

“Whenever I hear the word ‘hope’..., I reach for my whiskey bottle” (Paul Kingsnorth, “It’s the End of the World as We Know It,” *NY Times Magazine*, April 17, 2014).”

These are the words of Paul Kingsnorth, a writer and environmental activist. I should say writer and *former* environmental activist. After climatologist James Hansen said that to save the earth we must keep atmospheric CO2 levels below 350 parts per million (ppm) and that since they’ve now exceeded 400 ppm, Mr. Kingsnorth has decided to stop with the demonstrations, put down the signs, the bullhorns, end his environmental advocacy and simply accept this reality and grieve. Regarding “hope,” he continues: “It seems to me to be such a futile thing. What does it mean? What are we hoping for? And why are we reduced to something so desperate? Surely we only hope when we are powerless?(Paul Kingsnorth).”

The stages of grief are often characterized as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It sounds as if hope, to him, is evidence of denial. For him, hope that is manifest when one is powerless to do anything constitutes denial. Regarding his grief, he prefers to be in acceptance (however when I read about him, he sounds as if he’s actually in depression).

The prophet Zechariah said, “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope (Zechariah 9:12).”

When Persian King Cyrus allowed exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC, they found a city and temple in ruins. The returning Israelites became overwhelmed, dejected and depressed. They simply gave up. Rather than rebuild their city and temple, they chose to live amongst the rubble for decades.

Then the prophet Zechariah urged them onward, urged them to do something, to take action; urged them not to accept the situation or the conditions in which they found themselves.

Actually, Zechariah urged them to not only rebuild their city and temple, he also urged them, more importantly, to rebuild their relationship, their commitment, and their covenant with God. These too had been lost amongst their depression. The people of Israel, at Zechariah's urging, slowly rebuilt their temple and their city.

Hope is not denial. Cornel west says, "the world is always a mess (Cornel West, *The Sun*, January 2018, p9)." Howard Zinn says that history can be defined, in part, by cruelty.

The United States now seem to be two countries. Might we be headed for civil war of some kind? Not north vs south but perhaps blue vs red, or perhaps, urban vs rural? I'm not sure what that war would look like. Racism and discrimination seem to infect everything. Rampant income inequality is always driving wedges between the have and the have-nots and it might be the root cause of all our societal ills. And, even if we had no societal problems, many say our the earth's fate is already sealed due to the relentless poisoning of our environment. I don't think we live in denial.

Yet who knows, maybe if we tackle corporate greed, we can commit to the creation of meaningful, living-wage jobs here and we can then begin to reduce income inequality. And if people are working in meaningful jobs, contributing to our economy and culture, they may not feel the need to blame or feel threatened by the "other" (i.e. the minority, the immigrant, the gay, the black or brown person). Maybe then we can begin to cooperatively find a way to address our environmental issues.

No, hope is not denial. These issues are real. Again, as Cornel West says, "hope is a virtue... it's an excellence that we aspire to (Cornel West, *The Sun*, January 2018, p9)." And Vaclew Havel calls it "an orientation of the spirit (Vaclav Havel from Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, p219)." Hope is something we must cultivate. But it is more than this; it "gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction (Howard Zinn, *The Sun*, January 2018, p48)." Zechariah says it is an active commitment to rebuilding and re-covenanting.

Yet, hope is dangerous though; for hope without this commitment, hope without action, hope without doing anything, hope without exercising the power you've been given is to be imprisoned by denial, ignorance...or maybe even cowardice.

Hope can give us the energy to act; to move beyond the depression of the "Sorrow that Endureth Forever" toward the aspiration of the "Pleasure that [may only] Abideth for a Moment...[or not at all] (Oscar Wilde, *The Artist*)."

Yet without any promises of success, without any guarantees of a future without cruelty or suffering, I ask that hope be an orientation of your spirit and be a commitment to yourself, to your congregation and to your community. Despite the cruelty, despite the suffering, despite this whole mess we're in, rather than recede into denial, ignorance or cowardice; it's time to behave magnificently.