

Angels of Hope
[Isaiah 2:1-5](#)
[Matthew 24:36-44](#)
[Romans 13:11-14](#)

One of the best things about our faith is that it has a way of launching us forward. That's what hope does. It gives us a reason for living on into the future.

Hope isn't the same as expectation. Expectations are more specific, in fact sometimes they can be confining. Like, if you expect to earn a certain amount of income, or live in a certain neighborhood, or get a certain job, you might really be disappointed if you do not succeed. You might even miss other opportunities while narrowly working toward your set goals. You might put unnecessary pressure on people around you, and you might end up feeling lousy about yourself if what you had expected doesn't materialize.

I have been reading Wendell Berry's books about farm life in Kentucky, where the author is from. His characters live in a close-knit rural community. They work hard, but they don't resent the work because they help each other. It's the life they have been given—that's the way they see it. They call the farm families that all live near one another—and some are related—their "membership." No one keeps track of favors back and forth within the "membership." Everyone shares and makes do. Hannah Coulter says, "Living without expectations is hard but, when you can do it, good. Living without hope is harder, and that is bad. You have to have hope, and you mustn't shirk it. Love, after all, "hopeth all things." But maybe you must learn, and it is hard learning, not to hope out loud, especially for other people. You must not let your hope turn into expectation" (*Hannah Coulter*, 146). Hannah has a way of loving her family members—both her own kin and especially the families she marries into. First she marries Virgil, who later is missing in action in World War II. Then she marries Nathan, who made it home from the War. She embraces both families she has married into and lives with an open-hearted sense of hope for all the best to transpire. Life is hard, but very happy because Hannah doesn't worry about what ought to happen. I'd like to be like Hannah.

So, I wonder what you expect. Maybe you expect your kids to come home for Christmas. (And maybe they will or maybe they won't.) Isn't it better just to hope that the holidays will be a happy time? Maybe you expect to receive a certain gift for Christmas. But isn't it better just to hope that your family members will all express love for each other? Maybe you expect someone to have a certain response to your gift. But isn't it better just to know you did the best you could in choosing the gift and that that's good enough?

Hope is more like an attitude than a concrete notion of what will happen. It's the attitude of goodness coming. We cultivate hope here at church. It's the central idea of our faith, beginning with Advent and culminating in Resurrection.

The way we observe Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas, is a rather curious practice, when you think about it. It's peculiar because we are waiting for something that has already happened. We come together now—in the present—to ponder the past, in

order to live into the future with hope. Advent plays on our notion of time! We know that a man named Jesus of Nazareth was born way back in Roman times, and we are thinking about his coming as if he hasn't been born yet. Every year we begin the story of his life again. Time has a way of stopping, as we experience once more what it is like to be "living in the wilderness between what was and what will be" (Matt Rowle, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7850/here-but-not-yet-the-feeling-of-advent?spMailingID=82996&spUserID=Mzk4NjU0Mjg0S0&spJobID=180106320&spReportId=MTgwMTA2MzIwS0>).

And the present is a wilderness of many unknowns. We have many health concerns in our church right now. At least 4 families have a loved one recovering from a stroke. We are asking ourselves, will the person regain full use of body and mind? At least 4 people have suffered recently from bouts with mental illness. They must be thinking: How much more can I take? Won't this go away? And at least 5 people have cancer and are currently in treatment or remission. We have seniors not knowing when to move into retirement communities. We have people looking for jobs and people struggling with the requirements of their jobs. We have people uncertain about where they will be next year, how they will earn a living, and what people they will be in relationship with. We have people in and out of hospice, not sure at all what to expect....I thought I was going to die, am I? Well, yes, we are all going to die, but we don't know when. If only we knew what to expect in life. But, really, we don't. And we have good things happening too: We have babies in our congregation and babies yet to be born. And we don't know what opportunities we will have or where life will turn. We don't know what to expect.

We have to live without expectation. But we don't have to live without hope.

Each week in Advent we are using one verse of the carol, "Angels We Have Heard on High." This carol is from 19th century France. It's likely from the countryside, from Lorraine or Provence, where there *are* shepherds in the fields. In French, the carol is called "Les anges dans nos compagnes," "the angels in our countryside" I like the way the French personalized this carol. The angels are not just in Bethlehem, they're in Southern France! The carol is thought to be a conversation between the shepherds and the village women. The first verse is the shepherds speaking:

Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plains,
and the mountains in reply echoing their joyous strains.
Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

We are used to singing this, but if you think of it as a spoken conversation, the shepherds might have run telling their wives and girlfriends, "Guess what? We heard angels singing in our field! And the sound—why it echoed across to the mountains and back: Glory to God in the highest!—Imagine!"

Were the shepherds expecting angels in their countryside that night? No! But they *heard* them.

What do we hear? What signs of hope do we hear as we watch and listen and wait?

The Prophet Isaiah heard many calls for hope: God would be established on the highest mountain, and everyone would gather there. God would judge the nations and tell them to "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks," so that "nation [would] not lift up sword against nation" (2:1-4). This is an aspirational hope for world peace. We need that peace today.

Matthew says that nothing is certain! Even the angels don't know the hour or the day to expect the coming of the Son of Man. Matthew makes it sound like it's humanly impossible to know when anything is going to happen—bad or good. We just have to be ready!

Ready for what? For the unexpected! And in the Book of Romans, Paul helps us know how to be ready. He says to "get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness." We are supposed to "put on weapons of light"—we could also call them "weapons of hope." As a shield from the darkness, we are to put on light, in the form of our behaviors. Paul instructs us not to party too much, not to get drunk, not to "sleep around or engage in obscene behavior"—I picked the *Common English Bible* because I figured a lot of people wouldn't know what "debauchery and licentiousness" meant.— We are to behave appropriately—not to fight or be obsessed with jealousy.

This is it—. There is nothing concrete to expect out of life, but there is plenty we can do to prepare ourselves for good things to come, if we have hope. Before we criticize others, we must ask ourselves, "Am I living my life according to the teachings of Jesus Christ? Am I living not according to my selfish desires, but for the common good?"

I remember a conversation with a teenager and her mother. The mother told me how her daughter had to have radiation and chemo for metastasized cancer. The girl was standing right there, and I turned to her and said, "It's going to be hard, isn't it?" She looked sad, and so I said, "And you're going to make the most of every day you have, aren't you?" And she smiled and said, "You bet." That's hope. And we can give each other hope. And as the Church of Jesus Christ we can be the hope of the world. And as progressive Christians we can give hope to our neighbors who are Muslim and to people who may not look like us, and to people who may not speak our language or even have the same opinions we have. We are the bearers of the light. It is our calling. It is something we can do: We can be the angels of hope.