

**“A SINNER OF YOUR REDEEMING”:
Articulating Hope at the Time of Death
by Rob Fennell**

In a death-defying and death-denying culture, how shall we speak of death? In a society obsessed with youth and health, fitness and bodies, what hopes, specifically, may we lift up when the body dies? These questions are the heart of this article. My intention is to offer a few reflections on the hope that Christians are given, by the grace of God.

When I was ordained in 1994, the funeral resource then in current use was a dark-green booklet, *Services for Death and Burial for optional use in The United Church of Canada*. It is still available, but perhaps has never been used as widely as it deserves. That “optional” in the title sends an ambiguous signal! Toward the end of the funeral liturgy printed in this book, immediately before the final benediction, these words of commendation are suggested:

Into your hands, O merciful Saviour, we commend your servant..... Acknowledge, we humbly pray thee, a sheep of your fold, a lamb of your flock, a sinner of your redeeming. Receive him/her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.¹

This is somewhat unfamiliar language for many of us these days. The “sinner” language, in particular, is quite out of fashion. It’s not that we have entirely forgotten about sin, but rather that we often prefer to speak of “brokenness”, or — well — not to speak of it at all.

The phrase, “a sinner of your redeeming”, does announce something rather important, however. It is an indicator that we have specific hopes about God’s redemptive presence and work in life

¹ *Services for Death and Burial for optional use in The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1987) p. 23. These phrases seem first to have appeared in print in the U.S.-Episcopal Church’s *Proposed Revision of the Book of Common Prayer* (Morehouse: Milwaukee, WI, 1925) and reprinted in several other volumes since.

and death, and life beyond death. I argue, then, that preserving the language of sin in fact helps us to speak more concretely and indeed more convincingly about that for which we hope. But sin language isn't the only problem.

At A Loss For Words

Funeral liturgies and sermons (if they are offered) can become eviscerated, anaemic shells of Christian witness when it comes to hope. We slide too easily into "Hallmarkisms," platitudes, clichés, wishful thinking, and vague assurances. Many of us also find ourselves at a loss for words when death arrives and we accompany the surviving family members and close friends. This is especially true when there is an accident or when a young person dies. We are meaning-makers and meaning-seekers, and we intuit that our faith should lend us some help at such times. Yet we remain tongue-tied.

Add to this the realities that in Canada more and more funeral and memorial services are taking place outside the church building; that there are certainly fewer open caskets and visitations than was once the norm; that quite often we see a small urn rather than an actual body that has died. Sometimes there is neither casket nor urn: the body has just vanished!² We heap on this our admiration and even praise for those who remain "composed" and do not wail and openly show their grief. Many funeral directors are reluctant to lower a casket or urn into the ground at the grave side service (even when the hole is dug and the straps and engines are ready to go). One director told me that "it was too hard on the family" to see the body descend. I assume he meant that it was better for them (or easier for him?) to stay calm and composed. Rarely do we see actual earth (as a *memento mori*) spread on the casket at the grave side (a vial of sand is tidier). Few of us indeed these days actually

² Naturally there are regional differences and customs in this regard, from east to west and north to south across the country, between urban and rural, and among different cultural traditions. In some places, thankfully, the presence of the body is still central to funeral and memorial rituals.

witness the burial itself. The denial of death seems even to pervade the rituals of remembrance and to attend the handling of the remains. If we continue to distance ourselves from the realities of a body's dying, how can we speak meaningfully of our hope? And is it meaningful to speak of eternal life and redemption if there is no acknowledgement of sin?

A Glance At Funeral Liturgies

The heritage of the United Church with respect to sin and hope within printed funeral liturgies is patchy. In recent years, the green-covered *Services* (1987) and *Celebrate God's Presence* (2000) have provided us with substantial liturgical materials with which to work.³ Earlier resources had sound guidance for the wording and design of services to mark the end of a life, but limited reference to sin, redemption, and the actual content of our hope. The 1969 *Service Book* provides wording for the commendation of the deceased at the grave side, noting simply that we trust "in God's great mercy by which we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."⁴ The Scripture sentences suggested for the grave side are more explicit about hope.⁵ The 1932 *Book of Common Order* notes that God has given "blessed rest, and perfect release from sin and sorrow" to those who have died before us, and asks God "to raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness."⁶ In the burial liturgy in *Forms of Service for the Offices of the Church* (1926), the presider asks God to "[d]eliver us from the power of sin, and the fear of death[.]"⁷

³ Within the rich and more comprehensive funeral and memorial service options offered in *Celebrate God's Presence*, very little is said about sin and hope. Hope, when it is named, is touched upon only briefly and generically.

⁴ *Service Book for the use of ministers conducting public worship* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969) p. 219.

⁵ Including John 11:25-26 and Rev. 7:16-17.

⁶ *The Book of Common Order of The United Church of Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto, UCPH, 1955) pp. 209, 215. This language was borrowed almost verbatim from the Church of Scotland's *Book of Common Order* (9th ed., 1913).

⁷ *Forms of Service for the Offices of the Church* (Toronto: UCPH, 1926) p. 74.

Somewhere in back of these liturgies is the pattern of rather scant instruction, let alone liturgy, that John Knox is believed to have given to the Church of Scotland with respect to such matters:

The Burial. The corpse is reverently brought to the grave, accompanied with the Congregation, without any further ceremonies: which being buried, the Minister if he be present, and required, goeth to the Church, if it be not far off, and maketh some comfortable exhortation to the people, touching death and [the] resurrection.⁸

Later, the 1913 (9th) edition of the Church of Scotland's *Book of Common Order* had a fullsome liturgy. It makes greater acknowledgement of the world's sin, which God has overcome and from which the deceased has been delivered.

My conclusion is that our funeral liturgies have not helped us a great deal to "fill in" the details about sin, redemption, and hope. It seems sensible to think (and to hope!) that when the gospel was preached in the funerals of the past, the sermon provided the kind of assurance and grounding in Christ's promises that such occasions require. But more needs to be said in specific terms about sin and redemption if we are to provide a meaningful and theologically adequate message of hope. Similarly, most of our funeral liturgies have not prepared us to speak of the realities of the sin and decline (death?) of our denomination. Accordingly, we are currently struggling with (if we have not yet abandoned) the task of articulating hope within our congregations and the wider courts of the Church. How shall we speak of the sin and redemption of, and hope for, the United Church?

Mistaken Hopes

We often speak about hope rather generally, exhorting one another to have it, or professing our own, without being explicit about that for which we hope. Given the pluralistic smorgasbord

⁸ *The Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland, commonly known as John Knox's Liturgy* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901) p. 80.

we have before us these days, all manner of hopes are in circulation in the wider culture. But a number of “hopes” we hear bandied about are not properly Christian hopes at all — that is, they are not rooted in the Christian faith itself.

We do not hope for emanation and return. The ancient Greeks believed that the soul was splintered off from God before birth somehow, then travelled through a period inside a rather inconvenient material body, and at death made a natural progression back to God. It was a cycle: a predictable, uninterrupted round-trip through the universe. The soul’s return to God at the body’s death was inevitable, and while desirable, not something one could either choose or reject; nor did it have anything to do with sin and redemption. The biblical witness does not support these assumptions. Our spiritual ancestors in Israel largely assumed that death and the next world (Sheol) were enemies, not a natural progression to the next (heavenly) stage.⁹ The earliest Christians likewise conceived of death as annihilation, not spiritual evolution. Thus they spoke of it as something that needed to be opposed, battled, and overthrown.¹⁰ This victory was integral to their understanding of redemption.

We do not hope for reincarnation. While some religious traditions embrace reincarnation, it is not a biblical concept, nor is it supported by the teaching of the Church. The notion of an perpetual cycle of birth, death, punishment/reward, and rebirth for an (already) immortal soul does not cohere with the Christian understanding of the work of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, his mission includes the disruption of our logic of punishment/reward, and the free gift to God’s people of redeemed, everlasting life. The cross and resurrection, and the redemption they signal and effect, are a *rupture* in the expected outcomes of life and time. God’s work in Jesus Christ alters the outcome of the story. The cross and resurrection remain potent signs for us of God’s work in judging

⁹ E.g. 2 Sam. 22:5-6; Ps. 49:7-14; Is. 38:10-18. There are counter-examples (at least for the righteous), to be sure, such as Gen. 25:8 and Is. 57:1-2.

¹⁰ E.g. 1 Cor. 15:26, 54; 2 Tim. 1:10

and redeeming the sin of individuals and of the world — including the Church.

We do not hope for eternal recurrence. This myth, first found in ancient Egypt, explored by Nietzsche, and having several recent restatements (including the 1993 film *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray) suggests that we are doomed to return to a given day (or year or life) and repeat it over and over, in exactly the same fashion, forever. Although Nietzsche intended us to learn from this myth that the gift of each day is unique and worth living fully, the myth operates as if reincarnation had got stuck, like a broken record. It sounds more like doom than hope.

We do not hope to get whatever we want, or what we think we may have earned. This is a popular myth in our culture, well-depicted in the 1990 film *Ghost*. In this film, “bad people” are swallowed up at death by nasty demons from under the ground, and “good people” are lifted up to heaven by good spirits (angels perhaps?). Some part of our psyche seems to want this kind of retributive justice: nice people go to heaven, bad people don’t (or shouldn’t). But again, the biblical narrative and the teaching of the church don’t support this mythology. We can’t earn — or lose — God’s love, in any form, including the gift of eternal life. It is God’s sovereign decision to love us and to welcome us to heaven, but that decision is not based on a balance of “more good than bad” behaviour. We cannot predetermine our own redemption by trying to tilt the scales in our favour.

For What May We Rightly Hope?

So there are things for which Christians do not properly hope, however widespread they may be in the wider culture. But there is a great deal for which we *do* hope. Recognizing that each situation for a person who is dying, or has just died, will be different, I will not try to give advice here for pastors on how to deal with loved ones on these issues at the time of a death. But I do believe in the critical importance of reflection time on them *before* and *between* deaths within our communities. People are hungry for hope: we

are all called to find ways to articulate the content of Christian hope for our time.

The *Ars Moriendi* (the art of dying), a medieval genre of writing, was just as surely directed toward the living as it was to the dying. So also our ongoing, open reflection about death and life in non-funeral contexts (Sunday worship, Bible study, pastoral visits, confirmation classes, even over coffee) has a catechetical function. The *Ars Moriendi* taught that when we acknowledge death in the midst of life, we begin to lose our fear of it. Open talk about death teaches us both to seek a fear-free and a holy dying, and to live a generous and faithful life, here and now. Our hopes for life now and the life to come are intertwined with one another.

We hope for the fulfillment of God's promises, the fullness of which is as yet unseen. This is the core Christian hope that informs all the others. We find sustaining hope in the testimony of Scripture, which tells us repeatedly of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness, even toward us, a sinful people. The Torah and the Prophets assure us that God hears the cries of God's people and is faithful to the covenant God has made with us.¹¹ The Gospels and the Epistles witness again and again to the goodness of God who is true to God's promises, fulfilled especially through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹²

Our hope finds a wellspring in these ancient witnesses, and blossoms forth from the gift of God's faithfulness to all generations. Our hope does not arise from our own clever designs or righteous efforts (indeed we humans tend to muck up this earthly existence rather consistently). We may suppose that our plans and various tools and tricks will redeem and transform life and death. But this is a false hope: our hope is grounded, above all and below all, upon the sovereignty of God's love. Indeed, hope itself is a promised gift.¹³ No one can be compelled to accept these promises, of course.

¹¹ Exodus 2:23b-25; Exodus 3:7-8a; Is. 49:14-16; Jer. 31:1-14, 31-34; *passim*.

¹² Luke 2:25-38; John 14:18; Rom. 15:8-9a; Titus 1:1-4; *passim*.

¹³ "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me (Jer. 29:11-13a).

Yet if Christ is the foundation of our faith, then these promises give shape to our trust in God's provision for us in and after death. The faithfulness of God to God's promises is revealed above all in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose new life is the first fruits of our own.¹⁴ Likewise the church may look to resurrection as an indicator of God's plans for our future.

We hope for eternal life. Though much popular imagination supposes this to be a state that commences at the precise moment of the body's death, the New Testament teaches that eternal life has already begun for those who are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-4). The death of this body is in fact a mid-point in human beings' eternal life, that is, in the everlasting personal existence or continuity of self that we cannot yet fully define.¹⁵ This is a spiritual reality, then, but we affirm also that after the death of our bodies, the resurrection that Christ brings to us enables us to have "new bodies". While we do not know what this will look like, the promise of a new body is itself a key hope to communicate when bodies have deteriorated in old age or illness. Again, it is Jesus' own bodily resurrection that is the sign and guarantor of this hope: God loves the material universe and will remake our bodies together with our spirits. So also the Body of the Christ which is the Church in its present form is passing away, but will be transformed in the fullness of God's love.

We hope for redemption. Many troubles of this life remain unreconciled for us. War and injustice seem unrelenting. Sin and its consequences are ever-present. We become alienated from others and from God. So much healing is needed, so much forgiveness. We long to be delivered from the narrowness of our selfishness and we yearn for the reconciliation of the whole human family. We desire the integrity and wholeness of personhood for which we were intended. Yet we cannot transform ourselves fully. Thus we trust in God's promised gift of redemption that "transfers us into the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son".¹⁶ This is a realm in which

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 15:20-26.

¹⁵ Rom. 6:4-5; 1 Cor. 13:9-10,12-13.

¹⁶ Col. 1:13.

forgiveness and reconciliation flow freely, in which transformation into the fullness of the image of Christ is made possible for all creation. It is the place of freedom from suffering and pain, the place of release from all that binds us. This vision, in which the New Testament absolutely delights, is not a vision of escape and renunciation of this world. It is a vision of the world's transformation, its reconciliation, redemption, and renewal. Above all, this is a vision that looks to the Triune God as the One who will deliver us: individuals, church, and world.

We hope for the renewal of the whole creation. As redeemed people we are not invited by God to slip through a trap door at the end of our time on this stage. Rather (to extend the theatre analogy) we are welcomed as members of a large cast, with the Holy Spirit as our prompter and Christ as our director, to enact the world as God intends it. This is the consummation of God's purposes, the fulfillment of God's dream. The new heaven and new earth John sees in his vision (Revelation 21) is a re-creation of all things "visible and invisible" (Nicene Creed). We do not know with certainty how this moment of full consummation relates to our present understanding of linear time: perhaps it is outside of time. Nevertheless, we long for it and work toward it now, in this life. God's realm of justice and joy, peace and bread may be remote in time in one sense. Yet it is near at hand, whenever we serve together to ensure that all have roofs that don't leak, shoes on their feet, and bread in their bellies. God loves this material world, and longs that we also would extend Christ's care and love to it and all its inhabitants. Here again God's work of renewal is meant to govern our life in and as the Church, as (above all) we serve together. Our service, and God's work in us and others, perdures before and after death: they unfold in this life and in heaven (Rev. 7:15).

We hope for heaven. The gift of our life in God in the afterlife is not merely a continuation of our life with God now, but a perfection of it. "We shall all be changed" in Christ's transformation of us from mortal to immortal creatures.¹⁷ We hope, then and there,

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 15:50-57.

to be in the company of the saints and angels; of those who have gone before us (including those we love and no doubt those we struggle to love); and of God's own Triune presence. According to the Book of Revelation there will be much singing (for which Thursday night choir practices turn out to be a helpful choice after all), but surely there will be many ways to delight in God's presence and to offer our praise and thanksgiving. Heaven is the place of freedom and reconciliation, where the greatest of joys will be our everlasting feast. It is the place in which we are finally and fully "at home".

We hope for the peace, consolation, healing, and perseverance of those who mourn. We might reassure loved ones that the departed one is in heaven or in "a better place", but this in itself is not the fullness of hope that they need. When someone we love, need, or respect dies, we must find ways, over time, to transform the grief into service. Often the healing of memories is needed. Our prayer for survivors might focus on wholeness of heart when the heart has been broken by this death; for a renewed sense of mission and discipleship; for a deepening awareness of God's presence and accompaniment in their lives. In short, everyone needs to believe that life has meaning. Reconnection to a meaningful life of service and self-giving is essential for that meaning to emerge and re-form itself. It goes without saying that this takes much time, much patience, and much grace. This is true both for persons and for communities of faith.

We hope for the defeat of death itself, the death of death, the final overcoming of all powers and forces that deal in destruction and opposition to life. The inner reality of the Triune God is the mutual giving and self-giving of life and love. God's desire is to overflow that life and love into creation, into "all things seen and unseen". Thus Jesus' ministry, in ancient times and now, is literally a life-giving ministry: "I have come that they may have life, and have it in all abundance" (John 10:10b). In another generation, we were much less timid about all this in the United Church and said quite openly that "we believe that by His resurrection and exaltation Christ stands victorious over death and all evil" and that we too

“are conquerors”.¹⁸ Life is God’s gift, and in the end God’s purposes shall prevail. And so we hope, knowing that death, and its annihilation of life, do not and will not have the last word.

A Penultimate Note

Recently one of the Maritimes’ most noted ministers and public servants died, the Rev. Flemming Holm. He is remembered as “a good friend of Christ”. His obituary noted the pastoral charges he served, his life and long career in service to human rights and social justice, his family, character, and commitments. In quite a lovely turn of phrase, Holm’s family noted that “he was not afraid to die, and passed away with relief and in peace... As for what he would find on the other side, he said, ‘Let God surprise me’.”¹⁹

May we all have the gift of such hope and confidence in God’s provision, and ever seek to share it with those we meet. “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for [the One] who has promised is faithful.”²⁰

¹⁸ Article VI of the 1940 *Statement of Faith* [The United Church of Canada]

¹⁹ *Chronicle Herald* [Halifax, NS], 15 October 2009, p.B11.

²⁰ Heb. 10:23