

## Hope: A Bridge to the Future—An Uncertain Beginning Live Into Hope

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stewart Pattison

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

June 29, 2025

I titled this sermon “An Uncertain Beginning” because, as I stated three years ago, the older I get the less I know. So, here I am, knowing even less than I did. Yet knowing less is not necessarily a bad thing. As the old saying goes, the less you know the less there is for you to forget.

I begin this way because as we start our journey of reflection on the theme, “Hope: A Bridge to the Future,” we have a lot of forgetting to do. Perhaps a better word from the mystical tradition would be more accurate: We have a lot of *unknowing* to do. This is to say that we need to examine all that we *think* we know about what hope is. Indeed, we may even need to look at what we think a bridge is. Finally, we may need to ask ourselves where are we standing and to what future do we want to build? Are there strangers on the other side of this hypothetical chasm who, like us, are seeking to build toward us?

And having engaged in the practice of *unknowing*, can we begin to discover a capacity for a deeper knowing? Might we discover that what we are coming to “know” is really a remembering of meaning and purpose that has been with us all along?

I don’t pretend to have answers for any of these questions. They are wonderings that have been sown in me. Your own reflections are far more important.

The first and most obvious unknowing we must face is the idea of hope as a projection of our desire to feel secure, loved and appreciated and to have control over what happens to us in life. They are primarily projections of feelings of insecurity: a desire to feel safe and for life to make sense. Hope here is another way of saying “wouldn’t it be great if....”. Or, stated differently: “Everything would be better if only....”.

Nor can hope be a bridge to something we already believe or something we can create if only we work harder and unite for a common purpose. The painful fact of this moment in history there *is* no *common* purpose. The historical and cultural narrative which many of us grew up with in this country and which provided a sense of purpose and progress is disappearing. For better or worse we have reached a state where some of us see nothing but evil and oppression in the United States while others passionately seek to reinstate the idea of the greatness of America. There are now two forms of American exceptionalism—that we are the greatest of nations, and that we are the worst. Hope which accepts either of these

assumptions will build no bridges to the future. It will only strengthen our identities as people who are right in our own eyes.

In addition, the slow erosion of Christianity as the civil and cultural religion of this country has emptied churches and led to generations who are no longer exposed to the biblical story which has grounded so many of us. We are living in a time of a loss of context. Instead of God being our co-pilot, we have artificial intelligence.

So what is hope? The motherlode of meaning is found in the Hebrew scriptures. I count nine different words which are translated into English as hope. These renderings include: confidence, refuge, expectation, waiting, to remain or abide, to cause to trust. In Hebrew, hope is a multifaceted jewel whose significance cannot be captured by any one meaning. Indeed, any one meaning cannot help but imply all the others. To have confidence includes expectation, taking refuge, abiding, and trusting. The psalm we read earlier in the service is a wonderful example:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.  
Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!  
If you, O Lord should keep track of iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness  
with you so that you may be held in deepest reverence.  
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word do I hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for  
the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.  
O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is  
steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.  
It is he who will redeem Israel from its iniquities. (Ps. 130)*

The very next psalm adds yet another dimension to what it means to hope:

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too  
high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too  
marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the  
weaned child that is with me.  
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and  
forevermore. (Ps.131)*

For me, the greatest statement of hope in the entire Bible does not use the word hope at all. It comes at the end of Psalm 27 and it has steadied my steps more than any other scripture: *"I believe that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord."*

The King James version hits my reality even more deeply: *"I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."* (Ps.27: 13-14.)

Hope in the Hebrew scriptures is not a polished gem which we wear on our finger to exhibit our spirituality. Nor is it optimism about the future. It is an earthy, gritty commitment against all the evidence. It is what the apostle Paul, speaking of Abraham's trust that God would provide a son to himself and his wife, Sarah, called "hoping against hope." (Rom. 4:18). It is illustrated by the story of two rabbis who through exhaustive study reached the conclusion that God does not exist. Having reached this conclusion, the one rabbi was surprised to discover the other praying. "Why are you praying when there is no God?" The other replied, "What does that have to do with it?"

If hope in its raw and unadorned meaning lies in what remains after all illusions are stripped away, then perhaps we have found the rock on which we can stand in the midst of what David calls in Psalm 57 "the destroying storms" which swirl around him and now us. Perhaps it is hope that remains after the earthquake, hurricane winds and devastating fires encountered by Elijah on Mt. Horeb. What remained, like real hope, is impossible to translate. It is usually rendered "a still, small voice." I am drawn to that which reads "the sound of sheer silence."

Finally, it is important to recognize that in both Hebrew and Greek, hope is a verb. It is the result of a choice. In ancient Greek the word *elpis*, used by the apostle Paul, denotes that hope is what emerges when we have shed all human expectations. Thus he writes in his letter to the Romans:

*Therefore, since we are justified through faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom. 5:4-5)*

Paul identified himself as a Jew and as such his understanding of hope grows out of the conviction that the path to authentic hope is the path of suffering the loss of all the things we rely on for security, affirmation and control which are not rooted in utter trust in the unseen yet present life of the Creator.

I want to conclude this beginning of our summer-long reflection by returning to the questions with which I began.

First, that whatever hope is, it is an experience which we only encounter when we embark on the journey of relinquishing all the attachments to people, things and circumstances which we depend on for security, affirmation and a feeling of control over our lives.

As we do this through the spiritual practice of prayer and discernment and of active involvement in the life of the world both privately and in community, we are slowly liberated from the power of external events to determine our sense of orientation and well-being. With Elijah, we are invited to dis-identify with the destroying storms which rumble, blow and burn around the mountain so that we can recognize and consent to receive the sound of sheer silence which is, in the words of Fr. Thomas Keating, God's first language.

Notice that in the scriptures hope is not something we have or don't have. It is a choice we make often against all the evidence. It requires us to face all the ways we depend on external sources to consolidate our identity, and to defend against forces which threaten our sense of security. Hence the journey of hope is most likely to grow and endure in community. As the psalmists cry out, "*O Israel, hope in the Lord!*"

If we follow this path it is possible that we will discover that *we* are not *building* a bridge. We may become aware that *we are becoming part of a bridge*. To borrow from the first letter of Peter, we are becoming "'living girders and pilings'" of a structure on which work began long before our births and will continue long after our deaths by countless generations. Let this sacred confidence give us the peace and serenity to trust that it is enough to be a part of this great work. Amen