

I Have/But He Will
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Such is the nature of faith...that it cannot truly exist without an element of hope. Or perhaps, it might be simpler to say that a person of faith is never without hope. I have referred to the words of Emily Dickinson before:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all. (Hope is the Thing with Feathers)

Well, I suppose hope can flicker and, at times, almost go out. Things get pretty bleak when your car's engine fails and you are stuck on the side of the road. On a far more serious note, there is a sadness or gloom that can edge in and take over the faithful person's soul, turning life sour or bleak. Yet, for the most part, we are resilient. We seldom give up. We carry on, in the midst of health issues, poverty, struggle and strife. The Psalmists were pretty observant and astute. They knew full well the realities of a harsh land, oftentimes complete with enemy forces. But seldom did they waver:

O God of our salvation;
You are the hope of all the ends of the earth;
And of the farthest seas. (65:5)

And then, of course, there is John the Baptizer, a prophet of hope (if you will). John knows better than anyone exactly what his role is. He is the table setter. The batter who bunts to move another into scoring position. The Interim! It was in his contract that he would not be "the one." Therefore John has prepared the way. I admire how The Baptist draws our attention to this aspect of his ministry. As if to counter the thoughts of others - it's not about me...it's about Jesus. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." Expectation is so essential to the forecast - "I have baptized with water; but (watch now) he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Hope is oftentimes the ability to persevere through the struggles. So that one day God's true purpose might be made known and be revealed. I am convinced also that it is hope that gives people the discipline to continue. The fortitude that refuses to quit or give up.

I recently was speaking with a woman who had just started her ministry in a church. She had been in her new location only two months. Though excited about new assignment, she is clearly more eager to talk about her female partner of some 18 years, who was also a minister, but in the Episcopal Church. This woman also had recently been called to a church, to a permanent position as its Rector. So currently they are both employed, happy and doing what they want. But the woman I was speaking with couldn't help but add... with relief as well as a solemn reminder...that her partner had had to wait nearly a dozen years for such a position to be open to her; for her Episcopalian Church to accept the authentic calling of a lesbian woman as a pastor. My friend sighed, with both relief and regret "All those years of waiting to simply be able to do what you know that you were called by God to do!"

If not for hope? Could we see the light at the end of a tunnel. It is so important to be able to see clearly what you need to be before God. What the world needs to be as a creation of God's love! Hope.

The struggles that John the Baptizer went through! How harsh life must have been. It's not normal to be described as being garbed in camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and honey. He is pictured as one on the edge of society. We only read about his imprisonment and beheading later, but such prophets as he were shunned along the way. We can only guess at how he lived - an outcast, apart from the mainstream.

Yet, certainly, John continues to preach and prepare the way, because of the hope that continues to awaken him each and every day. He sees the light - the light that comes into and penetrates the darkness. The same hope that glimmers inside a person who waits twelve years to be what she knows she is called to be. Do we have such confidence that we are laboring for God? Though we might question our courage and steadfastness in the shadow of John's work, I think we generally do.

Bob Hope, the comedian, really belonged more to my parent's generation. I wasn't drawn to him when I was young. Only as I aged did I appreciate his endearing qualities. In any case, I always think it a wonder that his last name, Hope, seems so fitting for who he was. Here was a person who lived a good long life, and seemingly did so by bringing joy to people. Hope said he might have gone into politics, but he admitted he was not a good enough actor. So, he found his calling in making other people laugh. And of course, he went to where the troops were fighting, knowing that they needed a word of cheer to see them through the conflict at hand. When asked near the end of his life where he wanted to be buried, he told his family, "Surprise me!" A humorist to the end. One always looking ahead!

Hope, it seems, is an attitude by which you live. It tends to permeate your character, so that even when you are feeling down inside, you know the storm will eventually clear. Hope is the anticipation of a positive outcome. Bob Hope conveyed that feeling to millions of people - that the events of our lives would work themselves through in a newer and brighter tomorrow. If we could just keep things in perspective and find the humor to laugh and the joy to make lemonade when you are given only lemons.

John the Baptizer doesn't seem to be a Bob Hope type, does he. He operates from a similar perspective, but within a more serious and sacred calling. In his case, of course, he is about is proclaiming the glory of the One who comes to set all people free. In so doing, he reminds the people that the best is yet to be. That Jesus, the Messiah and chosen one, will give the world new reason to love! He is just the Messenger, as Mark's gospel decrees. He is the opening act. Jesus is the one. "You see what I have done in the wilderness; that is nothing to what is coming!"

Strange man, wasn't he? Daffy, like a duck! A real quack. Not a funny man, like Bob Hope, but an optimistic visionary. In fact, few of us can be as cheery and optimistic as Bob Hope seemed before the camera or the audience. But strangely, we can be of the same mindset as John. Convinced through faith that we too can see beyond the now - to God's future revealed. For truly we know the miracle of what John announces - that in Christ's coming there is a love for all people of all ages; and a hope that endures the test of time. Jesus Christ - born to set the people free! As Christians, how can we fail to revel in the truth - Jesus lived and died and rose that the world might realize its salvation before God.