

LIVING HOPE

1 PETER 1:3-9

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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JANUARY 1, 2017/FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a **living hope**...*

A “living hope.”

New Years Day is a day that seems to me to be all about living hope. It is the day when our hopes for the future are most alive.

Hopes for our bodies... Maybe this will be the year we lose the weight and become more active! Maybe this will be the year when we leave behind some of the health challenges we’ve struggled with. Maybe this will be the year we kick the habit.

Hopes for our relationships... Maybe we want to become better spouses or friends or parents or neighbours.

Hopes for our jobs... Maybe we’ll commit ourselves to greater degrees of competence, maybe we’ll transition into something new.

Hopes for our spiritual life... maybe we’ll pray more... or read Scripture regularly... or journal regularly

Hopes for finding a more balanced life... maybe we’ve resolved to spend less time online this year... or to volunteer more... or to spend more time outdoors... or to read more books... or to have more face to face conversations and spend less time on our devices...

January 1 is often a day when our hopes are most alive.

Having said this, I confess that I have not often been fond of making New Years resolutions. I have tried and failed (and seen others try and fail) far too frequently to believe that swapping one digit for another on a calendar will magically make me a more disciplined, resourceful, and consistently loving person.

But lately I've been wondering about this refusal. Is my unwillingness to make New Years resolutions in some sense a failure of imagination, even a lack of faith?

Might I be too proud to have a living hope?

What are we saying when we wish each other a "Happy New Year," after all?

Yes, the expression is often a rather benign wish for pleasant experiences, good health, and the vague sentiment that we hope the coming 365 days will contain more things that make us feel good than things that make us feel bad.

And that's not particularly lofty or inspiring.

We're not exactly wishing character transformation and personal improvement, or refinement through suffering, or deep and lasting connection with God and neighbour for each other.

We're wishing each other happiness. Plain, nice, safe, non-threatening happiness.

But I think that behind our "Happy New Years!" is the conviction, the wish, the desperate and frantic hope that **genuine newness** *is* possible.

We know ourselves well. Too well. We know our dark secrets, the habits that eat away at our souls and our relationships, the private grudges we nurse, despite our best intentions.

We know that we are people who are at least as familiar with weakness and failure as we are with strength and victory.

We know the way things tend to go—the way things have gone in the past, and the way things will probably go in the future.

We know that we have not often proven up to the task of joyfully and confidently living as disciples of Jesus amidst the withering cultural winds of cynicism and despair and the myriad challenges of life.

But we also know that we need this rumour, this possibility, this hope, however faint, that things can change.

We know that even though oldness so often seems like all we know, newness is what we were made for.

We know that the God we follow after is a God of newness. We are just stubborn enough to believe in the possibility that the God who says, “Behold, I am doing a new thing!” might just be capable of doing it in us.

And so, we say “Happy New Year” and we make our resolutions, not because we are particularly virtuous or disciplined or because we have such an excellent track record, but because we believe, finally, that God loves us, that God has better hopes for us than we do for ourselves, and that God really can be trusted with all of our hopes, fears, frustrations, triumphs, setbacks, right steps, missteps, and half steps.

And because the swapping of a digit on a calendar is as good a reason as any to breathe new life into these hopes.

Living hope.

These two words point to a need that we have that will never go away.

And I do have hope, here at the outset of 2017.

My hopes have, I suspect, changed over the years. They seem a bit smaller. My hopes have become less about things *out there* than things *in here*.

Because I know that changes in here will be the only way that I will ever find my way through and contribute anything meaningful to out there.

So this year, I am hoping for little things. Little steps, little changes.

Not by magic, not without effort or struggle, not little miracle droplets that will float down from heaven to inhabit my mind. Nothing like that.

Nothing that will not involve me in deep and committed ways. But I am hopeful for little signs that the things that bring life will gradually, steadily, irreversibly come to be at home in me, in the way I live and move through 2017, however extraordinary or utterly ordinary it turns out to be.

Little things like...

Love. Grace. Patience. Kindness. Self-control. Gentleness. Peace. Joy! To forgive and to ask for forgiveness more easily and naturally.

Little things that actually aren't very little at all. Little things that are, in fact, among the biggest things any of us could hope for.

And my deepest hope is to be found with Christ and in Christ.

I long for the words of 1 Peter to be true of me

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

I hope that you hope for this same living hope.

I want to close with a prayer that I encountered a few weeks ago. It's a longer prayer, but we have time.

Some of the language and experiences of this prayer might not connect with you as it comes from a "higher church" tradition. It contains some pretty poetic, even flowery language, but hey, you braved the elements to come to church today, so you deserve some good words to take with you!

For me, this prayer speaks of a living hope.

It's called "Why I stay" by Debie Thomas.

I stay because A was for Adam, B for Bethlehem, and C for Cross, and my first classroom was a pew. Because I played hide-and-seek in the font when the preacher wasn't looking, answered every altar call with a sprint down the aisle, and snuck the leftover communion juice from the glasses the church ladies washed on Mondays. I was hoping—I understand this now—to steal a drop more of you.

Because decades later I'm still felled by stain glass; by musty old Bibles in empty, patient sanctuaries; by altar cloths, choir robes, and candle wax. Because my breathing slows in your house, my muscles unclench, and I remember how to sing loud and clear.

Because you are my rootedness, my air, my water. The dark and frozen ground in which I wait to crack open, die, and sprout. You are the closest I ever come to flourishing.

Because I love stories, and I cherish the ones I first learned in your book. Because I am Eve and the apple makes sense to me. I'm Rachel and I won't surrender my sacred objects. I'm Leah and I long to be loved. I'm Hagar, and I will name you in the desert. I'm Miriam and I am ever watchful. I'm the bleeding woman and I need the hem of your robe. I'm Mary Magdalene, and I must bear witness by your tomb. I'm Junia, and my story aches to be told.

Because childhood ends but childhood hungers do not. Because you were my first house, first father, first mother, first love, first hate, first heartbreak, first safety, first terror.

Because the psalmist got it right: I was cast on you from birth. Because Peter got it even better: Lord, if I left, to whom would I go?

Because I like questions, and it turns out that you ask good ones. Because I answer when you ask, and my answers never shock you.

Why are you so afraid? (Are you kidding me?)

Do you still not understand? (Nope, not even a little bit.)

What do you want me to do for you? (Um, how much time do we have?)

Do you want to get well? (Occasionally.)

Do you love me? (I think so. Or, I want to. Or, not yet. Or...)

How long shall I put up with you? (A little longer, please.)

I stay because sorrow came too many times this year, and there had better be an afterward to explain it. I stood at gravesides and raged, my body betrayed me to panic, and my children knew fear and pain. Bodies failed, minds cracked, and we didn't live happily ever.

I stay because all in all there are far too many unfinished stories, and I'd like to believe you're neater than that. Because I yearn for so much more than I have. Because my yearning comes from somewhere, and that somewhere must be you. Because "on earth as it is in heaven" is all I've got, and if it's not enough, then I am lost. Because "Death, where is thy sting?" is a mockery, but "Jesus wept" is not.

Because joy comes too, and it doesn't look anything like I think it should. Because you hound me, and I can't get rid of you. Because our pursuit of each other is exquisite in both directions—pleasure and pain.

Because rarely—too rarely, but I'll take what I can get—the veil parts, the ground gives way, the skies open, and my hunger for you intensifies to the breaking point of communion. The hunger itself becomes you: incarnate, shining, present. I know you then in the liturgy, in the word, in the broken bread and spilled wine.

I press my palms against ancient redwood trees, and you are there. You awe me in the mountains and at the shifting edges of the ocean. I hear you in the stillness of the forest, in the cacophony of birdsong. I feel you in the solid embrace of the people I love—their hands your hands, their eyes your eyes, their voices soft echoes of yours.

And in those moments the possibility of you grows and grows until I am unhoused and undone, almost too alive for this world.

Because you are my Everlasting Almost—almost here, almost certain, almost always, almost irrefutable. You are the tenuous edge I will live and die on. Because the almost of you—heartbreaking as it is—is sweeter than any guarantee I can find in this world.

Because you're not who I thought you were, so I must wait for revelation. Because the mystery of your strangeness is a lure that calls my name.

Because I thought I needed to contain you, but a tiny deity won't bend my knee.

Because the path is winding, and you are a God worthy of perilous journeys. Because I need to wrestle, and you meet me at the river.

Because this is no ordinary hunger, and your manna alone will suffice.

Because you know the loneliness of the desert, and so do I. Because I will drown unless you part this water. Because the world is dark, but it shimmers at its edges.

Because I'm wild inside, and you are not a tame lion.

Because you suffered, and only a suffering God can help. Because you spoke of joy and I need to learn how to laugh.

Because I am wired to seek you, and I will not let you go. Because my ache for you is the heart of my aliveness.

Because I am still your stubborn child, and I insist on resurrection.¹

Amen.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/why-i-stay-prayer>