

***“What Are You Hoping For?”***

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune — without the words,  
And never stops at all,  
And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
I've heard it in the chillest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.*

So wrote Emily Dickinson. It prompted Woody Allen (back when he was funny) to write a book, *Without Feathers* which gave rise to his particular brand of neurotic pessimism. Somewhere in between those two is where most of us live.

We have hopes — sometimes rather high hopes — but we have learned from the rough realities of life that there are often disappointments. But we say to one another, “*Don’t get your hopes too high.*” as a warning against letting hope run away with our imaginations. As the economy struggles in this pre-holiday season, more and more people are expressing their concerns and setting up somewhat diminished expectations for what will be under the Christmas tree this year.

Yet what we do in these instances is to confuse hope with wishing. Wishing has to do with the moment. As a child, you may have wished for a pony; even you likely thought it was something that was never going to happen (especially if you lived in a two-bedroom upstairs apartment). In my own case, it was a bicycle that was in both the catalog and the window of the Western Auto Store; my parents had told me not to get too

excited about that bike — but I had my heart set on that red and chrome beauty (the only present I remember from that Christmas was underwear!). Others wished for Cabbage Patch Dolls, or video games, or even a Pet Rock — some had their wished realized; others were sadly disappointed.

But hope is not wishing; hope is more substantial (or at least it should be; indeed, it must be!) and hence, not “*that thing with feathers.*”

What are you hoping for? That is not just a pre-Christmas question focused on some Wish List of gifts you’d like to see under the tree or stuffed into a stocking. “*What are you hoping for?*” It gets at our deepest yearnings — our core longings.

God has built into each of us a set of longings that really frame who we are and what we are about. These longings include ... fellowship with God ... a secure and safe environment ... a sense of worth ... a desire to be unique and special ... to be important ... to be loved and to love ... to be enjoyed and to enjoy ... to find fulfillment and meaning in life. There may be others, but this list will suffice.

When we find God-directed and God-pleasing ways to meet these longings, we are content, fulfilled, thriving. But sin keeps us from meeting these longings: Idolatry is substituted for fellowship with God. Money and power are thought to bring security and safety. Personal performance is linked to self-worth. Approval replaces uniqueness. Position now determines importance. Sexual activity is substituted for genuine love. Godless pleasure is thought to bring lasting enjoyment. Career advancement is pushed as the answer to fulfillment in life.

That which is deeply and profoundly imbedded within our spirits becomes trivialized and, we begin to think, unattainable. We loose hope. We settle for something other than what God has designed and intended for us to have. We still long for what is at the core of our being; but we have bought into the lie that other things can provide what God has told us only His presence can provide.

This is why so many people self-medicate — it staves off the pain, gives a sense (albeit a false one) of well-being, and provides at least the illusion of a longing met. Others become deeply enmeshed in work — they think that are finding value in how hard they work, or how many hours they put in, or how much money they take home [this one, by the way, gets all kinds of social approval, and so is very insidious.] Still others become people-pleasers, get caught up in affairs, get taken down by hucksters — because they try to meet that God-given longing to be special, or to be unique, or to matter and make a difference and fill it with things and people who can never meet those longings.

If any of this sounds like you, there is hope (so hold on). But if you're sitting there saying to yourself, "*Well, I don't do that,*" or "*Well, I have never done that!*" or "*And I most certainly will never do that!!!*" there is a deeper problem. I know that somewhere in your life sin has left you groping around for some key component of full being, and you do, in some way, struggle with this problem.

How do I know that? Because this concept comes out of God's Word. Jesus said, "***I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.***" You know what the enemy convinces us we should have instead? A "good life." Not life "to the full" — full of God, full of Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, filled to overflowing with grace, mercy, forgiveness, love, joy, peace and all the other things that God has told us He has already implanted in each of us who are "in Christ" — but a "good life."

What's wrong with a "good life"? My initial reply would be "*Nothing!*" But that would be incorrect. There is something very wrong with "the good life." It's not what God wants for us. Christ came — God sent His only Son — to provide for us something better: "*Life to the full.*"

The so-called "good life" — filled with things that Satan, the world, and our own sinful desires tell us we both want and need — is not, it turns out, all that "good." Why? Because it is not "of God" which, if memory serves me, is what the word "good" is supposed to mean. But we have turned "good" into: "pleasurable," "sensual," "something that causes

envy in others,” and host of other meanings — anything but “of God.”

In this evening’s Gospel, Jesus reminds us that “. . . *in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . .*” — they had what many would call “the good life.” But something was deeply, fundamentally wrong. Genesis records: “*The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*” (Genesis 6:4-5) So much for God’s regard for “the good life.”

But what is there that will fulfil our longings? For what should we — *can* we — hope? St. Paul, in typical straight-forward, no-punches-held-back fashion, puts it to us thus: “*You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*” “*Let’s not pretend that we don’t know, or that we have never heard, what we should be about.*” Paul is saying. “*Let’s not kid ourselves, and let’s not kid ourselves that we’re kidding God.*”

Here’s where you can hang your hope: “*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*” I have appreciated J.B. Philips’ paraphrasing of that last phrase. He wrote, “*Let us be Christ’s people from head to foot, and give no chance to the flesh to have its fling.*”

Focus, people! That’s what’s called for. “*Focus!*” “. . . *you . . . must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*” And all the claims and suppositions, predictions and guarantees from TV evangelists, book hawkers, and Gospel confidence men notwithstanding — **NO ONE KNOWS WHEN THAT WILL BE!!!**

More to the point, I think it is injurious to us to imagine that we can know. Hope is not about knowing. Hope is about not knowing, and trusting nonetheless. Hope is looking ahead to that glorious day of ***“the coming of the Son of Man.”*** — not with dread, or anxiety, certainly not with an eye to seeing others *“get theirs”* — but is a growing confidence in how gloriously satisfying it will be to have completely the full life that we can only begin to experience here and now. Not “the good life” — the God life. Life to the full. Life in which what we long for is being found because we are found to be “in Christ.”

The prophet Isaiah issues the invitation: ***“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”*** It is an invitation that echoes through the centuries to our ears and our hearts: ***“let us walk in the light of the LORD!”*** Come find what you truly long for, what God has designed in you to desire, to hope for — ***HIM!*** ***“. . . that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”***

For those ways and those paths lead us in the heart of God, our true hope, our deepest longing . . . our Savior.

Amen.