

The difference between wishing and hoping

Wishes are about what we want. Hope is about what God wants.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue



Hopefully a copy editor won't remove the poorly chosen word that I've stuck at the beginning of this sentence. *Hopefully* is an adverb that ought to be used only to modify a verb. So why do we keep using it in ways that rightfully have the grammar police all over us, as in "Hopefully, this column will speak to your life"? The biggest reason is because we find it easier to express vague optimism and wishful thinking than to take hope to heart within ourselves. I assume greater personal risk and responsibility when I say, "I hope this column will speak to your life."

Frederick Buechner believes we have no business preaching about hope unless we're willing to confront hope in a personal way with enough candor to say what we actually hope for. If we cannot speak of the "darkness and pitiableness of the human

condition, including [our] own condition, into which hope brings a glimmer of light,” then there’s little honesty left for the moment. We’ll merely jettison our day-by-day experience for the sake of replacing it with “just the official, doctrinal, [and] biblical reasons” for hope.

Wishing is a flat and powerless venture. I may wish upon a shooting star, or wish for a brand new car. But so what? What does that wishing add up to? Hope goes so much deeper, requiring risk and assuming responsibility. I hope that my life will be a useful one. I hope to be a good person. I hope always to long for things that matter, like seeing to it that the poor have bread, and that I’ll be found with dough on my hands or driving a bread truck.

Hope has everything to do with what God wants in me; wishing has everything to do with what I want from other people and objects, and even from God. A positive attitude that extrapolates a wonderful future from present circumstance is lovely. But hope grows in the soil of the possibilities of God, not in the dirt of life’s present circumstances. It’s anchored in the faithfulness of God. Here’s the real surprise about hope that makes God’s power behind it so crucial: it thrives especially well in adversity, or in the struggle of what Charles Pinches calls “difficult goods” (see ["How to live in hope"](#)).

Hope is what keeps a cancer patient going when the oncologist has thrown every drug in the pharmacy at the disease, only to find nasty cells still multiplying. Hope is believing in your teenagers with every fiber of your love, even when their absence of good judgment thins your patience to the tiniest thread. Those who live with abundant hope never worry about not knowing what’s around the next corner. They’re confident it will be good for one reason alone—God is good.

When Nelson Mandela received a surprise visit from his daughter near the end of his 27-year imprisonment, and he held his “vulnerable and soft” granddaughter in his calloused hands for the first time, the encounter overwhelmed him. He named the yet-to-be named baby Zaziwe, an African word for hope. Why? “During all my years in prison,” he later wrote, “hope never left me.” Hope is what sustains us when we’re not ready to give up on God beaming light into our darkness . . . or placing life into our weary hands.

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