

Hope Anchors the Soul

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 12, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Hebrews 6:13-20](#)

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We have no idea who wrote the document we know as “the letter to the Hebrews.”¹ In fact, we don’t even know to whom it was addressed. Unlike most New Testament letters, it does not name its audience. The title “to the Hebrews” was added sometime after it was first written, probably decades later. It *does* appear to be written to a group of Christians who were also Jews and/or “God-lovers” (as non-Jews who worshipped the Jewish God were called). And it appears that they had suffered or were suffering some level of persecution.

The letter’s central and best-known metaphor presents Jesus as the “great high priest” who offers himself as the “once and for all” sacrifice. This metaphor makes the most sense if one is familiar with the temple in Jerusalem, the high priest, and the practice of temple sacrifice.

“Within Judaism, the temple in Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God on earth. Because it was God’s dwelling place, it was there and only there that sacrifices were offered to God.

“Sacrifices had various purposes. Because many people today automatically think of sacrifice and sin as intrinsically connected, it is important to know that not all sacrifices had to do with sin. Some were about hosting God – about ‘feeding’ the God who dwelled in the temple. Some were sacrifices of thanksgiving, petition, and purification, none of which intrinsically involved forgiveness of sin as the motivation. Sacrifices that did involve sin were sacrifices of reconciliation in which the community, represented by temple priests, offered a sacrifice as a way of making peace with God.

“Within this system, the high priest, appointed from the tribe of Levi, was the chief official of the temple. There was only one [high priest] at a time and according to Jewish law, he served for life He represented God to the people and the people to God. Only he could enter ‘the Holy of Holies,’ the innermost chamber of the temple, and only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement.”²

Hopefully, this context helps us make some sense of the last sentence in today’s reading, when the author of this letter says Jesus “became a high priest.” The author is saying that Jesus is now the mediator between God and God’s people. Jesus is the one who enters the inner shrine behind the curtain. The author doesn’t mean this literally. The author knows that Jesus wasn’t of the tribe of Levi and thus couldn’t literally be the high priest.

¹ This summary of Hebrews is based on the introduction to the letter in Marcus Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 277-282.

² Borg, 279.

The author extends the metaphor further later in the letter. Jesus is not only the great high priest. Jesus is also the sacrifice itself. And what Jesus sacrificed was his life. In chapter 9, the author says that Jesus' death was the "once and for all" sacrifice for sin.

Unfortunately, if we literalize this language, we lose the metaphor. In literalizing this language, some in Christianity have come to believe that Jesus' death was *necessary*, that God *required* a perfect sacrifice, and Jesus was it. They've come to believe that the most important thing about Jesus' life was his death. However, the author of this letter was not making doctrinal statements. "He did not think Jesus was literally a high priest; he knew that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah and not Levi. He knew that Jesus never served as the high priest of Jerusalem. He knew that Jesus never entered the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple. All this is metaphor. And it is meaningful metaphor. For Christians, Jesus is the great high priest, even though he was never the high priest of the Jerusalem temple.

"So also the language of Jesus as sacrifice is metaphorical. He was not literally a divine human sacrifice planned and required by God, so that our sins can be paid for and we can be forgiven. In Hebrews ..., what Jesus sacrificed was his life *because of his passion for God* ... not because God required it"³

When we understand that the author of this letter is saying that the need for sacrifices at the temple is over, we begin to hear how radical this theology is. The author is saying that God through Jesus has taken away whatever you think separates you from God. The "once and for all" sacrifice has been made. The system of required sacrifices is over. Through Jesus, we can know God who chooses to no longer remember our sin.

In the passage we heard today, the author talks about how reliable God's promises are. When we build our hope on the promises of God, that hope becomes "a safe and secure anchor for our whole being," to use the Common English Bible's translation. And that's what I really want to talk about today: hope.

I have long thought that hope – as it is most commonly expressed – is often a hopeless hope, a disempowered hope. Often this hope is based on a pipe dream, or worse yet, on a lie. Brian McLaren states it more boldly: "In the presence of doom, hope (at least a common and superficial kind of hope) can be downright deadly."⁴ "[M]alevolent forces often use hope to manipulate us, rendering us compliant to their continued oppression. Hope can be a false promise, not just a lie, but a dangerous, delicious lie. And the lie becomes all the more appealing when the only alternative we see is despair."⁵

Religion is hardly immune from embracing this kind of hope. With a nod to Karl Marx's often cited and almost as often misunderstood quote about religion being the opium of the people, McLaren realizes that "hope-ium," a hope that dulls the pain of the present, "aids and abets the oppressor by pacifying the labor force If [on the other hand,] the oppressed can muster the courage to put away the opium, they will feel the pain of their

³ Borg, 280-281, emphasis added.

⁴ Brian McLaren, *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart* (New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2024), 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*

current condition, and that pain may make them desperate enough to take collective action toward their own liberation.”⁶

Yes, it is counterintuitive to see hope as dangerous and desperation as necessary. As counterintuitive as it may be, this is the insight that I hear when Greta Thunberg “thundered: ‘I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic ... and act as if the house is on fire. Because it is.’”⁷

As McLaren points out that this simple hope “can lead us to complacency and even paralysis,” he adds that despair can do the exact same thing. “Hope and hopelessness can have a surprisingly similar appeal. First, both relieve us from the uncertainty of an unknown future. For one, happy ending is assumed; for the other, a tragic ending is inescapable. Either way, at least we know what’s coming. Second, both promise us a future that asks nothing of us.

“Because things are going to turn out fine, you don’t have to do or change anything.

“Because there’s nothing you can do to avert doom you don’t have to do or change anything.”⁸

Yet, “for so many, hope is essential because without it, we will give up. Hope is, in this sense, a synonym for the will to live...

“So there’s the paradox.... hope is essential because it motivates ... [and] hope is dangerous because it keeps you from facing how bad things really are and responding appropriately.

“Good people promoting hope and good people critiquing hope are both against the same thing: foolish complacency. And both are for the same thing: wise action. And that’s why *hope* and *optimism* are *not* the same thing.”⁹

In his letter to the Romans, Paul refers to ‘hope against hope’ (Romans 4:18). This is the hope that I think Jesus had. “Jesus conducts much of his ministry with the assumption that he will be killed (Luke 13:33), yet he trusts that his work will carry on in others ... This ‘hope against hope’ seems to be empowered by a refusal to give up the will to live even though the way to do so is not at all clear.”¹⁰

When I think about the climate crisis, I don’t have a lot of optimism. And yet, I still have motivation. I still refuse to give up. Like McLaren, “When I was largely energized by hopeful optimism about outcomes, my motivation was dependent on receiving a continual flow of encouraging anecdotes and keeping discouraging evidence at bay. And now, here I am, feeling that the discouraging evidence far outweighs the encouraging evidence. But rather than slumping into an easy chair of despair or paralyzed resignation, I’m still on my feet, brimming with defiance and creative energy.”¹¹

⁶ *Ibid*, 75.

⁷ *Ibid*, 76.

⁸ *Ibid*, 76-77.

⁹ *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 80.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 80.

Embracing a 'hope against hope' leads us to realize that the real choice is between Team Cruelty and Team Courage, between Team Indifferent Apathy and Team Wisdom, between Team Selfishness and Team Kindness.¹²

McLaren says that, having processed and refined his hope into a 'hope against hope,' he feels "the energy of fierce defiance. *All that is bad around us* motivates me to resist, to defy, to refuse to comply, and that very defiance feels like *a marvelous victory*."¹³ So, what motivates me to hold onto defiance I find in a 'hope against hope'?

Love.

I love my niece and nephew, and I want them to have a civilization to grow old in. I love creation. I love the New England autumn trees that paint the hillsides in color. I love the majesty of both the Grand Tetons and the easily-stepped-on prairie-fire flower. I love the waddle of the duck and the raccoon. And I love you. You, too, are part of creation.

And, as Derrick Jensen once said, "If you love, you act to defend your beloved. Of course results matter to you, but they don't determine whether or not you make the effort. You don't simply hope your beloved survives and thrives. You do what it takes. If my love doesn't cause me to protect those I love, it's not love."¹⁴

Conventional hope is motivated by the outcome: "If we see a likely path to our desired outcome, we have hope; if we can see no possible path to our desired outcome, we have despair."¹⁵

'Hope against hope' is motivated by something different. It is motivated by love. When we 'hope against hope,' "we find courage and confidence not in the likelihood of a good outcome, but in our commitment to love. Love may or may not provide *a way through* to the solution of our predicament, but it will provide a way forward in our predicament, one step into the unknown at a time....

"To put it differently, even if we lose hope for a good outcome, we need not lose hope for being good people, as we are able: courageous, wise, kind, loving, 'in defiance of all that is bad around us.'"¹⁶

This is the hope that I think anchors the soul. This is the hope that is built on God's love and promise.

I would like you to take five minutes to talk in groups of three or four about two questions:

When have you settled for a hope that is merely optimism?

In what ways is love lived out in your 'hope against hope'?

¹² *Ibid*, 81.

¹³ *Ibid*, 82.

¹⁴ Quoted by McLaren, *ibid*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 84-85.