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## **The Presence of Hope** (John 1: 4-6, 19-28)

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Our theme this Advent is ‘The Work of Love in the Face of Doom’. I’m conscious this is a fairly ‘heavy’ theme with which to end the year. It feels in tension, to say the least, with the trappings of the ‘festive’ season – the Christmas lights twinkling brightly, the carols and holiday preparations; at odds also with our liturgical anticipation of a birth, the ‘light of Christ breaking into the darkness’.

Yet for increasing numbers of us, I think, a sense of looming global catastrophe does make it difficult to enter blithely into this seasonal round. French scholar Jean-Pierre Dupuy writes of humanity’s ‘suicidal course’ towards a disaster comprised of ‘a whole system of disruptions, discontinuities, and basic structural changes that are the consequences of exceeding critical thresholds’.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to speak of the likely impact of climate change on patterns of migration, food and water security, and the violence such disruptions will precipitate. And it seems to me that to speak of the Advent of the Lord, without acknowledging the coming towards us of *this* possible future evades the necessary spiritual labour of this time.

So over these three weeks, we’re exploring how these advents intersect. How does our proclamation of God’s promised presence affect how we live at this time in the earth’s history? What difference might it make?

Last week, we focused on the work of faith. I spoke of how the advent of God to be with us in Christ creates our faith that unfathomable goodness is the source of all things and is, even now, actively seeking the world’s healing. Sourced in this faith, entrusting ourselves to this goodness, we’re able more fully to face up to what’s

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.22.

coming. Like John the Baptist, we may become those who cry out in solidarity and warning, calling a destructive culture to repent and pointing to the way of life. This week, I want to turn to the question of hope. What may we hope for in the face of doom? And how does the character of our hoping matter?

In relation to the climate crisis, I'm conscious of a tendency in myself to vacillate between hope and despair. Some days I feel OK – maybe it won't be so bad; maybe the worst can be averted – some new technology, some shift in political urgency, some slowing of the process. And on other days, I feel not at all sanguine – in fact, I feel fearful, sorrowful, helpless.

In his short novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Russian writer Leo Tolstoy offers a brilliantly insightful portrayal of a man vacillating in this space between hope and despair. Ilyich has fallen ill. He has some unspecified pain in his abdomen, which no doctor can reliably diagnose. At first, he doesn't think it's serious, but as the pain continues, he becomes worried. He attempts to carry on with his life as it's been till now, going to work, playing cards, performing the social obligations consistent with his station in life. But, with increasing frequency, his sense of 'normality' is disturbed by the pain in his side, the strange taste in his mouth.

He tries yet again to persuade himself that all is well. He performs a visualization exercise, imagining the re-establishment of 'normal activity' in his kidney or appendix and he takes his medicine: "Yes, that's it!" he said to himself. "One need only assist nature, that's all." He 'lay down on his back watching for the beneficent action of the medicine and for it to lessen the pain. "I need only take it regularly and avoid all injurious influences. I am already feeling better, much better.'" But then, writes Tolstoy, 'He put out the light and turned on his side ... Suddenly he felt the old, familiar, dull, gnawing pain, stubborn and serious. There was the same familiar loathsome taste in his mouth. His heart sank and he felt dazed'. His hope is revealed to have been empty – he's thrust back into despair.

The significance of hope in human life is a contested question. In relation to climate change, many believe that ‘hope’ is (as it was for Ilyich) a dangerous form of denial and evasion, wishful thinking that refuses to face up to the truth and respond accordingly. On this view, hope (too much of it at least) gets in the way. We are profoundly ‘lost’,<sup>2</sup> insists writer and activist Margaret Wheatley, and ‘our greatest tragedy is the absence of a sense of tragedy’.<sup>3</sup> Others argue, on the other hand, that cultivating our hope is vital if we’re not to give up entirely. One advocacy group, Climate Interactive, maintains that: ‘Recognizing the progress the world has made keeps us hopeful and avoids the feeling of helplessness that can stop us from moving forward and taking action. So Climate Interactive has been gathering reasons to be hopeful about the climate’.<sup>4</sup> And so it goes – to hope or not to hope, that is the question.

Or is it? Notice that so far I’ve portrayed hope and despair as responses to the perceived likelihood of certain outcomes. The prospect of all being well strengthens hope, the prospect of disaster engenders despair. But what if there’s a kind of hope that’s not connected in this way to outcome, and not something that’s up to us either to cultivate or abandon? And what if this is the hope we most need to connect with?

Cynthia Bourgeault has noted that in our biblical tradition, there are plenty of stories of hope tied to outcome. ‘In fact’, she writes, ‘you could almost say that the Bible is the history of one miraculous intervention after another to change the outcome, to create hope when things looked completely hopeless’.<sup>5</sup> She mentions the parting of the Red Sea, the rescues celebrated in the psalms, the healings and miracles wrought by Jesus. One difficulty presented by these stories, as we know from our own experience, is

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *So Far From Home: lost and found in our brave new world* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Toni Hassan, ‘Finding Hope Amid the Hopeless Doom of Climate Change’ <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/finding-hope-amid-the-hopeless-doom-of-climate-change-20171005-gyupsn.html> [accessed 15 December 2017].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Top 11 Reasons for Climate Hope’, <https://www.climateinteractive.org/blog/top-11-reasons-for-climate-hope/> [accessed 15 December 2017].

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Chicago, IL: A Cowley Publications Book, 2001), p.4.

that such interventions are not always forthcoming – an illness is not cured, the firestorm not quenched.

But there is, Bourgeault points out, ‘another kind of hope ... represented in the Bible that is a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. Beneath the “upbeat” kind of hope that parts the sea and pulls rabbits out of hats, this other hope weaves its way as a quiet, even ironic counterpoint’.<sup>6</sup> We see it sometimes in the prophets when, after a long litany of doom and grief, the prophet is suddenly filled with confidence and joy, the unshakeable conviction that despite everything God is present. Says the prophet Habakkuk: ‘Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord ... The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights’. (Habakkuk 3: 17-19).

Similarly, Job who has lost everything – wives, children, health – comes, after a long period of anger and lament, to the point where he ‘sits destitute amidst the wreckage of what was once his life, and sings: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19: 25-26)’. I think too of Julian of Norwich, that 14<sup>th</sup> century English mystic, living through the terrors of the Black Death and the Hundred Years’ War, who came to know in the depths of her being that, ‘All will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well’. And of Etty Hillesum on her way to death in Auschwitz writing to a friend that ‘life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good ... And if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything’.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of hope cannot be manufactured because it’s motivationally useful or in order to evade the truth of our situation; rather it dawns almost despite us, in the midst

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<sup>6</sup> Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomeranz (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.144.

of suffering. Bourgeault writes: 'It has something to do with presence – not a future good outcome, but the immediate experience of being met, held in communion, by something intimately at hand'.<sup>8</sup> This kind of hope is a gift of the Spirit – it's given not made.

'Among you stands one whom you do not know', John the Baptist said, 'the one who is coming after me'. That's the Presence. And I want to suggest that part of the spiritual labour of our time is to be open to the advent of this *gift* of hope – whatever the future holds. I don't know exactly what difference it makes – but that it makes a difference, I am sure. How do we become recipients of this gift? It's a fruit, I think, of the work of love, which we explore more fully next week.

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<sup>8</sup> Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope*, p.9.