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Trinity on the Green

Where Can we Find Hope and Joy in an Age Like this?

### **Introduction:**

What an appropriate Sunday to stand up here preaching about today's theme, "Joy, Hope and Flourishing."

If I understand the liturgical calendar correctly, this Fourth Sunday is known as "**Laetare Sunday.**"

**And "laetare"** means "to rejoice."

A Sunday in which we can finally see the Resurrection in sight.

Where we finally see that there is a reason "to rejoice."

And while I don't come from a tradition that uses the liturgical calendar, I do come from a tradition that is known for saying:

*"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord."*

That just being in the fellowship of other believers is cause enough to rejoice. And And so I share that sentiment with you this morning so I'm so glad to be here with you, in your fellowship.

With sincere gratitude for the kindness of Deacon. Kyle Penderson, Rev. Elsie Hanley, and your rector, The Rev. Luk De Volder, whose extended this pulpit to me.

### **How can we talk about Hope in an Age like this?**

And yet, even as I talk about the appropriateness of today's theme on hope, joy, and flourishing,

I am acutely aware of the *age* in which we find ourselves in.

Some call this a secular age

"Because all belief systems are contestable

And any claim of Divine action is questioned"<sup>1</sup>

Others call this a scientific age,

Because we set our devotion on altars

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), x.

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Of What can be proven as true  
on what works  
Of progress and technologies that we  
Think will bring about flourishing  
With no real vision  
For what flourishing is.  
Our faith continues to suffer,  
In this Political Age,  
Where tensions are high  
Around what it means to  
To be a *just* America!  
In an age of natural disasters  
And senseless shootings.

*How can we talk about Hope in an Age like this?*  
That's the question that some of you may be asking.  
Not necessarily the ideal time to be rejoicing.

Yet, here we are  
on Laetare Sunday,  
Carving out a time to hope.  
Choosing to rejoice.

In our Old Testament reading for today,  
we find the Israelites asking the same question  
about how they can hope at a time like this.  
In the desert and desolate country to the south of Mount Hor,  
the people of Israelites find themselves.  
*In the wilderness.*  
In a place that represents desolation and dryness.

Stretched, Frustrated, Confused... Questioning...  
with little understanding about *why*  
but with much complaint about *how*  
Complaint about what God allows  
In the wilderness  
In the place betwixt and between.

You see,  
God had promised them a place of flourishing,

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a land flowing with milk and honey.

But when they left the place of slavery,  
They didn't find themselves in the promise flourishing,  
They found themselves in the process toward flourishing.

The Israelites found themselves in the wilderness  
stretched beyond themselves  
to the point of complaining.  
Hmm...

Some might even wonder if America is in a wilderness,  
going around *very familiar* mountains,  
Stretched, Frustrated, and Confused.  
With a people who are Questioning,  
What is this American Dream we have boasted about for so long  
In a place where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness  
seems more like an illusion than a dream.  
An illustrious ideal that is held up for many to see  
but made available to only a select few.  
Leaving us with the question:  
*How can we talk about Hope in an Age like this?*

### **Emergence of a Theology of Hope**

If we find ourselves in a time where we're questioning,  
Whether joy and hope is possible.  
Others have been here before,  
Like in the 1960's and 1970's  
where people were asking some of the same questions.  
yet two of the greatest movements of hope emerged.

In the historical paradox of beliefs in humanity's limitless possibility,  
on the one hand,  
and radical threats to the future of humanity on the other,  
the theology of hope movement was born.  
The movement, popularized by German theologian Jürgen Moltmann,  
emerged during a time when the horrors of Auschwitz  
seemed to silence questions about God and  
even led some theologians to claim that God is dead.

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In the age of nuclear weapons and ecological crisis,  
With new developments in medicine, technology, and outer space,  
Moltmann's grasping for a God who invited humanity  
into the fulfillment of future promise seemed appealing.<sup>2</sup>  
And then here in the US,  
with the upheaval of Black people seeking justice and equality,

A politics of hope that identifies with the oppressed emerged,  
connecting hope-talk with freedom-talk.  
The Father of Black Liberation theology,  
James H. Cone critiqued American theology  
because of its failure to step into the concrete situation of the oppressed.  
Cone insisted that all people identify with Blacks.  
This radical statement about identification with the oppressed signaled  
Hope within the fight for freedom for all.  
Black liberation theology focused on the One who is lifted up.  
It emphasized the importance of a God capable of intervening  
in present despair to remind one that one is not alone  
in his or her suffering, and that a future with hope may in fact be realized.  
Far from an abstract hope, the hope of slaves and Black people  
emerged from Jesus' interference in the concrete reality of oppression.  
To borrow from Cone, "Their hope sprang from the actual presence of Jesus,  
breaking into their broken existence and bestowing  
upon them a foretaste of God's promised future."<sup>3</sup>  
Both Moltman and Cone alike, rooted their hope in the One Who is Lifted Up!

### **The One Who Is Lifted Up**

In an age like this,  
Something from deep within wells up,  
Beckoning for a sign of hope.  
A sign that conquers sin and death?  
A sign that counters false visions of hope and flourishing.  
A sign that invites repentance,  
A sign that points us toward light.  
Today, we look for a sign of hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Capps, "Mapping the Hope Movement," *The Future of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 27-31.

<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 117.

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Like the Israelites,  
Like Nicodemus seeking to understand  
New birth in the Gospel Reading,  
We too look for the One Who is Lifted Up!

You see,  
What often invokes hope in narratives  
like the Old Testament reading,  
Where we see God exacting punishment on people,  
Complaints that so irritated God that God responds  
by allowing snakes to bite the people.  
If we stop reading there,  
We perhaps will ask ourselves the question again,  
*How can we talk about Joy and Hope in a time like this?*

But what fascinates me about this passage is  
The very serpents that were killing the Israelites,  
Is the symbol God used to heal them.  
The brazen serpent representing  
a love that supersedes death and punishment.  
The symbol lifted up as a sign of hope and life  
for all who believe.

The Gospel reading,  
reinforces this idea of healing coming from the One who is lifted up.  
It doesn't take much for contemporary readers of the Gospel  
To recognize that being lifted up  
is symbolic of the type of death Christ was going to die.

The One who is lifted up upon the cross  
Points to power *over* death.  
It is the power *over* the cross that, in fact,  
imbues the cross as a symbol of hope.  
Power *over* the cross that gives a cause to rejoice.

But, where is God lifted up?  
Where is the place of execution?  
According to Black Theologian James Cone,  
God is not neutral but standing on the side of those who are suffering.  
Cone writes, "The cross places God in the midst of a crucified people,

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in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured.”<sup>4</sup>

The very place where God is executed  
is the place where hope is born.

Where are the places of suffering? The places of execution?

### **Who Do You Identify With?**

Imagine that Christ,  
The One who is lifted up,  
Is lifted up next to two criminals on a cross.  
The One we look to points us to  
How he relates to people on the cross.

When we find ourselves wrestling with the crosses life gives us to bear,  
where do we place ourselves?  
Even more so, who do we identify with?

There are times when I've identified myself on the cross,  
bearing a portion of the suffering that Christ must have experienced.  
And then, there are times when I've been the thief on the cross,  
asking Christ to remember me.  
Times I've been both the Crucified One and the One crucifying others.  
Both oppressed and the oppressor.  
Both the invisible and the one who can't see.  
I've been the one engaged in ecstatic worship  
overflowing from a grateful heart  
and the entitled one complaining  
because I didn't think I got what I deserved.

Where might we find hope in an Age like this?  
My response is that  
Hope and joy is embodied in how we, as a community of faith  
locate ourselves and our activity with a crucified people.  
Hope and joy is in our own acknowledgement of guilt  
Our recognition that we are the Thief on the Cross.  
Hope and joy is found in us asking Christ

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<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 26.

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to remember us when He comes into God's Kingdom.  
Hope and joy is rooted in us remembering those who are in places of  
Great suffering.

### **Conclusion**

The Old Testament reading and  
the Gospel reading remind us of God's desire  
to respond to the cries of people,  
to offer forgiveness,  
and to give a sign of hope  
for those who have faith  
and commit to turn away from their sins.

### **Hope Found in the Prison**

In my work teaching in prisons,  
I've found that God is even present in the prison.  
That in places that are dark,  
Hope can be born.