

## A Little Cloud of Hope

I Kings 18:41-46

Romans 8:22-25

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If we are in need of hope, most of us do not turn to the Hebrew Bible's book of *I Kings*. If we need hope, we're much more likely to turn to the words of Paul in Romans, "But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Yet, once we dwell a while with this little vignette nestled in the book *I Kings*, we just might truly have more hope—and a way of helping us to regain hope when we need it. That's at least what happened to me a long while ago, when I became well-acquainted with this passage.

Let's look closely at what was happening. The whole community was desperate, due to a long-term drought. They had been fasting, not eating or drinking, as they earnestly prayed for rain. All their energies were concentrated upon praying for rain. One dilemma. Which God should they pray to? There were competing religions in ancient times. Since they needed rain so badly, they wanted to be certain to pray to the most powerful God. They had a novel way to solve their dilemma. They had a contest to show what each God could do. We pick up the story today just after the Hebrew prophet Elijah and his God whom we English-speakers know as "The Lord," has beaten those of the religion that worshipped the God they called Baal.<sup>1</sup> Quite understandably, Elijah was not only *grateful*, he was excited and ready to rumble! In particular, Elijah was ready to deal with the people's biggest problem—lack of rain.

Elijah goes off with an assistant to the very peak of Mt. Carmel and crouches on the ground in prayer. Elijah asks the servant to look out toward the sea for any sign of rain and to keep him posted. Six times the servant returns, "No sign of rain." The seventh time scouting for a sign of rain, the assistant returns to Elijah and says that he sees a little cloud "no bigger than a person's hand" arising from the horizon. A little cloud.

What does Elijah do with this news? He tells King Ahab he had better head down the mountain in his chariot, before the gushing rain would make him unable to do so. Needless to say, it rained.

Today we need hope, too. I hardly ever list big crises in sermons, but think of what we are facing today: We need hope as we face the possibility of a pandemic. We need hope as we seek the end of violence and genuine peace in Iraq. We need hope as we believe there are solutions to problems in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Dafur . . . We need hope in relation to global warming, even potential drought today. We need hope in relation to housing, jobs, health care. . .

We are not unlike the people in this little vignette. We, too, turn to God with fervent prayer. It is good that the people back then got their rain. But how on earth can this ancient episode provide a segue for us?

First, I notice that the people who centuries ago were facing severe drought did not pray for snow. "What?" you might say. "Reverend Carolyn, dah, that is obvious.

They were in a Mediterranean climate where it doesn't snow. Why do you point that out?"

One facet of hope is to focus upon what to hope FOR. Finding **relevant** hope is the key. God is in the **relevant** business. I believe that what God offers us in the present is always possible for us, given who we are—as individuals and as a community. Think of it this way: When we take one step, a goal becomes **relevant** that was not before, because now we are in a different place. We are never “hopeless cases” to God, for there is always some hopeful way forward that is **relevant** for us, from God's perspective.

Let's think of some things we might hope for. Mr. X who is ill may hope to regain health. Family Z where there is tension may hope for reconciliation. I myself might hope to be the centerfielder on the Padres.

This may be controversial; some of you may disagree with me, but I don't think I have the ability, size, age, or even gender to make it to the Padres. If you were my spiritual advisor, or frankly, even a good friend, you might suggest gently that I hope for something more **relevant**. You might suggest that I alter the *content* of my hope slightly—perhaps I might hope for the establishment of slow-pitch league of “over-sixty-never-having-played-softball-before-females-who-walk instead-of-run-around-the-bases.” As my friend, you might join me in praying for that. You might even say to me, “Carolyn, I think even that is unrealistic—how about joining Curves?”

It's a serious and delicate thing to discuss with another their hope. But sometimes to help someone gain a **relevant** hope is a huge gift, and I think that God is in that business, too. God keeps offering us **relevant** hope.

Mr. X who is ill may adjust to some limitations upon his health. Rather than hoping for an entire “cure” that will make him just like he was when he was 20 years old, he may find that he can hope anew—for a very good life within limits that he can face, even embrace. I think God helps us to readjust our hope, to make it **relevant**.

Perhaps we can think of hope as either how high to put the bar for a high jump or how low to put it in a limbo contest. Either way, *we need to be flexible and to stretch*. Either way, *we need a goal*—hope, but we can set the bars at realistic, **relevant** heights for us given today's circumstances.

The second thing to notice from this vignette of the little cloud is that Prophet Elijah, the servant, and the large group of people were **persistent**. They wanted, they hoped, and they kept hoping. They did not give up.

I don't think that **persisting** with hope is all that simple. Even if we hope for what is **relevant**, how long do we hope? How **persistent** are we? How long is long enough? How long is too long? 100 resumes? 12 counseling sessions? 90 peace accords?

At age 30, when I was still single, I began to reconsider my **persistent** hope to marry. I began to entertain the idea that I might hope to be *contentedly single*. Seeking **relevant** hope MAY transform us from **persisting** with one hope to a hope that is slightly different. To others it may look as if we've stopped **persisting**, but we've just altered the *content* of our hope—we're still hoping. I believe God is often a partner with us who introduces these novel little shifts.

Literally while I was working on this sermon on Thursday, a good friend from Dayton, Ohio telephoned. We had not talked for months. He shared with me how he and his wife (they are both Methodist clergy) had to face the reality that they could not have children with their DNA. They had hoped for a child of “their own.” Now they were

beginning steps toward adopting a child. He spoke quite honestly about how they had to face their grief even as they were hopeful for a child through adoption. I told him I was just typing the word “relevant” hope. He said something like this: “if you tally up our moments of grief and those of hope, it’s always tilted toward the hope.” This couple will now be **persistent** in their hope, as the child whom they will bless as parents finds his or her way to them through adoption.

Hope is an internal affair; others cannot know what stirs in us. Yet, hope itself seems to be deeply rooted into our human ways of being, God-given.

As Emily Dickinson wrote, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the *soul* and sings the tune without words and never stops at all.” Hope is lodged in the human soul; it is not up for grabs. God may be helping us to **persist** in our hoping—or to make adjustments in the content of our hope—but whatever else we are dealing with, it seems God has tilted us humans toward hope.

The third fascinating element of this story about the cloud no bigger than a hand that brings hope for rain—is that the final stage of hoping is **rejoicing**.

Sometimes we hope and hope, then the moment we reach some goal—we develop the deep friendship we’ve been praying for, we reach a loving reconciliation, or we succeed at an achievement we’ve been working toward—we say to ourselves, or to God, something like “Finally!” Or, “It’s about time.” And, look at what we do. Very likely, we immediately hope for something else. Maybe we spend a full milli-second **rejoicing**.

Alexander Pope is famous for one line in his *Essay on Man*, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” The line *after* that one is not so famous. It is, “**Man never is, forever to be blessed.**”

In other words, we humans tend toward hope. However, the moment we *are* blessed, we jump from the present tense—“I am blessed”—to the future again... hoping yet again for something *else* in the future. Run a mile in 4 minutes and while crossing the line, start hoping to shave a couple seconds off the time of the next race! (“Man never is, forever to be blessed.”)

Today we rejoice that our beloved friend Howard Cutter is recognized as “Layman of the Year” for our entire Annual Conference. His life has been one devoted to one type of service after another—and we are deeply privileged to acknowledge his gifts to us, to the District, to the Conference—to God’s world in many ways.

Let us be sure to take time to **rejoice**, to truly enjoy Howard and his generosity of spirit and to **rejoice** in our connectedness with other United Methodist churches—as we together lift up role models and say, “Thank you.”

Let us restrain ourselves at least for today from thinking, “What’s next?”

Ever since I came to so enjoy this little Scripture passage, whenever I see a little puff of cloud in the sky, I dwell a little on whatever I’m hoping for and feel a boost of hope. You will notice little cards in the pews. Because I find this little vignette so helpful, I couldn’t resist using this imagery to offer you an opportunity to make clear what you are hoping for—today. Please feel free to write or to draw on the card a symbol of something for which you hope—a **relevant** hope—for yourself, others, or some larger community. Of course you can take the card home and meditate upon what you hope for before filling it out. The card itself, which was lovingly glued together by our Office Angels, can help us to be **persistent**, if we place it where we look often.

When we, like Elijah's assistant, see the little cloud, it might stimulate us, as news of the cloud enthused Elijah, to expect what we hope for—but cannot quite see, because it is over the horizon. Remember the famous words of the Apostle Paul about hope—Hope is like being on tiptoe, waiting for what we do not yet see, but waiting for it with both patience and excitement.

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<sup>1</sup> Some say Baal was the consort of a Goddess, not the primary God worshipped in that religion.