rln rupert'slandnews

HOPE

JANUARY 2026

CONNECTING CHURCH & COMMUNITY

Contributors

PUBLISHER
Bishop Naboth Manzongo

EDITOR
Cinna Baran

ACCOUNTING
Joy Valencerina

LAYOUT & DESIGN
cityfolkcreative.ca

HOPE

Rupert's Land News magazine is published 10 times per year (September - June) by the Diocese of Rupert's Land, in the Anglican Church in Canada. It connects churches and communities from Portage la Prairie, MB, to Atikokan, ON, by offering news, events, opinions, and ideas to 4,000 readers per month. RLN is available in a variety of formats: Website • Facebook • Twitter

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EDITORIAL OFFICES
Anglican Lutheran Centre
935 Nesbitt Bay
Winnipeg Manitoba, R3T 1W6

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Faith Matters: Hope

What is hope, and how does it shape our lives? As we return to the "Faith Matters" series, our three new authors—**Melissa Ritz**, **Obren Amiesimaka**, and **Zoe Matties**—seek to offer insight into this question. While all of them have their own unique perspectives on this subject, they directly or indirectly address what general hope is, and how this differs from what hope means for us as Christians. The final article in this issue is an interview with Malcolm Guite, in which he delves into what vocation means, and how each of us can be aided by poetry in our prayer lives.

In the general sense, hope is wishful thinking; it's aspirational. One hopes for what one wants to occur, no matter how realistic or beneficial it may be for the person. We may hope that our bus will be on time, that our children and grandchildren will visit us over the holidays, or that our favourite sports team will win every game. This hope can be helpful in getting us through our day-to-day lives, yet it does not really inform our actions, such as how we treat others and what we devote our time to.

Christian hope comes from a very different place—one of certainty based on rational, foundational beliefs. We do not hope that God is with us; we *know* He is. We do not hope for the Messiah, the Christ to come; we *know* He has come, and we await His coming again. Christian hope is grounded in the promise and character of God, and it relies on *trust* in Him, instead of wishful thinking.

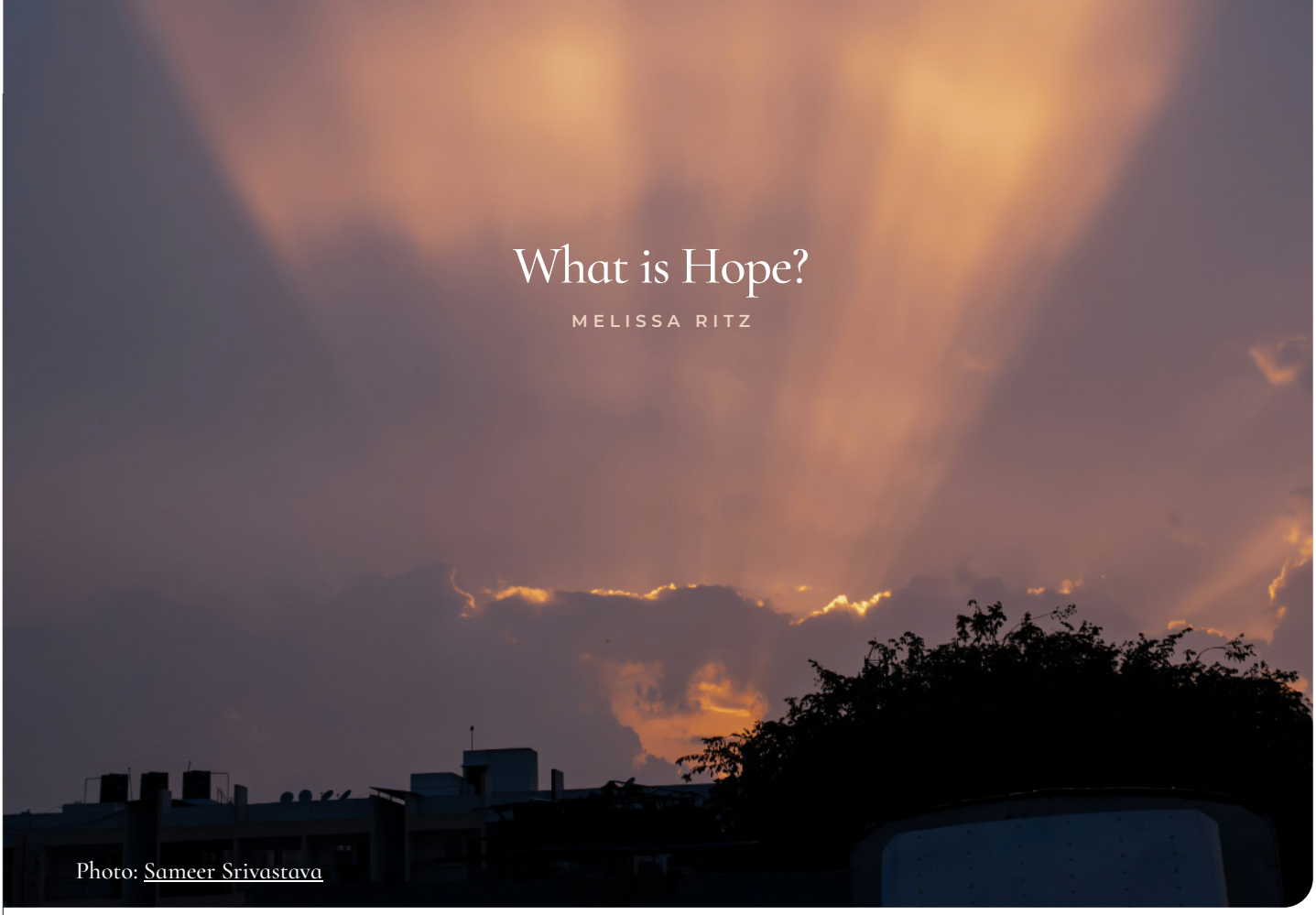
This theme is fitting for the season of Epiphany, as the story of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel provides us with an excellent example of Christian hope. The Magi must have had a great deal of patience and attentiveness in waiting for a sign from God. When the time came for their journey, they were bravely willing to travel (which was a considerably more dangerous task two millennia ago) because they trusted in God's plan.

Their journey highlights two important ways in which Christian hope differs from general hope. First, they could not remain static in their places of comfort; they had to endure a long and likely arduous journey, having faith that the difficult journey would be worth the destination. Second, what they witnessed was probably very different from what they were expecting. Instead of a rich or lavish palace, they find a vulnerable infant in an otherwise ordinary and unremarkable place. Despite this, they rejoice, fall down, and worship Him. This shows that Christian hope is not marked by worldly goods and material wealth or power, but by God's humility.

As we enter a new year, let us learn from the Magi and continue to go forward in Christian hope.

CINNA BARAN

Editor of Rupert's Land News



What is Hope?

MELISSA RITZ

Photo: Sameer Srivastava

My simple answer to the question, "what is hope?" is that hope is a belief about the future that combines expectation and desire. In other words, it is a belief that a positive outcome is in the offing, with at least some assurance that the hoped-for outcome will indeed come about. It follows that what we hope for in the future will then necessarily impact how we live in the present. To give a couple banal examples, if I'm hoping to graduate school in the spring, I might begin looking for a job or applying for university now so that I have something in place once the expected graduation occurs; or if I hope to go on a big vacation next year, I might have to live more frugally this year. The two keys that make hope practical, as opposed to wishful thinking, are therefore desire (as I mentioned earlier) and agency—the ability to act in the present in a way that impacts the future.

While the basic understanding of hope I've just set out applies to Christian life as much as it does to non-Christian life, there are some important considerations that set Christian hope apart. Before I leap into what those considerations are, I think it is necessary to say a little about the relationship between hope and faith. Faith, hope, and love, the famous Pauline trifecta (à la 1 Corinthians 13:13), are tightly tied together (and just happen to be RLN's themes of the first three months of this new year), faith and hope particularly so. Hope rarely stands on its own as a biblical virtue, and while I can't refer to a specific theologian or tradition for corroboration, it seems to me that hope describes what we believe, while faith describes how we believe it (in thought, word, and deed). This is why hope and faith are constant companions in Scripture; as James writes, faith without works is dead.[1]

So what, then, is Christian hope? Speaking generally, Christians hope for many things, often expressed in our prayers for ourselves and others. However, put in light of the Advent and Christmas seasons we've just traversed, and the revelations of Epiphany, these smaller hopes are wrapped in the grand, cosmic, ultimate hope of Christian faith: "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" (cf. the Nicene Creed). The corresponding line from the Apostles' Creed is even more specific in that we look for the "resurrection of the body." To put it another way: all the scriptural tradition, Christian history, and present Christian

[1] James 2:17

life is working its way toward the final coming of Christ when the dead shall be raised bodily to be judged, and heaven and earth will come together in the final consummation of the kingdom of God. N.T. Wright's 2007 volume, Surprised by Hope, says a great deal more on this matter and I hope you will seek it out if you are at all confused by what I've just said or am about to say.

As a child, I assumed that the "resurrection of the body" meant Jesus' bodily resurrection at Easter, and that the "life everlasting" would be spent in the clouds of heaven with a harp and a halo. Four years of graduate studies in theology offered some correction to this perspective and I now understand Christian belief about "the end" to be more in line with the 1st Century Jewish belief in a bodily resurrection and a renewal and transformation of all creation, "visible and invisible" (thanks again to the Nicene Creed). Jesus' clearly transformed flesh that can ignore locked doors and is difficult even for his closest friends to recognize is a foretaste of what waits for all of us on the far side of our own deaths and upon Jesus' second coming.

Photo: Jessica Mangano

Different interpretations of the end times have shaped Christian practices and attitudes about all sorts of things through the ages. For instance, some Christians believe that the church has no responsibility to care for the earth and its non-human inhabitants because they expect that God will burn the whole establishment down at the end of time, while those of us who have a more material view of eternity take quite the opposite tack to climate change. There are of course many other examples, which I don't have space to tackle here, so I will again commend to you Surprised by Hope and spend the rest of this article discussing the implications a view of the future that is material and bodily has for our present conduct, both as individuals and as the Church at large.

C.S. Lewis wrote in The Weight of Glory:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously - no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.[2]

We are, in this present life, growing toward our true selves which are "hid with God on high"[3] and will be revealed in the transforming resurrection. We cannot reach this full potential until we ourselves have passed through death and been (bodily) raised to new life with Christ, but foretastes of the new creation are available in this life for those who would pick up their crosses and follow Christ. We are not, as some Christians have assumed, building the kingdom of God on earth, nor will we accomplish this undertaking during the extent of human history. We are, as Paul writes to the Philippians, working out our salvation in fear and trembling.[4] You may choose not to agree, but N.T. Wright suggests that this life is in fact the only Purgatory we'll be given, and that any growth we experience in this life will carry over to the next one. Our call as Christians, therefore, is to seek the life of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, expecting that the cost of joy will be the discomfort, pain, and even suffering that comes from resisting the regime of sin and death which, though defeated in Christ's Passion and Resurrection, is not retreating quietly.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperCollins, 2009), 62.

[3] Colossians 3:3

[4] Philippians 2:12

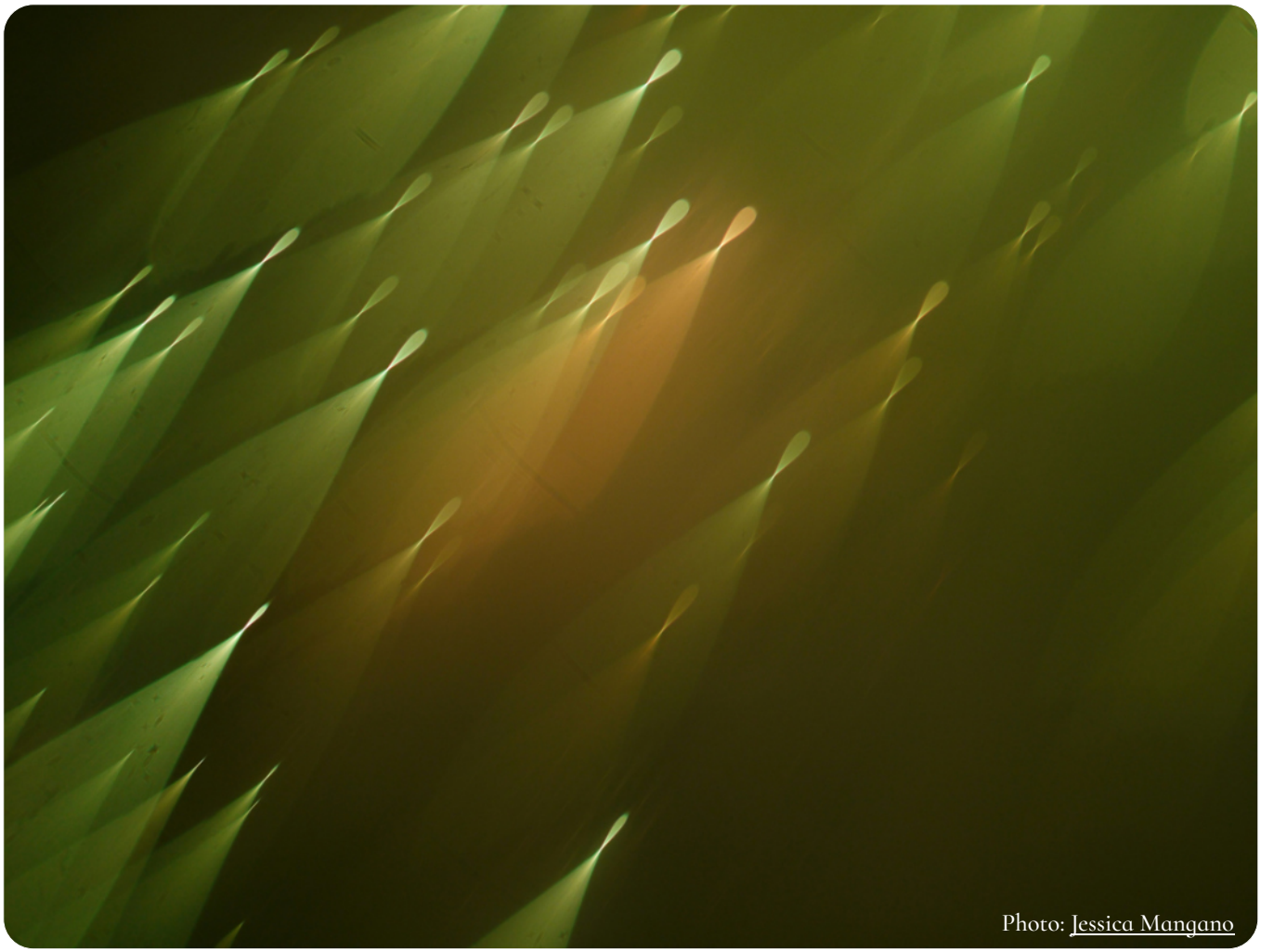


Photo: Jessica Mangano

Thus, to seek freedom for the oppressed and enslaved, to love our neighbours as ourselves, to pray without ceasing, and to gather regularly to worship God, is work done in the service of our Lord and is not wasted. To seek to preserve the beauty and health of all creation is not to waste time caring for something that will be incinerated and re-created from scratch, but to walk together with the rest of creation toward the glorious hope of resurrection and transformation. To speak truth to power and to resist the encroaching corruption of consumerism (and the other "isms" that twist the Gospel to their own ends) is not defeatist, but liberating and life-giving, not just to those who are oppressed and downtrodden by the powers that be, but to us as well. The more we seek God, the more we become like Christ, and the more we become like Christ in this life, I suspect the less it will hurt to have the corrupted parts burned away by the fire of the Spirit at the final resurrection. Hope is the map for this journey and the fuel for the fire that lights our way. Jesus Christ is the root and anchor for the hope I have outlined above, and his Spirit within us and within the Church is the assurance of things to come. A life that truly seeks Christ may have its ups and downs, its periods of doubt and faith, its sorrows and its joys, but it will always be moving toward that sure and certain hope of God's victory over sin and death and the renewal of all things in Christ.

MELISSA RITZ

Melissa Ritz is a theologically-trained librarian with a love for teaching and preaching. Originally from Edmonton, she is relatively new to Winnipeg, where she lives with her husband, an Anglican priest and military chaplain, and their tuxedo cat, Holly.

Photo: Tomás Robertson

"All Our Hope on God is Founded"

OBREN I. AMIESIMAKA

'All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance He guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown,
He alone
Calls my heart to be His own.'

This hymn by Joachim Neander (English translation by Robert Bridges) is a most popular one, and it starts with the proclamation that all the singer's hope is reposed in the Lord. This is apt for this period when we enter a brand-new year in the midst of Christmastide (from dusk of Christmas Eve until the eve of Epiphany). With the many celebrations of the season—the parties, potlucks, dinners, outings and events—starting to fit more fully in the rearview mirror as the calendar marches further away from January 1st, people often enter a reflective stage. Looking back at the year gone by, people count their blessings and consider how much of their goals they achieved, what targets were missed, and what pleasant surprises arose.

The other side of these reflections involves looking ahead at the year just started. People set out plans for their year, outlining their wishes, goals, and desires, with some even making new year's resolutions. Doing this is inherently optimistic, for people of faith and no faith alike, as it entails the belief that good things would be possible, doable, and achievable; it is thus an effort in hope. Hope that one would have life, health and agency. Hope that efforts would yield results. Hope that factors outside one's control would work in one's favour.

Still, hope is more than just wishes and goals for the new year; it can sometimes be lifesaving. So powerful a force is hope that it is a key tool in suicide prevention, even in secular mental health practice. This potency was underlined to me over a

decade ago as I was taking a mental health first aid course and it has stuck with me ever since. We were taught the importance of inspiring hope that tomorrow would be better, hope that things can turn around for good, hope that all is not lost. In fact, from 2021-2023, the triennial theme for World Suicide Prevention Day was "Creating Hope Through Action". Per the World Health Organisation, this was a "call to action and reminder that there is an alternative to suicide and that through our actions we can encourage hope and strengthen prevention". Even outside of suicide prevention, in trying times, hope keeps us going; when passing through the dark valley, hope says that there is light once we crest the summit.

So, what is the best explanation of hope? It's a common enough word with dictionaries presenting multiple definitions, but what does it mean for Christians? As one might expect, the Good Book points us to God. The Psalmist says "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? **My hope is in you.**"[1] and "**O Lord, you alone are my hope.** I've trusted you, O LORD, from childhood."[2] Isaiah 40:31 tells us "**But those who hope in the Lord** will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

For us Christians, all our hope on God is founded. The very foundation of our hope on which our dreams can be realised is our faith in God—our firm trusting belief that our Heavenly Father loves us, cares for us, guides us, and fights for us. We can have hope for tomorrow because we have faith in our omnipotent God.

Hope is essential to Christian life, as St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now these three remain: faith, **hope**, and love. But the greatest of these is love." Notwithstanding the supremacy of love, hope is also fundamental.

It is instructive to note at this juncture the distinction between hope and faith as they are separately listed by St Paul. Whereas both are often used interchangeably as they connote belief in a possibility, both can be contrasted.

As established above, hope can be an optimistic reflection of a generic level of belief and can be used in colloquial

[1] Psalm 39:7

[2] Psalm 71:5

Photo: Joshua Woroniecki

terms. Hope can remain within the realm of a wish, want, desire, or longing. We can hope that something will happen, things will turn out fine, all will be well no matter the way events proceed. Faith, however, encompasses hope and connotes a greater quantum/level of belief. Hebrews 11:1a tells us, "Now faith is the assurance [ESV]/substance [KJV] of things hoped for…/confidence in what we hope for [NIV]…". These translations show us that even as we hope for something, faith goes further in being the very firm belief or conviction that our hope will materialise through the grace of God.

It is noteworthy that there is a somewhat circular relationship between faith and hope in Christianity as Christian hope rests on a foundation of faith in God. Because we have faith in our Heavenly Father who directs all our affairs, we can have hope that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."[3] We have hope in heavenly afterlife as Saints Triumphant because of our faith in the Risen Christ and His resurrection power. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 tells us: "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."

Therefore, let us go into this new year with great hope, secure in the knowledge that all will be well, for "…**hope does not put us to shame**, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."[4] Personally, in all aspects of my life, I hold fast to the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" These words give me great comfort and reassurance and underpin my eternally optimistic outlook on life.

In this vein, it is my hope that you had a very Merry Christmas and I wish you and your loved ones a 2026 filled with sweetness, loveliness, bliss, peace, abundance, and all things good.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

Photo: Sapan Patel

[3] Romans 8:28

[4] Romans 5:5

OBREN I. AMIESIMAKA

Dr. Amiesimaka declares that he is no theologian, but a lowly follower of Christ, striving to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly, day by day. Obren lives trusting in God's mercies and salvation bearing in mind Romans 3:23 "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Hope is a Practice

ZOE MATTIES

Photo: Maxime Valcarce

Near the beginning of my undergraduate studies, I had the opportunity to go on a study tour to the Holy Land. We visited many churches, archaeological sites, and museums in both Palestine and Israel. We also talked with many people—Jewish, Muslim, and Christian—to learn about their lives. On one hand, it was an incredibly hopeful experience learning about the peacemaking efforts of organizations such as Wi'am (The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Centre) and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. On the other hand, I struggled with feelings of despair after hearing story after story about the struggle of living under the occupation.

The Wi'am Centre in Bethlehem is located just meters away from the separation wall. Giant, foreboding concrete slabs and barbed wire shadow a small garden and children's playground. Palestinian children play and laugh here, in spite of the soldiers with guns sitting up in the guard tower at the top of the wall. On this side of the wall, people have covered its surface in colourful graffiti messages of hope, visions of peace, and condemnation of the occupation. I was struck by one message written in dripping yellow spray paint that read: "Know Hope?" This play on words captured for me the tension between the seduction of despair and the necessity of hope—a tension that is wrestled with throughout the Scriptures. You only have to read through the Psalms or the Prophets to find examples of the push and pull between desolation and consolation.

When I consider our wounded world—the genocide in Gaza, the erosion of our ability to know what is real and true, and the climate crisis, to name just a few of these wounds—I am tempted to believe that despair is the correct response. I sometimes wonder: Where is God in all of this? Where is the

church? Why bother even caring anymore? On the surface, despair does seem to be a reasonable human reaction to the stressful and real existential threats currently unfolding.

There are, however, two big shortcomings to the response of despair. First, it is not helpful, and second, it is not true, or at least, not the whole truth. In situations of upheaval, where the future is unknown, despair provides us with answers of a sort. Despair tells us that our efforts don't matter, that it's too late, that the problems are insoluble. And this is convenient for us. If we believe this to be true, we are absolved of any motivation to take action.

The writer Rebecca Solnit says despair is a luxury that those facing fire and flood cannot afford. She writes, "For those of us whose lives are already easy, giving up means making life even easier, at least in terms of effort. For the directly impacted, it means surrendering to devastation. Giving up on their behalf is not solidarity." This is why I say that hope is a necessity. I'm not talking about the version of hope that seems to mean a warm, fuzzy feeling. Nor do I mean that hope requires ignoring the pain of the world, or believing that everything will turn out in the end. The Palestinian Christian director of Wi'am, Zoughbi Zoughbi, wrote in his Christmas message last year, "Hope… is not naïve optimism or despairing pessimism: it is an active, nonviolent and shared struggle for justice and peace." Hope is a practice—it is something that we do, not a thing to possess, but a way of being, rooted in the goodness of life.

I am reminded of the story at the beginning of Mark chapter 2 where Jesus heals a paralyzed man. In this story, Jesus has been walking the countryside, casting out demons and healing the sick. When he returns to his home in Capernaum, many people crowd around him in a home to hear him speak. Four determined and loving friends, having heard of his miraculous ministry, decide to bring a paralyzed man to see Jesus. Finding the way inside blocked by others, they take to the roof and dig through it in order to lower their friend towards Jesus. I can just imagine how much courage and hope they must have embodied in order to get their friend to Jesus. There was no way for them to know whether the actions they took would result in healing for their friend, yet they did it anyway, because hope moves us forward in the world. It requires an imagination for what could be, and the will to work towards that vision, even if we don't know whether we'll be successful.

The people in this story belonged to a long tradition of hope, as we Christians do today. Our tradition tells stories of an exodus from a military superpower and the resurrection of life from death by execution. It tells us of a God who creates, redeems, and restores. These stories and promises help to ground our hope in God's character and give us imagination for what life could be. The reality is, we don't know what the future will hold! We don't know when or how exactly God will bring about God's promise of restoration. But hope, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, "locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act."

In my life, I find that hope is worked out day by day as a practice. For me, feeding the birds is a practice of hope. A few

Photo: Jonny Gios

Photo: Joshua J. Cotten

weeks ago, I finally remembered to fill up the bird feeders outside my dining room window, and the birds have started to arrive. Predictably, the resident gang of house sparrows have been the first to arrive, but then a downy woodpecker discovered the suet. I am filled with wonder! Hope reminds me that I don't have to choose between my joy and my sorrow for the world. One doesn't cancel out the other. In fact, it is precisely because I love and find joy in creation that my heart breaks when I learn that prairie birds are declining faster than birds in other habitats. Despite this heartbreak, I find that the world is still beautiful. It is still worthy of my care and attention. Loving the world means being willing to let it break your heart. This is what opens the door to solidarity and new ways of living that challenge business as usual. Our practices of hope are a resistance to the death-dealing powers that want to keep us overwhelmed and unable to take action.

Eco philosopher David Orr has famously said, "Hope is a verb with its shirtsleeves rolled up." If we embody hope as a practice, rooted in the conviction that this life is beautiful and worthy of our care, protection, and joy, then it becomes realized when we work together to make that life possible for all people and places.

MELISSA RITZ

Zoe Matties lives within the watersheds of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. She enjoys eating veggies from her garden, exploring the woods with her dog, and watching birds. She works for A Rocha Canada helping people of all ages learn to love and care for the places they call home.

Photo: Cherry Laithang

Come, Hidden Wisdom:

An Interview on Vocation and Poetry with Rev. Dr. Malcolm Guite

Rupert's Land News: In the workshop you conducted recently while you were in Winnipeg, you said "I'm more a priest when I'm writing a poem, and I'm more of a poet when I'm celebrating the Eucharist." Can you tell me more about what you mean by this?

Malcolm Guite: I had the vocation to be a poet, in a sense, first. When I first realized I had a vocation to priesthood, I thought it might be uncomfortable to do that too, despite the great series of examples that had gone before me. But I gradually came to realize that what you want to achieve from a poem is to invite people, through the richness of language, onto a kind of transformative journey. So, one enters the poem, and then through the images of the poem and the elevation and beauty of the language, they have something transformative happen to them, and they emerge from out of the poem changed; they've been on a journey. Then they're sent back from the poem out into the world with clearer vision.

Now, I realized once I became a priest and I was, in every sense, celebrating the liturgy, that that's exactly what happens in the Eucharist—and in any liturgy. The liturgy is itself poetry. So, in a sense, the thing I was trying in my small, particular way to do as a poet, I was also invited to do as a priest. I came to understand the liturgy in poetic form, and it followed therefore that I began to think about poetry liturgically.

Gradually, it got to the point where I realized that when I write poetry, the priest in me is fully alive to what I'm doing. And there's a pastoral and priestly and sacramental element to the way I write poetry. But I also realized that my whole feeling about liturgy and what it is, and what it is pastorally, was poetic. So now I see the two vocations as absolutely a single vocation mediating itself in different aspects.

RLN: You mentioned that you felt the call of a vocation towards being a poet before being a priest. Can you tell me what you've learned about vocation as a whole, and then how you have experienced this in your life?

MG: Vocation is a universal thing. The first vocation to which we have responded fully, all of us, is the vocation to exist. We are called into being by God. It's a really important insight—one I drew particularly from Coleridge. He sees the cosmos itself as a divine poem—one that is right now being uttered forth. For Coleridge, the cosmos is less like a piece of clockwork, and more like an utterance. If I give you a poem, you could spend a year on the chemical composition of the paper and the ink and you could look at the geometrical formation of the letters, and you could study it without ever knowing it was a poem. Then, if you discovered it was a poem, that wouldn't take away the truth of any of the physiological things you found out about it, but it would add something to it.

So, once you've got the idea that God speaks, He says, "Let there be light;" "Let there be cosmos;" He also says "Let there be you; let there be me; let there be Malcolm." That has implications. It means that you only exist because God has spoken and called you; He has literally called you out of nothingness into being. That's a vocation. The "voca" bit of the verb is literally "call" in Latin. In a sense, He's not only calling you, He's expressing you; He's vocalizing you.

Coleridge puts this beautifully in a letter he wrote to Thomas Clarkson, the great founder of the campaign against the slave trade. Clarkson had a bit of a crisis because he knew it was so obvious that slavery was wrong, but every two years over twenty years of campaigning, Parliament rejected the bill to abolish it. Clarkson sent a letter to Coleridge saying that he was not just giving up on campaigning, but that he was losing his faith. He had no idea anymore of the divine. Coleridge says, and this is so good, "My dear Clarkson, don't worry for a moment at all whether you have any idea of the

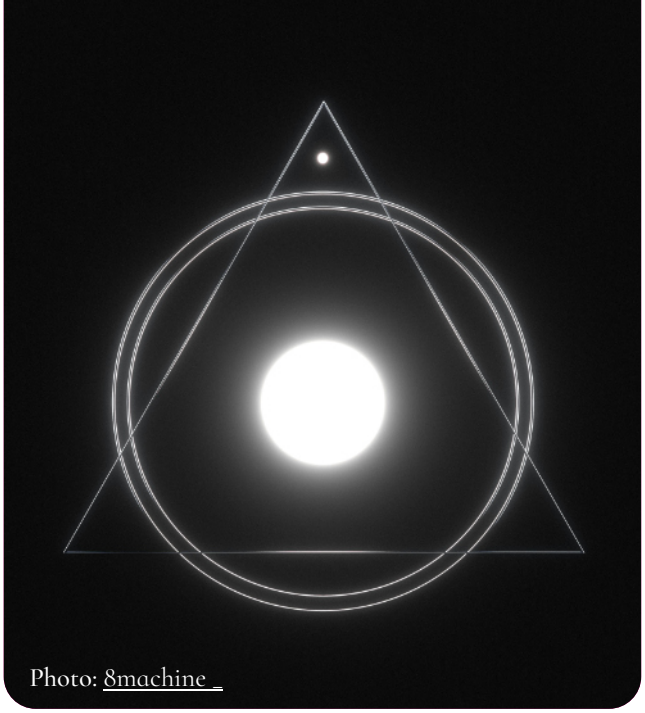


Photo: 8machine _

divine, but never forget that you are a divine idea. You were there in the mind of the logos, in the mind of the eternal Word, before the beginning. You and I are logoi from the logos—we are little words from the Word—that were spoken." That's a really radical idea. He tells him not to give up because Christ has not finished saying to the world what he intends to say through Thomas Clarkson. So, he sums it up: "Try not to become an impediment in the speech of Christ."

Now, think about all this in relation to the question of vocation. Think about every one of us as not only poems in ourselves being spoken about by God, but parts of this bigger epic that he's doing, which is the cosmos and the world. Every single person has a unique part to play in this utterance. Every person is made in the image of God, and one of the things He makes us to do is to do our own making and creating and shaping. And that doesn't just mean if you're a painter or a poet or a musician; it means if you're a father or a mother or a daughter or a son or a colleague or a friend. You have a creative role in shaping these things. That vocation is universal. But within that, we discern the particular things we think God is calling us to do.

I wanted to be a poet simply because my mother had given me lots and lots of poetry as a kid and I loved it. I thought I was called, vocationally, to be a schoolteacher. For five years, that's what I was; I taught English and Drama in a public high school for five years. I got married by then and my wife was a deaconess, so I thought one in the family was enough. But I was deeply studying John Donne, particularly his sermons, and in the course of that I began to wonder whether I had a call to priesthood.

And I put it off for a while, first being trained as a lay reader and then a lay preacher, but I realized there was still a sacramental aspect to it. And I thought it would be really embarrassing if I had a vocation to the priesthood because at that time, my wife was a deaconess and then a deacon, and we were still a decade off the final movement that allowed women to be ordained priests. I thought it would be totally wrong if I was ordained a priest before my wife, considering she's five years my senior and had been in ministry for quite some time before she even met me. So, I said to God, "I'm going to take my wife's opinion on this question as a word from You." I was pretty sure she'd say, "one in the family is enough." Of course, when I said to her, "Look, I know this is a dumb idea, but I wonder if God is calling me to priesthood." And she just looked at me and said, "Of course, I've known that for years." So, my last excuse was taken away from me, and I pursued that vocation. And I wrote this poem, which drew from the first of the Advent antiphons, "O Sapientia," which was just about the very things I've been saying to you about the nature of vocation:

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

So, I then think of all my poems as words from the Word, and I see the divine Word as underlining the meaning of everything. The two vocations of poet and priest came at different points in the time of my life, but I now perceive them as twin aspects of a single vocation, which is partly the vocation just to be the particular person that I am and no other.

RLN: What advice would you have for those who want to engage more with their prayer through poetry?

MG: The first advice I give is actually a piece of advice I received from the end of a poem by Seamus Heaney. He's got a sequence called "Station Island." In one of these, number 11, he records a piece of advice he was given from the other side of a confessional grille, which is to read poems as prayers. This doesn't just mean to read poems which happen to be prayers as prayers, or to just read religious and Christian poetry—it means to read poetry. How do we do that? Read poetry consciously in the presence of the Holy Trinity. Imagine reading a poem and reading it with Jesus. Jesus is looking at it with you; you are sharing it with your Saviour. That's transformative because you're bringing everything into the light of Christ.

One of the greatest poets in the Anglican heritage, George Herbert, has a poem called "Prayer," in which he offers you, in the space of a sonnet, twenty-six different emblems or images to help you reflect on what prayer is. It doesn't even have the verb to be; it's prayers:

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

Every one of these, if you reflect on them, teaches you about prayer. To take one up for an example, the second line, "God's breath in man returning to his birth," is a prayer. Now, obviously, he knew that the word "breath" in the Greek of the New Testament and in the Hebrew of the Old Testament simultaneously means "spirit" as well as "breath" and "wind." And so, if you think prayer is God's breath in the return to his birth, one way of looking at that is that in just a couple of breaths, you can go through the entire creation and salvation story and enact it again. When you breathe in, you can be Adam in the garden. Everything starts with this. And God breathes into the human being, into Adam, and Adam became the living spirit. So, our breath in is God's breath out. You can breathe in and you can recognize that you're created, alive, and a conscious living being. And this isn't just air in my lungs, this is the gift of the spirit of God. And you can thank God for that.

But now I have a problem. I can't hold my breath forever. But I know it's the breath of life. I have to breathe out, but every time we breathe out, we're rehearsing that last breath. One day we are going to have to give the breath of life back to the place it comes from. So, I can breathe in with Adam in the garden, but who can I breathe out with? Well, just as I'm wondering about how to do that, I find myself with the second Adam, and He's beside me, and He's stretching out His arms on the cross, and He breathes out His last. He says, "God, into Your hands, O Lord, I commit My spirit." And I think that if He can do it, I can do it. His breath can carry my breath. And I breathe out.

Photo: Thomas Ciszewski

But it's more than just that. Because if I'm in the garden with Adam, then I'm with Christ on Good Friday when He breathes His last and dies on the cross. Now, I've heard people describe Holy Saturday, that strange poise between Good Friday and the glory of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, as the earth holding its breath. And I thought, no, it's not the earth that's holding its breath, it's heaven that's holding our breath. Our life has been breathing.

Then, what happens on Easter Day? It's a new genesis scene. Jesus appears in the upper room to His terrified disciples. And what does He do? He breathes on them and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit. So, I breathe in with the first Adam, I breathe out with the second as He dies, and then when I breathe in the second time, this is my risen life; the risen Lord Jesus is breathing into me. And I know that I have the breath of the life of heaven, and as I die, I will be risen again. I can do all this in a couple of breaths. A lot of people talk about centring and breathing exercises for your prayer life, but that's not a new idea. So that's just one example of one line of a poem, one image of twenty-six, that can guide one in prayer.

RLN: Have you explored poetry in other languages? If so, what has that taught you about their language and form?

MG: I had a reasonably good grasp of French when I came up to the university, and I was quite influenced by French poetry mainly in terms of sounds and its usefulness in English. There was a particular verse of a poem by Verlaine that I really appreciated:

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon coeur
D'une langueur
Monotone.
Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure;

I think I appreciated it because I was able to understand its meaning just from the sound of it before I was able to use my vocabulary about the long sobbing of the violins in autumn. The translation is inadequate to that. So, sometimes it's good just to read it in the original language to hear the sound of it. Sound, in that sense, is untranslatable.

Photo: Josep Molina Secall

Now, let's look at a book of poetry that's in another language, which I don't have, but which is hugely influential on me, and that's the book of Psalms. Now, obviously, one of the difficulties of translating poetry, particularly rhyming poetry, is that you can't translate the rhymes. But, you have this extraordinary, basic poetic technique of the Psalms, which is called parallelism. So, "Open my lips; my mouth shall show forth thy praise." The same thought is presented in a slightly different form. C.S. Lewis in his reflections on the Psalms coins a brilliant phrase when he says that the rhyming of the Psalms is thought-rhyme, not sound-rhyme. He regards this as an act of providence because you can translate the thought-rhymes successfully in a way that you cannot translate simple sound.

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