise & presence, the Story of the covenant people & of the kingdom to be "on earth as it is in heaven." Because of all this, we need not fall into anxiety-breeding helplessness or depression-spawning hopelessness. Even when our eyes are full of sunset, our hearts can be full of dawn. The early Christians outhoped their world: we are called, challenged, privileged, to outhope ours.

5 Back to the second bird I mentioned at this sermon's beginning. Gloomy Thomas Hardy's "darkling thrush" as night came on, flung "his soul against the growing gloom" in a "happy good-night" song of "ecstatic" "caroling," apparently aware of "some blessed hope" of which Hardy was himself "unaware." In his poem "The Impercipient," the author calls himself "a bird deprived of wings" but fails to be aware that he was *self*-deprived. But contrariwise, in his poem "Afterwards" he prides himself on noticing little things, such as the month of May's "glad green leaves like wings."

The bottom-line truth is that **awareness of hope**, the theme of this sermon, is largely a matter of decision. From our spring garden, day by day we are gathering flowers of many kinds & putting them in a jar on the kitchen table. We could use that same jar to gather garden pests--slugs & snails & skeeters (or as one of our garden books is titled, BUGS, SLUGS, & OTHER THUGS). We could put a lid on & sit down to dinner while contemplating our garden enemies slipping & crawling around inside the same jar that now holds flowers. The flowers we choose to gather & look at lift up our hearts to the Lord, but watching that concentration of slimy & chewy & sucky creatures would make us as gloomy as Thomas Hardy.

6 Finally, Hardy's thrush had a "blessed hope," a phrase used only once in the Bible available to him. I close by reading that passage, Tit.2.13: "We wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us...and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good [NIV]."