



## Living Hope.

The ancient Greeks told a story. We know it as the story of *Pandora's Box*; though in the original account it was so much a box, as a “jar.” (Unfortunately when Erasmus of Rotterdam first translated the story in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he rendered the Greek word for “jar,”  $\pi\iota\theta\omicron\zeta$ , as if were actually  $\pi\upsilon\zeta\iota\zeta$ , meaning “box,” and the mistranslation has endured from that time till now.)

Now who is Pandora? Well, according to the Greeks, she was the very first woman ever created, not unlike the biblical Eve. According to Hesiod (Hesiod was a contemporary of Homer, by the way, who wrote in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era) it was Hephaestus—or Vulcan as he was known by the Romans—who created Pandora in his great cosmic forge, at the direction of Zeus. Once she was created, other gods and goddesses stepped into endow Pandora with many gifts: Athena gave her clothing; Aphrodite, beauty, Apollo, musical ability, and Hermes, speech.

But unlike Eve—who was created to bless her husband, and assuage his desperate loneliness; and together with him be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth—Pandora was made to curse the race of men, and unmake the world; not to mention to enable Zeus (“king” of gods) to take revenge on some people who had offended him; in particular, Prometheus, his one-time ally who had had the effrontery to steal fire from heaven, and Epimetheus, brother of the same. Now for the sake of retribution Zeus had already chained Prometheus to a rock, and commissioned an eagle to peck at his liver, but to revenge himself upon Epimetheus, he had an altogether different plan!

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But while Prometheus was wise and prudent, more or less, Epimetheus had always been somewhat of a fool. Knowing this, Zeus came to Epimetheus with a “modest proposal.” “Epimetheus, my friend,” said Zeus, “how would you like the beautiful Pandora for your wife. And let me give you a wedding present while I’m at it, my good man. How about this beautiful jar?” “I told you NOT to trust Zeus,” said Prometheus, on hearing this. “In fact never trust Zeus! ! And don’t trust Pandora either. You know how deceitful and charming she is.” (You’ll note there’s just a little misogyny here in the story of Pandora.) But as usual the goofy Epimetheus won’t listen. So that’s the backstory. The only problem is, in Pandora’s jar are lodged all the evils of the world.

“Now make sure you don’t open it,” Zeus tells Pandora: but of course he knows perfectly well that she will. And sure enough, burning with curiosity day after day after day, Pandora finally cracks the lid. And in an instant, out from the jar—or box—fly spirits embodying every

trouble, or sickness, or strife, known to man, all except one. A timid little spirit named Elpis. Elpis. And who is Elpis? British author Tom Holt takes up the story from here.

“He turned away, and suddenly she thought about the old children’s story, where the stupid girl opens the box that Zeus gave her, and all the evils of the world fly out, except Elpis; except ‘Hope;’ which stays at the bottom; and she wondered what Hope was doing in there in the first place, in with all the other bad things... Then the answer came to her, and she wondered how she could’ve been so stupid. Hope was in there because it was evil too, probably the worst of them all, so heavy with malice and pain that it couldn’t drag itself out of the opened box.”

Hope? An evil? Probably the worst evil? But this morning we just lit the Candle of Hope! The first candle of Advent. But for some people, hope—the first of our four advent candles—is actually an evil: a profound evil. Why? Because if you fill someone with hope for whatever reason—they insist—you will only set them up for disappointment, disillusion, and even despair, for the rest of their lives. Teach someone to hope, and you can then turn and crush them like an eggshell. “’Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all,” said Alfred Lord Tennyson.

But you can never quite say that about hope. As British historical fiction writer Bernard Cornwell insists “We all suffer—as if quoting the Buddha—from what? From dreams. ”Dream big dreams, if you wish, as people are wont to do. Light the candle of hope, if you wish—as we have done—but just be prepared for your dreams to come crashing down (insist some) and the candle of hope to blow out.

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time, laments Macbeth, Shakespeare’s king by stealth, and midnight murder. “And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death,” he goes on, every last hope dashed. “Out, out brief candle. Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

If you follow films, you will know that though Charles Schulz died 15 years ago, a new Peanuts movie opened in Canada on November 6, rendered in state-of-the-art 3D animation. And the reviews, on the whole, have actually been very good. And if you are familiar with the work of Charles Schulz You will know that one of the most familiar and beloved tropes from the original comic strip is Charlie Brown’s annual attempt to kick a football, held of course by Lucy, something Schulz revisited almost every fall for 50 years, beginning in 1951, when it was Violet who held the football, and not Lucy. It’s Grey Cup Sunday after all, right?

Every fall, Charlie Brown faces the same dilemma. Dare he hope, beyond hope, that he will actually get to kick the football Lucy holds for him? Dare he even try? Or will she pull it away at the last moment, yet again? Will he humiliated yet again? Will he be bitterly disappointed yet again? Will she laugh, yet again? Dare he line himself up, to kick the football, or should he just walk away? Poor Charlie Brown can never quite make up his mind—can you blame him? —but usually gives in at the last moment.

“She must be kidding,” says Charlie Brown in the 1970 version of this moment, rolling his eyes.  
“Charlie Brown,” says Lucy, smiling impishly, holding the football.  
“I can’t believe it,” says he, folding his arms across his chest.  
“Charlie Brown,” Lucy continues, “I’ll hold the football, and you come running up and kick it.”  
“How long O Lord? ” Charlie Brown cries out, rolling his eyes.  
“You’re quoting from the sixth chapter of Isaiah, aren’t you Charlie Brown?” asks Lucy, as he positions himself to run for the football.  
‘Until cities lie wasted without inhabitants; and houses without men; and the land is utterly desolate.’ “Actually,” she continues, as Charlie Brown begins running towards the football, “there is a note of protest in the question, as asked by Isaiah. For we might say he was unwilling to accept the futility of resisting the Lord’s judgement.”  
And just as Charlie Brown reaches the football she pulls it away.  
“Argghhh” screams Charlie Brown as he flies through the air, landing flat on his back for the umpteenth time. A rather self-satisfied Lucy then comes and stands over Charlie Brown.  
“How long? All your life, Charlie Brown, all your life.”

Indeed, the nation of Israel had been waiting for the salvation of the Lord. Waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Many people had grown heavy with malice, and pain, and no longer dared hope that God would have mercy on them once more, or that light would shine out of darkness. Speaking of Isaiah, he had already prophesied a coming age of peace, but what of that?  
“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,” wrote he. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her, that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double blessing, for all her wrongdoing. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all men, all women, will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

But the problem was, when? When? How much longer would people have to wait for this?  
How long, O Lord, how long?

I have had moments in my own life where I have grown tired of waiting for God. Where I have lost my ability to hope. Where I have given myself to despair. And you? It’s called being human. Sometimes, when I’m feeling really hopeless, I just go to bed. I pull the covers over my head, and stare into the nothingness of inner space. I have given up walking by faith, and have returned to walking by sight. As you know, when people grow tired of waiting, and lose hope, depression sets in, they—or we—actually begin to see the world in a whole new way. In fact, they, or we, sometimes no longer see the world as it really is, but as a mirror image of our own heart. What was good no longer seems good, but evil, or indifferent. What was beautiful, hopeful, meaningful, now seems empty, ugly, meaningless.

Nothing’s changed in any real sense; the objective quality of the universe, in fact, remains exactly the same—but in the eyes of the heart, nothing is as it used to be. “Indeed,” wrote James Hillman, “the world, and God himself, is dead or alive according to the condition of our souls. ”Someone who is depressed, or despairing, soon begins to pull the world down around himself, Like pulling a curtain down about his head, Whereupon everything grows dark, and we

become blind. In time, people even begin to think that life itself is no longer worth living. It happens to the best, the most courageous of people. How then do we have hope?

Here as elsewhere, it is at this moment where we end, and God begins. We end, and God begins. I'll never, once upon a time in the great long history of my world, when a kindly friend paid me a visit—a Christian friend. I was despairing, as usual, about something, and profoundly so. “Colin,” he said, very humbly, —for the last thing that man was, was a pompous spiritual know-it-all—“Though we may despair, God never does. Though we may give up, and despair, and wish never to hope again, God never does. And if God has hope, why can't we? ”“We are hard pressed on every side,” wrote Paul to the Corinthians, “but *not* crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed . . . So we do not lose heart. For though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self, —as it were where God lives—is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an *eternal weight of glory* beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen—our world; our lives; our selves—but to the things that are unseen. —that is to say, the Kingdom of God—For the things that are seen, are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. ” This is hope; where we end, and God begins.

“Know ye that the LORD he is God:” writes the Psalmist. “it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. For the LORD is good;” —there is hope! ! —his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endures to all generations. ”No wonder Peter wrote that “in his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

What is one of Paul's final prayers for the church in Rome? “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope. ”God has not given up on us! By the power of the Holy Spirit, hope is possible. It doesn't matter how we feel or why. It doesn't matter what happens, or why. God does NOT given up on us.

It's the first Sunday of Advent, and Christmas is on the way. Time to watch Charlie Brown Christmas, yet again; the show, which, when completed, was panned. It was panned for being too religious; it was panned for its use of jazz—then seldom broadcast; it was panned for its use of voices of real children, not actresses with unchanged adult voices—pretending to be children; it was panned for not having the obligatory laugh track—just in case the audience couldn't quite divine on its own what was truly funny, and what was not. But it was an instant hit with viewers and reviewers alike. Good old Charlie Brown, always depressed, especially at Christmas.

“By the way, Charlie Brown, I know how you feel,” says Lucy the dime store psychiatrist. “Getting presents and all that stuff. Every Christmas it’s the same. I never get what I really want. I always get a lot of stupid clothes, or toys and stuff.”  
“What is it that you want?” asks Charlie Brown. “Real estate,” says Lucy.

Well, as you know, as the story develops, Charlie’s frustration grows, and grows, and grows. An insanely materialistic little sister; a hopeless Christmas play; a *Lights and Display Contest* which his own dog enters. Finally he exclaims at the top of his lungs:

“Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

“Sure, Charlie Brown, ” answers Linus, suddenly, with great love, “I’ll tell you what Christmas is all about.” Whereupon he walks to the center of the stage, lifts up his hand, and says, “Lights please! And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, “Fear not. For behold I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace goodwill toward men. That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

There is hope. Amen.

Colin Cross