

What Hope Is Not

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, February 5, 2023, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Psalm 137:1-6](#) and [Jeremiah 29:10-14](#)

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On January 27, as we in California were still reeling from the mass shootings in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay, the City of Memphis and other cities across the country were preparing for the release of video footage of Memphis police officers beating Tyre Nichols, a beating that led to Mr. Nichols' death three days later. The following day, on January 28, the Rev. Terri Hord Owens, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) issued a statement. I posted a link to the full statement on our church's Facebook and Twitter accounts last night. Here's part of what Rev. Hord Owens said.

"It is with deep lament that I find myself inviting the church into prayer for the family of Tyre Nichols and the community of Memphis, in the wake of the video footage released yesterday of the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of Memphis police officers.... Another Black man has died at the hands of police. Another mother grieves the untimely and tragic death of her son. Another video summons our outrage and our cries for moral clarity and action...."

I have been in communication with Rev. Dr. Christal L. Williams, Tennessee Regional Minister, as she supports our pastors and communities across the city of Memphis. I encourage the church to join them as Rev. Dr. Williams encouraged in her message yesterday, 'our faith gives us hope when confronted with systems beyond reform.'"¹

"Our faith gives us *hope* ..." Today, and for the following two Sundays, Pastor Brenda and I will offer a brief sermon series on Cultivating Hope. The reality is that we could probably spend a full year preaching on *hope*. We could spend a full year exploring what hope isn't, what hope is, how hope lives in our bodies and how hope travels in our stories, and finally on the practice of hope. Thus, in three sermons, we will only scratch the surface of the topic of hope. Nonetheless, I invite you to engage with this series and consider your understanding and practice of hope, particularly as it relates to your faith.

I have tried, during the past week, to understand *why* I have been more disturbed by the death of Tyre Nichols than by the deaths in Monterey Park, in Half Moon Bay, or in last Saturday's mass shooting in Los Angeles. I think it boils down to this: the homicide of Tyre Nichols was committed by people who were charged with protecting us. This in way excuses the people who committed the mass shootings. I worry that perhaps I'm becoming numbed by mass shootings and they don't cause in me the cognitive dissonance that a homicide committed by police officers does. The story in Genesis of the murder of Abel by Cain teaches us that we *are* our siblings' keepers, that we are responsible for the welfare of each other. That *should* be such a part of who we are that someone shooting someone else

¹ Read the full statement at <https://disciples.org/from-the-gmp/statement-on-the-death-of-tyre-nichols/>.

should cause cognitive dissonance. And it doesn't, at least not in me, at least not in the way Mr. Nichols' death does.

The death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of police officers moves me to a place of despair, a despair that makes it hard for me to feel hope. That might be because I too often confuse *hope* with *optimism*.

Our first scripture lesson comes from a place of that kind of despair. The Babylonian Empire has conquered Israel and vast numbers of the Israelites have been sent into exile. Without a doubt, the religious and political elites were rounded up and exiled to Babylon and probably vast numbers of common folk as well. While they were there, their captors demanded that they sing songs from the old country. But how, the Psalmist asks, "could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

It is in the midst of this exile that Jeremiah preaches. Jeremiah says that the exile is going to last a while: 70 years. Then God will bring the Israelites back to Jerusalem. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

This is supposed to be good news, though if I'd been a 30-year-old priest at the Temple who'd been exiled in Babylon, I don't think I'd find it all that comforting. In 70 years, I'd be 100, so I'd probably be dead. If this good news from Jeremiah was right, I wasn't going to see Jerusalem again. Perhaps that's why the Psalmist sang, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you."

Maybe this good news from Jeremiah isn't so much a word that gives the 30-year-old exiled priest hope as one that gives optimism. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, the author who inspired this sermon series, says, "Optimism does its best work in the Before – when the evidence points plausibly in a positive direction, when you can still anticipate the best possible outcome, when things could work out OK. But when the facts suggest otherwise, optimism isn't enough. This is when hope comes in, rolls up her sleeves and says, 'Optimism, take a seat.'"²

Okay, we're in exile. We're in exile because the Babylonia Empire is about as powerful an empire as we've ever seen. But Empires don't last forever. They eventually fall. And when that happens, maybe Jeremiah's right. Maybe when that happens, our descendants will get to return to our beloved Jerusalem. Our exiled priest might say, "I hope that happens," even though that's not what he means. What he means is, "I feel optimistic about that possibility."

"I've heard optimism described as a mathematical construct," writes Dana, "an equation in which past experience + present striving = future greatness. Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way. Hope isn't mathematical; it's philosophical, physical, maybe even musical. True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcome."³

² MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User's Manual* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2022), 10-11.

³ *Ibid*, 11.

I think I know what she means. When I look at the reports from scientists who crunched the numbers, I don't feel optimistic about humanity truly facing the climate crisis. When I look at the decisions being made, at the policies being adopted or failing to be adopted, I can fall into despair. And yet, somehow, even in the midst of that despair I can and do feel hope. I feel hope when I get an e-mail from a member of our congregation wanting to organize us to participate in a nationwide climate action on March 21. I feel hope because an e-mail like that tells me people are willing to roll up their sleeves. "Rabbi Jonathan Sachs says, 'optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better.'"⁴

So, here's some good news: "Hope is a muscle that can be exercised. Research shows that hopeful people have access to two kinds of thinking that merely optimistic [people] don't. The first is called 'pathway thinking,' which allows people to imagine many possible approaches to a situation in pursuit of a goal or outcome. The second, 'agency thinking,' is a sense of personal empowerment and motivation to work to pursue those goals or outcomes. Pathway thinking dreams of many potential futures; agency thinking tries to bring them about."⁵

Last week at our annual financial meeting, the congregation chose not to adopt a budget for 2023. I could be wrong, but my sense was that the majority of people felt the proposed budget was too greatly out of balance and that it was poor stewardship to adopt it without a plan to bring the budget into balance – if not this year, then soon. I think we can be *hopeful* about the budget without needing to be *optimistic* about the budget in this moment – but it's going to take some work.

First, we have to access pathway thinking. We need to spend time imagining *many* possible approaches to the situation in pursuit of our goal, namely, a balanced budget. That is what I hope—No. I am optimistic that will happen at the small group gatherings that start today. (If I were participating in the small groups, I would be hopeful that we could make that happen. Since I won't be part of the small groups, I can be optimistic that you will engage in pathway thinking in them.) Then, we will need to access our agency thinking, harnessing our sense of empowerment and motivation to work together to pursue this goal.

This is the hope that Jeremiah called the Israelites to in the midst of exile. He offered pathways and the people had the agency to engage them: Continue to search for God with all your heart. Look for ways to restore your fortunes in the midst of exile. Trust that God will bring you back to your beloved Jerusalem. Believe that God's plan is one of welfare and not of harm, one that gives you a future with hope.

Perhaps the despair I feel when I contemplate the death of Tyre Nichols comes from the fact that I have trouble harnessing pathway thinking. Racism and police violence seem so intractable it is difficult for me to imagine possible approaches to the situation to change the system. And yet, we can work together. Each of us can remember that we are not confronted with systems that seem to be and perhaps actually are beyond reform *on our*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

own. That confrontation happens to all of us *together* and *together* we just might be able to imagine approaches to reform or replace the unjust systems. And then we can work *together* to bring about that needed transformation. That, I think, is the hope our faith gives us.

Amen.