

# Theology of Hope

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Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scripture all begin the human story with Adam and Eve in the garden. They are together and happy and all their needs are taken care of and then they make a choice to eat a forbidden fruit after which they are cast out of the garden, away from a loving god and into a world that is broken and includes shame, pain and death. Christian and Muslim traditions then design the rest of human history as ways of returning to the garden, albeit generally after death in Heaven which is a New Eden of sorts.

We have a similar story around election time. There was once something beautiful and perfect but it's been soiled, generally by the ill-chosen policies of the other party. Once we can restore order, get our party back in power, we can bring things back to their rightful places. Everything will be right again once the Democrats win back the Senate or the Republicans occupy the White House. The mania that has taken over the country will end and we can be at peace.

I can't tell you how many emails I got this past week lamenting the Republican sweep election night. Lots of them were from organizations I support telling me that the end is near. Women will lose all their rights, species will go extinct *en masse*, the oxygen in the air is being depleted and we'll all suffocate, food supplies are dwindling and millions of people will starve to death, black children will be gunned down in the streets or taken from their families to live out their lives in jail. And some of those emails and phone calls and drop-ins were from you, wondering what to do next, seeking wisdom or solace.

I don't want to make light of any of those issues. Each is real and there's a lot at stake. What I want to do today is put it in perspective and, even more, I want to give us a new way of approaching the world that steers us away from this all-or-nothing utopian thinking.

It wasn't just this week that I've gotten the doomsday message. It's been heralded for quite some time from- mass media, from my colleagues, from my friends and family and from many of you. There's an air of doom, a something-bad's-a-coming feeling. Many people are bearing the weight of a difficult world, a complicated moment in history. We're killing our planet and each other. All those things I just listed- those things are all happening. We are gunning down our children, people are starving, basic human rights are being challenged in our own country decades after being hard fought and won. It's just exhausting and to add to our cultural depression, we know that none of those things matter since we're killing the platform for life itself, actually ceasing Earth's ability to maintain human life making all the other horrors just details as we slide into the last few years of existence.

You all know, or I hope you know, I care passionately about all these things. But I've been able to avoid the collective malaise and I've done that because I'm a student of history. My friends, we've been here before. This might feel more apocalyptic-y than other times, that this is really the end of life as we know it, but I assure you, we've been here before.

Imagine for a moment believing that God is calling you to leave England, your country and everything and everyone you've ever known to travel to a foreign and uncharted land to start a new society. Or imagine that the powers-that-be have decided to go to war against one of the most powerful nations on the planet to fight for a reduction of taxes, and to start a new country, calling you and your children to bear arms against the Redcoats, a massive enemy. Or imagine that machines have just arrived, changing the way everything is produced. Your entire way of life is irrevocably altered by an industrial revolution that swept in out of nowhere. Or imagine you live in New York and thousands, no millions of people from other countries, speaking other languages are arriving on your shores.

I can go on. The end of slavery. Women voting. The First World War. The Depression coupled with the Dust Bowl. No work, no food and no federal programs to help. Oh wait, imagine the New Deal, a completely new way of understanding the role of government in people's lives. Think of all that was at stake during those election years. How about World War Two. The hydrogen bomb. The nuclear bomb aimed at our country by a nation that has promised to use it during decades of Cold War. The Sexual Revolution brought on in part by readily available birth control. Right? Everything was different. The Technological Revolution is doing it again. Without warning

and in almost no time at all, the way we do everything has changed.

Every time things change, people get afraid. Some of us respond by fighting for the way things used to be. Some of us respond by fighting for ways to incorporate change faster. Not only does the change give us a sense of dis-ease, but the varied responses to it create anxiety in all the unknowing about what's next and the unwelcome clarity around how differently various groups respond to change.

And here we are again. I'm sure some of you are thinking that this is different. This time everything's at stake. It's always different and everything is always at stake. And people will suffer as we sort through it. It might be you or me or anyone we love. I'm not denying that. I'm simply saying that if we take a good long look, we'll see that the world is not going to hell in a hand-basket. Or, maybe I'm saying it is, but we've made the trip before and it's not so bad.

Hope for me comes from this long lens, but it also comes to me in another way. Let's go back to that picture of the Garden of Eden. That place where Adam and Eve had each other and they were warm and safe and had food and shelter. I'd like to suggest that the garden still exists, and that we're still living in it.

The story of Adam and Eve being cast out has never made sense to me. A god who would punish people for all eternity because two people ate the wrong piece of fruit is ridiculous. I could skip the story entirely for that reason, but this story has survived for millennia for good reason, I suppose. It gives us a sense of why we suffer and the hope for a world in which suffering no longer exists. It tells us about a place where everything is as it should be and holds up that utopian vision as a carrot for which we will always reach.

Karl Marx's critique of religion comes into play here. He points out the consequence to this other-worldly hope as a primary reason people can be lulled into complacency when their lives are less than ideal. We can accept the pain of today because we know that after this life, there will be something better. Marx noted that this is a perfect way to control people, to ensure that they don't rebel or otherwise seek social change; they know there is something better waiting for them on the other side. This is the price we pay for – something – and we are rewarded when it's all done. The trick is to learn patience and acceptance.

The premise is that Eden, is elsewhere. I'd like to suggest that Eden is here. We aren't heading to Something Better; this Is Something Better. It's not about waiting for God to reclaim this land or for Heaven to arrive or for a new political party to gain control or the passing of our current cultural crisis. We live in the Land Not Yet *and* we live in the Land Fully Realized. The Muslim poet Rumi wrote, "There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground." I'm saying there are a thousand reasons to kneel and kiss the ground. A thousand ways to know that we have arrived.

We live in Eden. What we have here, now, is good. All of the cultural crises we've faced, they all came to pass. You can tell me that we abolished slavery but we've institutionalized racial inequality; we have a long way to go. Yes, we do. And, we've come a long way. Yes we have a new Jim Crow. But we abolished the old one. With a few exceptions, black people and white people live together in community peacefully. We raise our children in the same neighborhoods, hell we raise our children in the same families. Women's rights are at risk, but nearly 25% of the American Congress will be female in January. Hate crimes against gay, bisexual and transgender people are still rampant, but 32 states in this nation have full marriage equality. The Keystone Pipeline is poised to run through this country, top to bottom, but solar power is also poised to become a common source of energy for our nation as power companies work quickly to meet consumer demand.

I don't have hope in a fantasy Eden that is waiting for us just over the horizon. But I have great hope in the magnificent world in which we currently live.

Twice a week, I work from the Starbucks in Ridgefield, CT. I've spent Mondays and Friday mornings at the same Starbucks with my laptop for the last 3 ½ years. There are stories in that little coffee shop in Connecticut that I've been watching unfold. The woman who confessed to a friend while I was sitting in hearing range, that she desperately wanted children but is having a lot of trouble getting pregnant walked in Friday morning with her toddler twins. People greet each other with joy, accidentally run into old friends, learn about community events, bring warm clothes for local people in need and will fill a box next month with Toys for Tots and just generally take a little time out for a cup of coffee and a deep breath.

There's a man who's been part of that community for years. Because he used to be there so frequently, I know that this middle aged man is the father of a teen-age girl and unmarried. When I first started to notice him a few years ago, he was unemployed and trying to get sober in AA. Every Monday morning he was at Starbucks with a sponsor or other AA friend, generally killing time. He presented as someone unable to find his way into

mainstream culture. He talked too loudly often speaking the kinds of things one might keep to himself. He sat in many different seats over the course of a morning, generally unable to sit still. He borrowed other people's newspapers and relied on his friends to buy him coffee and breakfast. They seemed to take turns sitting with him, giving him money and offering their time and attention so he could get through the day without drinking.

Then one day, an interesting thing happened. Rather than being the one in need, I saw him helping one of his caretakers through what seemed to be some very complicated mathematical formulas. It turns out, this man has a particularly sharp mind and in return for these months of companionship, he started to give something back.

And it wasn't just to his friend that he demonstrated a new ability to see outside himself. That same morning he was helping his companion, I was sitting across from him at a communal table. An email came in that created an emotional reaction in me and tears welled up in my eyes. As he was talking to his friend about something I really didn't understand, he handed me a tissue and offered a smile.

Why do I have hope for this world? Because that man hasn't had a drink since October, 2011. He's writing code full time and sponsoring other men who are in need. I know there's hope because, even though Thanksgiving can be a lonely day for some people, Rose and Eva are once again opening their home for anyone looking to share a meal that day. I have hope because I've seen change happen. Four months ago, I got an email saying that climate justice is not on the UUA agenda. At all. Not a low priority- not even on the list. And last week I got an email saying that climate justice is now one of two top priorities for the UUA. They are devoting significant staff time and funds to address what they now understand to be the critical issue of our day. (Don't tell me the Climate March didn't do anything.) I just learned that the most common question from homeless people in New York in the weeks after 9-11 was, "How can I help?" I also learned this week that Medellin, Colombia, which used to be one of the most dangerous cities on the planet, has made a massive shift after some major green building and is becoming a safe and exciting place to live. No need to make your claims of no-hope to me because I know better.

My theology of hope doesn't rely on an any political party to be in power or any supreme court ruling or any external god to allow us back into the Garden of Eden. My theology of hope relies on the internal gods to awaken to the Garden we are already in, to welcome each other to the majesty of life on this planet. My theology of hope relies on our history, the track record we have of being kind and generous to each other, despite expectations otherwise.

I don't want to lull us into complacency, simply enjoying the life we have. A theology of hope reminds us that we are living a life surrounded by love and joy and our fight for justice, our fight for clean air and racial and gender equality, these are fights for more love, for more of what's wonderful in this life and for equal access so we can all enjoy them. My theology of hope says that we've faced into difficult times before, and we've been OK. We've gathered our steam, joined together, and we born witness to love over greed and hope over fear over and over in human history.

And that's what we're going to do again. There might be reasons some people feel defeated or worried or even angry. But we aren't letting depression or anxiety take over, because that would be a denial of what is most real.

And what is most real is an Eyes Wide Open, We've Been Here Before, Living In the Garden of Eden, Great Big Helping of Hope.