

The Reason for the Hope that I Have

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Our reading today from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of Peter contains a line that names an essential responsibility of anyone who serves Christ and his gospel. Here is how it's written in the New American Bible, where I first learned it:

Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope...

Always be ready to give the reason for your hope.

Always be ready. Which means you might need to think awhile about what is behind the hope you have as a follower of Jesus. Because someone just might ask you.

They might demand an accounting of the hope that is within you, as in our translation today, and you might have to defend yourself with it, like in a court of law. Which may have resonated with the audience of this letter, who experienced conflict and persecution from their neighbors . It is after all tucked within a paragraph about being persecuted for one's faith – and how to endure it, even witness to the Good News of a loving God in the middle of it. When in such a conflict, gentleness and reverence and a clear conscience will serve you well.

As for myself, I rarely have people demanding such an accounting of me, threatening me if I don't explain this gospel that I profess. But I do sometimes have people wonder where my joy comes from. Why do I practice a faith tradition when so much evidence indicates that evil has the upper hand?

Why do I have hope, is not an unheard of question in this day and age. It's a little different from the question: what do you hope for? The question is where is your hope from; what is the reason for your hope?

If I'm going to wear this collar, or welcome people at these doors, or pull into my reserved parking space every day – I better have an answer. Should anyone ask.

Vaclav Havel, the late Czeck political prisoner, writer, and the first president of the emancipated Czech Republic was asked in an interview: "Do you see a grain of hope anywhere in the 1980s?"<sup>1</sup> This was three years after he was released from prison and three years before he was elected president of the new state he helped to form.

*His answer is in an essay called "The Politics of Hope."*

*... [T]he kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us, or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul , and it's not particularly dependent on some particular*

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<sup>1</sup> From *Disturbing the Peace*, by Vaclav Havel. P 180-181

*observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.*

This was the reason for the hope Havel had, hope that he held sacred in the immense conflict and persecution that he found himself in during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Eastern Europe.

*“Hope is not the same thing as optimism,” he said. “It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’ It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.”*

While Havel did not call himself a believer, he nailed hope right on the head. It’s as though he were drawing the truth from the “altar of the unknown god,” that we hear about in today’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

I’d like us to pause at that altar for a moment, and consider what the “unknown God” may be saying to the world that longs for the divine.

In our first reading Paul is in Athens addressing the crowds at the Areopagus or Mars Hill, the traditional site of a Greek tribunal and a location that would have put Paul in conversation with the intellectual and philosophical heavyweights of the region. It’s a bit of a flex on the part of the author of Acts, framing early Christian thought as a debate partner with other philosophies.

Paul points out in his address that he visited the altar of the unknown god as he made his tour of the various shrines in the city. He happens to be very familiar with this unknown God, naming it as the God of Israel.

Biblical Scholar Jeremy Williams of Texas Christian University makes an interesting observation about the Greek’s *altar* to the Unknown God, pointing out that they got something very right in seeing the divine as being in some ways unknowable.<sup>2</sup>

He explains that Greek word *agnostos*, which is behind the phrase ‘to the unknown’, is connected to agnostics, “those who affirm that they have questions about God, God’s role in the world, and God’s role in their lives.” “This passage affirms that Unknown God is indeed a name for the God of Acts,” he writes.

This passage from Acts shows that appreciating the unknowable nature of God “acknowledges that from one, God made every family (ethnos) of humans to inhabit the face of the whole earth (Acts 17:26.) Each family and group of families has its own knowledge and quest for God, the God in whom we all live,

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<sup>2</sup> Working Preacher, accessed 5.12.23 -- <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-6>

move, and exist (Acts 17:27,28). This God who is knowable yet ultimately unknown is close to everyone,” Williams writes.

This is helpful to me when I consider my own answer to the reason for the hope that I have. I wonder if it already may resonate with truths held by others who might believe differently than I do, or may insist they hold no beliefs at all. Perhaps we have all recognized something of this God that goes beyond the words and the rituals that we build around the divine. I experience this in Vaclav Havel’s description of hope, which is so close to how I would describe the hope that I have as a follower of *Christ*.

“ I feel that (hope’s) deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are, though of course I can’t – unlike Christians, for instance – say anything about the transcendental,” says Havel. And later he explains: “I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’ It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.”

In the transcendental that Havel describes, I see my own God. The source of hope that Havel finds “elsewhere”, sounds like the Holy Spirit to me.

And it’s that Spirit that Jesus sent to dwell in me, so that I would know God from deep within, and who in turn I could love outward toward those who long for love. The commandments of love that send me out into the world are the ones that compel me to love my neighbor as myself, to bring healing to those who suffer, to bring Good News to those who long for a Good Word or thirst deeply for justice,

Be ready to give a reason for the hope that you have, the Scripture commands. To defend it with reverence and gentleness if attacked. But also to offer that reason with kindness to the curious, the wondering – those who might not have a name for the God that they have been encountering all along.

When we do this we give flesh and feature and name to the one who is revered at the “altar of the unknown God”, which the world encounters all the time in its own experiences of care, compassion, mutuality, forgiveness, relationship and hope, and especially its experience of Love.

How do I account for the hope that is in me? If I had to put it into words I would likely talk about the presence of God I’ve experienced – a burning heart, chance encounters, love and compassion where I didn’t expect it. Or I might talk about the power of faith community -- the joy I’ve found in relationship, accompaniment, common cause. I might describe pancake dinners, fellowship hours, or listening circles. Or I might describe what I experience in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers – in the power of song, in speaking with one voice, in broken bread and a common cup.

Or I might just say, “come and see” in the belief that God will make the divine self known to anyone “might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us,” as Paul explains.

This I the reason for the hope I have. Amen.