

***Leading Causes of Life:***  
***5) Not Wishful Thinking: Hope***  
***Psalm 42:1-5, Ephesians 1:15-23***  
***September 27, 2009***

Recently I heard about an experiment of four monkeys placed in a room by themselves. The only thing in the room is a giant pole with a bunch of bananas at the top. Once allowed in the room, the monkeys smell and see the bananas. Immediately they start climbing the pole to eat the bananas. What happens is fairly predictable: the strongest and boldest monkeys go up the pole and eat some bananas. When they have their fill they come down and the smaller, skinnier monkeys go up to eat and come down happy. Then the scientists put a bucket of water on a pole in between the bananas and the monkeys so the when the monkeys try to get the bananas, they knock the bucket of water and are doused. They jump down from the pole because they hate being doused with water. Gradually the monkeys stop climbing the pole to get bananas.

Eventually the scientists take the water away, but the monkeys still will not climb the pole. That negative experience of deprivation and hardship stays with them. They can't imagine a different reality. The scientists take one monkey out and put in a new monkey who has never experienced water falling on its head. The new monkey looks up, sees the bananas, and runs up the pole, but the other monkeys grab its legs and tail to pull him down. They won't let him go up the pole. What's going on in the monkeys' heads? Three monkeys think they are protecting the new monkey. They've experienced pain and hardship and don't want that to happen to the new monkey, but the new monkey has never experienced the water dousing and he knows there is nothing between him and the bananas. But the other three monkeys will not let him consider that reality. They pull him down.

Gradually they replace each monkey with a new monkey. Every time the monkeys pull down the new monkey who comes in and tries to get up to the bananas. Finally there are four monkeys, none of whom has ever had water poured on their head, and none of whom will try to get the bananas. The next generation of monkeys who come in will not even try to climb the pole. It is as if they enter in and know that the ethos is one of hopelessness. The monkeys are stuck in despair and cannot imagine a reality that is different.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we get stuck in a downward spiral of despair that saps us of energy and hope for the future. We may feel assaulted by the economic downturn, changing health conditions, and other challenging circumstances. Daily we are bombarded with news of the war in Afghanistan, bombings in the Middle East, terrorist scares, crimes, and global climate change. It is easy to fall into a slump of

despair. Our capacity to hope for new life in the face of so much that fights against life is diminished. Pessimism and cynicism easily creep in where there is a vacuum of hope.

The good news is that we are not monkeys. We humans have the capacity, when reminded by scriptures and the Divine, to think of life cyclically, to remember that new life follows loss. We have the ability to understand that the present reality, be it very good or very bad, will not have the last word. It is not the forever moment.

Hope is one of the five leading causes of life. Hope differs from optimism or wishful thinking. Magical thinking is often an escape from life. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains the difference between optimism and hope. “Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope.”<sup>ii</sup>

Hope is based on the faithfulness of God and the possibilities of God’s promise. Hope exists irrespective of circumstances. Hope is based on God’s coming into the darkness to dispel it with divine light.

Many in our church family have experienced or are currently in the midst of challenging caregiving situations. Whether you are caring for an aging relative, a child or grandchild, a loved one suffering from mental illness, undoubtedly there are moments when you are tempted to feel hopeless. In many circumstances, there are no simple fixes, no easy answers. The pathway forward is often foggy. Feelings of exhaustion and hopelessness are close to the surface. It is tempting to give in to despair and fall into the pit, crying with the Psalmist, “Why are you cast down, O my soul and why are you disquieted within me?”

But having expressed his despair, the Psalmist is able to feel a glimmer of light, praying, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” Hope enables us to face and cope with the realities of life. Hope motivates us to take even a single step forward into an uncertain future, trusting that the way forward will open. Our hope is anchored by all of the other leading causes of life: the connections that are so vital to all of our lives; a sense of meaning and purpose; the call to be an agent of action; and abundant blessings. All of these forces of life give us reasons to hope in the possibilities of new life.

The philosopher Aristotle taught us that if we want to understand anything, we have to consider not only what is but also what it is capable of becoming. He applied this idea especially to human life. Every human life, even if it has sunk into failure, has within it hidden possibilities for renewal. So long as a person remains alive, that person can never be written off. There is still the possibility of a new flowering in which there may emerge qualities that reverse and redeem the

failure.<sup>iii</sup> Aristotle bids us look on things not as they actually are but in terms of what they have in them to become. That's hope.

In *The Agony and the Ecstasy* Irving Stone recounts the story of Michelangelo's sculpting of one of his most famous statues. Sculptors came from all over Europe to take part in a sculpting contest. The stone to be sculpted was a giant marble slab seventeen feet high. As the artists filed by to view the stone, however, one by one they shook their heads in dismay, for that stone was marred in vital places by nicks, pits, and gouges. Michelangelo, the greatest of the world's great sculptors, paused longer than the others, and he saw taking shape in his mind's eye a form. From that marble column he carved his magnificent *David*.

Even within a broken life, there is the possibility of renewal. Hope clings to the potential of a new flowering even where there has been loss.

The surprise winner of eight Oscars this year was *Slumdog Millionaire*. The story takes place in India. It is about two brothers and a little girl who lose their mother. They live in the slums of what was then Bombay, but has become Mumbai. There in the slums they are persecuted and homeless, a difficult life for anyone, especially children. They are picked up by an orphanage that is not a caring place, but an organization that exploits the children. It sends them out into tourist areas to beg for money. They go so far as torturing, blinding, and maiming the children so they look more pitiful to get more money for those who run the orphanage. It is a horrible existence.

Yet these resilient children escape the orphanage and go on to have adventurous childhoods. They are determined to succeed. They are set on overcoming the hardship that has scarred their lives.

The movie begins when one of the little boys is a young man on the quiz show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* He is winning the quiz show, amazing the whole country because they call him a slumdog. He has very little education and they can't believe he is getting all the answers to these hard questions right. They even accuse him of cheating, wondering how he could get this far in the contest. The movie shows him answering every question. He answers correctly because he is reflecting on some aspect of his childhood, usually a hardship, which gives him the answer to a question. When, for example, asked about the maker of a gun, he remembers a terrible scene from childhood in which a gun is pointed at him by his brother. Out of that painful experience, he is able to succeed and move to the next level.

It's an amazing movie about the power of hope and resilience. This young man refuses to be like the monkeys, caught in a downward cycle of despair. He is able to push back the present reality and imagine a better future for himself. He is even able to mine his worst and most painful experiences for some wisdom to carry him forward. The movie has a predictable and corny ending, but the story of

how this young man lives his life and his resilience is biblical. It is a story of life-giving hope.

My friends, may you know the hope to which God has called you and the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those who believe. Remember that the present reality, whether it be very good or very bad, is not the last word. It is not a forever moment. There are hidden possibilities for renewal in every situation and in every human life. We must claim the courage to hope that we can make the world a better place. Thanks be to God for the precious gift of hope!

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<sup>i</sup> Rev. Lillian Daniel, "Seven Fat Cows," February 1, 2009, First Congregational Church, Glen Ellyn, Illinois, [www.firstconge.org](http://www.firstconge.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 166.

<sup>iii</sup> John MacQuarrie, "Hope as Idea and Reality," *Living Pulpit*, Vol. 1, 1991.

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