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Horizons of Hope

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Abstract

"One of the problems we Christians have with hope is knowing whether it's an earthly or heavenly thing."

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> *"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed."*
> *Romans 8:19*
>
> *"But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?"*
> *Romans 8: 24b*

Hope has never been more dangerous. Okay, that's an exaggeration, but I needed something to get me off the block—writer's block, that is, did you *see* the title of this piece?—and that's the best I could come up with.

Let me try again: Hope seems very risky right now. I blame everybody's favorite scapegoat, social media. Posting something hopeful on social media these days (something specifically hopeful, like "I think we can really have positive dialogue with Iran and hold them accountable, too" and not some fortuneteller's generality like "Let your hopes, not your hurts, shape your future") feels like going into shark-infested waters with an open wound.

Then again, hope is a funny thing; it doesn't play well with predators. Or at least, that's the sense I get about hope from Romans 8—especially Romans 8:19 and 24b.

When I went looking for verses about hope, these two jumped out at me. I'm going to consider them in a way that you're generally not supposed to, taking two verses out of context, albeit from the same chapter, and slapping them down as if they were lightning

bolts from heaven. So take my efforts for what you will, but these verses by themselves have a *koan*-like quality to them—they feel like proverbs that might stop the universe—and they both strike me as important instructions for how to hope in this new year.

As I write this, the headlines read that we have crossed the threshold of 300,000 coronavirus deaths in the U.S. Other headlines announce that the first vaccines have been given, and that the first shipment of vaccines have landed in my state. That means we will not have gone an entire winter without a vaccine for COVID-19. The speed of that achievement is astounding. This, too, is a gift of God.

Does the existence of a Covid-19 vaccine mean we have, as the old hymn says, "bright hope for tomorrow"?

When the word "vaccine" comes to mind, for whatever reason, I think of the polio vaccine. I wasn't alive to really understand the threat that polio was in the world prior to the vaccine, but I had an aunt who lived with its effects. Here is my impression: polio came to you from you knew not whence and it disfigured you and killed you by choking you, mainly children. It worked in that same "nature's lottery" sort of way that coronavirus works. Odds are you'll be fine, but if the odds are not ever in your favor, heaven help you—even though heaven mainly stays out of it.

That may seem harsh to say in a piece about hope, but hey, remember 2020? That's the year I write this from. And like I said, the first vaccines are out. That's pretty heavenly.

And that's where one of these *koan*-like verses comes in: "For the creation waits in eager anticipation for the children of God to be revealed."

When I think of creation in "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:21) or "groaning as in the pains of childbirth" (Romans 8:22), I actually think of polio—snuffing out the lives of children, disfiguring young women like my aunt in the prime of her life.

And when I think about that same creation waiting in "eager anticipation for the children of God to be revealed," I think about proper stewards of that creation, and in this case particularly I think of Jonas Salk.

Salk saw the possibility of a polio virus vaccine. Just by comparison to our own vaccine news, it took Salk and his team seven years and more than a million participants to arrive at a vaccine for polio. But they had a vision, and that vision has largely freed part of the creation—the human part—from the terror that was polio.

Now, I know that suggesting Jonas Salk is one of the "children of God" of Romans 8:19 isn't quite right, and that it seems like I'm equating "children of God" and "scientists." They are certainly not the same thing. However, this is where exactly what we mean by "hope" comes in.

One of the problems we Christians have with hope is knowing whether it's an earthly or heavenly thing. On the one hand, we feel like we're supposed to save our ideas of hope for things we can't see, that we're supposed to take this verse about a yearning creation and think only of the final putting right of that creation—which we rightly say is Christ's work to do and not ours—puny, sinful creatures that we are.

However, when human beings have a vision for how a twisted creation might be made straight, that's a high calling. To write one more disfigurement out of the human script as Jonas Salk and his cohorts did in the monumental effort that gave us the polio vaccine—that is the kind of thing, it seems to me, the very creation itself "in bondage to decay" is eagerly anticipating.

I'm not the authority to declare where the kingdom of God might be breaking into this world, but vaccines through which more lives may flourish on Earth rather than be disfigured—that feels like the kind of thing creation itself might be yearning for.

Of course, I know this is a very human-centered way to interpret "creation." Meanwhile, massive species extinction goes on. More on that below.

An even more immediate problem with this more human-centered perspective on hope is that it has very definite horizons. As I write this, another headline reads, "With 'First Dibs,' Rich Countries Have Cleared the Shelves." Vaccine "hope" follows rather particular boundaries in our world.

Here's another example: I have a friend who is a doctor in Honduras. When coronavirus first struck, he was exhausted from dealing with an outbreak of dengue fever which took lives in his community, primarily of children. There is a vaccine for dengue fever, but many people do not have access to it.

The creation is eagerly anticipating the appearance of the children of God everywhere—in some places more than others. We can do better with our horizons of hope.

The horizons of our hope—that's what concerns me about hope and vaccines, about both new and old U.S. administrations, and about both "new normals" and old ones—and it's why the second of the Romans verses is so mind-blowing: "Who hopes for what they already have?" (Romans 8:24b)

As we begin a new year, as we hope in a vaccine, as we hope in or despair of a new administration, is it just our own comfort that we want back? It is just what we have seen and know—to get back to dinner parties and basketball games and church as it used to be and jostling past literally hundreds of people in a large crowd? Yes, because of the sanctions of coronavirus we can now more clearly see those things for the good gifts they were and probably will be again. But if we just want to get back to a bustling economy and the freedom to do as we like whenever we like—if that "old normal" is what we hope for, the Apostle Paul tells us, that is "no hope at all."

In essence, Paul asks us to renew our imaginations, to hope beyond known horizons. This is the value of a new year: we can use the rupture in normalcy that was 2020 to look at the cracks of our culture—to see, as Leonard Cohen says, where the light might be getting in. Reduced traffic and smog left city skylines transformed across the world due to coronavirus lockdowns. Oil crises around the world became non-crises. May the year 2021 not be a return to "old normals"; may it be the time to use our x-ray vision—our unique ability as Christians to see beyond normal horizons—to see how creation is groaning and yearning for the children of God to be revealed.

Before it's too late. Before the Ents march on Isengard. Or the rocks cry out.

So are the horizons of hope earthly or heavenly? Yes. As Christians, it seems to me we err with both horizons: either we become so focused on the beyond that we can't see the creation rejoicing before us here and now, in vaccines and restored wetlands and less straws up the nostrils of less sea turtles; or we become so focused on earthly, known horizons that we fail to imagine something that doesn't yet exist.

In 2020, coronavirus broke things we thought were unbreakable. In that sense we are living through a type of apocalypse: coronavirus has enabled us to see certain seams of our civilization in a way that might help us imagine better ways of re-stitching them together.

I'm not an expert on policing or police reform, but what happened to George Floyd and the violence that has plagued Minneapolis since George Floyd both cry out for shalom. It's not easy to imagine new forms of law enforcement; it's much easier to just go back to the old forms. But going back to what we had, if we are to take Paul at his word, may be "no hope at all."

Which is why in police reform, too, Christians with hope in what is unseen must be working as the children of God to bring restoration.

Realistically, how do we as Christians hope to do this—in any area of culture or creation? And aren't we in danger of a kind of blind triumphalism if we try? Well, of course, but this article is about hope.

And we have scripture to help.

Scripture is by nature horizon-blowing, and it is therefore our map in any horizon-shifting endeavor. The Christmas story, for example, could be such a colloquial story, with such local horizons. City of David, star of David, son of David. A quaint little Jewish story.

But the Christmas story is anything but. God's horizons for hope are never small. They're international ("…behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?…') and cosmic ("'…For we saw his star when it rose…'") right from the start.

In 2021, may we have eyes to see the horizons of hope—those that make the headlines, those that don't, and those that are beyond what we can ask or imagine.