

Christian Hope

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In my household lately, we've had cause to talk a lot about hope and its relationship to our faith. See, we're in our mid-30s, so our felt experience of the world around us has trended generally downward since we were able to start watching and understanding the news. Columbine happened when I was 12, and by the time I'd weathered my first two big recessions, school shootings were edged out of the news—not because they weren't happening, but because they weren't so much news anymore, and they were replaced by climate crisis, public reckoning for centuries of white supremacy, insurrections at the Capitol, and a global pandemic killing millions. I personally have been very lucky (and I use that language intentionally—I don't think there is anything as holy as “blessing” in the occasional idiosyncratic provision in the midst of unjust and scarce systems). But my sense of progress as a force or trend that operates in the world is skeptical at best. And so I'm reckoning with the fact that so often, in Christian spaces, this progress is what we are taught of Christian hope. Slowly, we seem to say, year after year, through the vision and sweat of many, the faithfulness of people and the provision of God, brick is placed upon brick toward the building of the tower that will be a “more just, verdant, and peaceful world” as they say on NPR. Except, I'm looking at the tower, and honestly it does not look stable enough to add another layer of bricks, and it seems like people and systems are pulling out load-bearing blocks from below like this is a Jenga game, even as they add flashy private trips to space and same-day delivery to the swaying progress tower's civilized peak. In short, if Christian hope is building a tower, I'm not sure Christian hope (or the tower) is viable.

It's not my intention to be overly grim—even in the midst of Lent. But I think it is important, always, to say things out loud (or in this case in print) that are true—and the above things are true. So if we are going to talk about the good news of Jesus Christ, then it has to be alongside the truths we know and experience in our lives. Naming progress as a grace of Jesus gives me a lot of questions about the reality and efficacy and power of Jesus. And rightly so. Because as I've experienced it, Jesus is a lot more real than progress as I've described it.

So what kind of hope are we called to?

Well, how we adapt and innovate has a lot to do with what we are hoping for. I want to argue that Christian hope—the hope based not in the slow stacking of incremental improvements upon people and the world, but rather based on the God who intervenes from outside history, the God who comes to us not from the accumulating baggage of the past, but from the in-breaking grace of the future, that hope—is much more powerful and much more imaginative than progress. Our (or perhaps more honestly, my) impulse is to build a sturdy tower heavenward, making progress more plausible and likely, and calling that hope. But this puts a lot more faith in my own engineering than hope or trust in the grace of the wind of the Holy Spirit. So, (as one must often do in the adaptive and innovative ministry work I am called to), I'm wondering if we can shift metaphors. What if Christian hope isn't a tower we are building toward the world doing and being better? What if, instead of being called to build a sturdy edifice out of our past, we are called to turn ourselves over to the wind of the future? Perhaps the hope is not to be strong and grow tall, but to be nimble and grow brave. What if we are called not to resist the wind with our growing strength, but to lean into that wind as a dance partner, rather than a threat? What if hope isn't that we would never fall, but rather that we would have the strength to throw

ourselves backward, to risk falling over and over, so we might be caught in the embrace of a skillful dance partner God who offers a strength and grace we could never build simply from the life we have already lived?

Indeed Christian hope is really about God. Hoping for my own improvement is not Christian hope. When I think of the God that I hope for, it is not the one that makes me strong enough to endure, but that one who lifts me off the ground with strength I could never muster, and enables me to move lightly with and in response to the realities around me. In short, I don't think Christian hope is about becoming more sturdy—just a *bit* more able to be good or just, but rather about doing and being things, as individuals and communities, that would be entirely impossible without a strength that comes not from us, but from a God who engages us where we are and takes us beyond where we have been.

Let us not put our hope in a better personal or governmental response to COVID-19, not only because it likely isn't coming, but because it is too small to be worthy of our hope. Yes, it would be very helpful to have basic medical infrastructure, but what would it look like to imagine something larger and more fundamental, something even implausible for us and for the world? What if instead of hoping in the likely—we hoped for dynamic and loving community within and beyond the church, deep investment in thriving of those across ideological lines, or even a systemic and personal care for the people and creatures around us, and a healing of the natural world? What if we imagined collaboration, mutual support, and solidarity for victims of racism, violence, exploitation, and pain? What if we started to believe that God and what God has for us is bigger than what is plausible? What if we imagined resurrection?