

Real Hope and Wishful Thinking: How to Tell the Difference”

Isaiah 60:1-5
Luke 2:8-20

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Faith Community

A few Christmas mornings ago, Lindsay Gibson of Hershey, Pennsylvania, was thrilled to find several carefully wrapped gifts from her husband under the tree.

Her joy was short lived, however, when she opened golf equipment (which she'd never expressed interest in), a heating pad, Listerine breath strips and generic nasal strips to prevent snoring.

Then consider the case of poor Tom Valentino, of Cheshire, Connecticut. As he wondered what to get his wife one Christmas he thought to himself, “Well, we have three kids already, so no need for anything from Victoria’s Secret. And I bought her a fancy watch last year for her birthday. How many of those does she need?” Then he remembered they needed a vacuum cleaner and a bigger pasta pot. How could a woman not be happy with those?” He soon found out.

“The worst part of it all was the looks the kids gave me. It’s been 15 years, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been reminded of that dark time.”

This is a classic Mars-Venus thing. A columnist for the Wall Street Journal, where I found these stories, says, “If I ask my husband what he wants for the holidays, he will say ‘nothing’ and mean it. If he asks me, I will say ‘nothing,’ as well. And God help him if he believes me.”

Here are a couple more examples:

Maureen Clark of Orlando, Florida, writes, “My ex-husband gave me a Porta Potty for the kids to use at night when we were camping.”

Dave AuBuchon, of St. Louis, says, “One year I gave my fiancé an electric shaver for Christmas. It didn’t help at all when I pointed out that my mother gave me the idea.”

So what’s a poor guy to do? Here are a few suggestions, and if you’re interested, we can make copies for anyone who could use a reminder. I’m sure you know who you are:

- When in doubt, go down a size.
- Never give a gift that suggests your spouse is less than ideal. No unsolicited exercise equipment, self-help books, wrinkle cremes or nose-hair removers.
- Appliances and cookware are OK only if she asks for them.
- Don't even think about a gift that you would enjoy more than your spouse.
- Remember: It's not the thought that counts when you don't have that thought until the checkout line.¹

Having said all that, there are times when we should be grateful that we do not get what we want. In the third chapter of the book of Acts is a story that tells of a man who had been paralyzed from birth, unable to walk. He made what living he could by sitting along a road that led to the main temple in Jerusalem and asking for help from people as they headed in to worship.

He'd settled into a lifetime of spare change living, and asked for that very thing from Peter and John, two of the key players in the early church. Fortunately they were broke, so instead of giving this guy what he asked for, they gave him something better. Peter said to him,

Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.
(Acts 3:6, TNIV)

And just like that he did, for the first time in his life.

Friends, all the silver and gold in the world would've done nothing to change this guy's condition. Living on spare change was actually keeping him stuck. And good religious people on their way to church were unwittingly helping him remain stuck. He had resigned himself to a life of personal inadequacy. Peter and John came along and used their own poverty to point him to God's abundance.

This is the difference between real hope and wishful thinking. Long ago this guy had resigned himself to a life of 'if onlys' and living on the leftovers of other people's lives. Hope, however, is different from that.

¹ Elizabeth Bernstein, "The Gift That Needs Forgiving" (Dec. 15, 2009), "Gifts That Backfired" (Dec. 18, 2009); [The Wall Street Journal](#).

Real hope is not a feeling. Instead, it's a choice, a series of choices and decisions, a lifestyle that's cultivated over a lifetime.

So ask yourself:

What does a hopeful person look like?

What does a hopeful person do?

A Jewish legend tells of "...a traveler who loses his way in the forest; the darker it gets, the more fearful he becomes. Danger lurks behind every tree. A storm shatters the silence. The fool looks at the lightning. The wise person sees the road that's suddenly lit up before him."²

A hopeful person goes through the same troubles and heartache that everyone else does. The difference is in the choices he or she makes in response.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. (Isaiah 60:1)

That spoke of the coming Messiah, and people built their lives on hope like that.

So how might a hopeful person live in times like this? What would his or her Christianity look like?

Consider the person who lives in a nice house that he's worked hard for, no handouts for him, thank you very much. Actually, he wishes the rest of the world were more responsible. If so and so would just get a job and not whine so much, things might actually get better.

He goes to church, sits there, sings the hymns, hears talk of the same old stuff, and it'll be over soon anyway, and wouldn't it be nice if the kids respected me more or my boss knew how hard I was trying, or I'm not sure if my wife even loves me anymore, and yes I drink a little, but if she'd just get off my case it would be OK, and why can't things be different anyway?

This person lives in a world of surface conversation and fierce competition, but doesn't think about it much, and Merry Christmas anyway, and leaves church until the next time, and nothing really changes. Nothing really changes.

² Elie Wiesel, *Souls On Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (New York, Random House, 1972), p. 154.

That's the generic nasal strips and vacuum cleaner approach to Christianity. It's the spare change of the world that keeps beggars quiet and in their places, and costs the giver precious little, and nothing changes. Compare that to a prayer offered by a man who finally came to terms with his own personal reality:

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

Some of us need to come to terms with our brokenness, and in that way become hopeful people. Ironically, the images we present to the world around us are the very things that get in the way. We spend our lives pretending, and nothing changes.

There's a short story entitled "Christmas" that's set on a country estate buried in snowdrifts outside St. Petersburg, Russia. The main character carries the coffin of his young son to the village cemetery, goes to bed, and wakes up on Christmas Eve Day.

He goes into the boy's room that's now unheated, and looks through some of his belongings. His son enjoyed butterfly-collecting, and the father finds the tools of the hobby: cork-bottomed spreading boards, black pins, and "a biscuit tin with a large exotic cocoon inside." His son had remembered it during his sickness, regretting he'd soon leave it behind, but consoled himself with the thought that the chrysalis inside was dead anyway."

The father sits, sobs, and returns to his sitting room, carrying a few of his son's belongings, including the biscuit tin with the cocoon inside. He reads from his son's diary, learns that he was infatuated with a cute girl at school, and begins another round of tears. He's convinced he himself will die of grief shortly, maybe even Christmas Day, and thinks of earthly life as "humiliatingly pointless, sterile, devoid of miracles."

"Then came a sudden snap — a thin sound like that of an overstretched rubber band breaking. The cocoon in the biscuit tin had burst at its tip, and a black, wrinkled creature was crawling up the wall above the table. The brand new butterfly had emerged because a man had taken a lifeless tin box to his warm room and held it, and the warmth of his grief had penetrated the creature inside. It had awaited this moment so long, had collected its strength so tensely, and

now, having broken out, it was slowly and miraculously expanding."³

What's it going to take for you? When will you finally get it, and quit messing around with all the junk, pursuing the nasal strips and vacuum cleaners of life, and let your broken heart lead you to the manger?

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. (Isaiah 60:1-2)

³ The Writer's Almanac for December 21, 2009