

REASONS TO HOPE
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Oil is pouring into the Gulf of Mexico. It's a growing catastrophe with no end in sight. Are there reasons for hope? I think so. And one reason is this affirmation from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Romans 5)

Here in this county and all around the world people are in a state of shock at the sight of oil gushing into the waters we know as the Gulf of Mexico. All around the world people weep for dying fish, birds, plants and habitats. All around the world people lament their own complicity in a bloated, carefree lifestyle that requires reckless exploitation of the earth and her creatures. Here and around the world people are indignant and screaming for change. And that's reason for hope.

Not all people in all places, to be sure, but enough in enough places to give us reasons for hope. God's own love for the earth has been poured into our hearts.

Engineers, mechanics and biologists are working furiously not just for money, though some might, but because they love this earth and are bound and determined to mend this catastrophic wound. They have not given up. And that's reason for hope.

Federal, state and local government officials are working furiously not just for re-election, though some might, but because they love this earth and are bound and determined to mend this catastrophic wound. And that's reason for hope.

Louisiana fishermen, shrimp trawlers, environmentalists, fish and game wardens and countless ordinary citizens are working furiously, dabbing oil from the wings of brown pelicans not for money or praise but because they love this earth and are bound and determined to mend this catastrophic wound. They have not given up. And that's reason for hope.

Hope is hard work.

Do not think that you or we alone seethe and weep, or that we alone love and care for the earth and its creatures, or that we are the first to appreciate the earth's wonder and fragility, or our own god like potential for good and ill. Millions upon millions do and have for a long, long time.

Listen to this anthem composed nearly 3,000 years ago by a poet in our religious tradition.

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic

is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8)

Of course, we don't need the Bible or a special revelation to tell us the earth is majestic or to tell us that we humans among all the species on earth possess divine like powers to create and destroy, or that we of all creatures have self-consciousness and with it responsibility like none other. Whether it's been "given" or not, we have *assumed* dominion, which is to say, a governing responsibility that makes us accountable for and to other creatures, not to mention our accountability to the Maker of heaven and earth.

We are moral creatures. And that's why we feel guilty, or should, when we mess up and why we blame ourselves, or somebody, *anybody!* We are *responsible* creatures and at our best we know it.

Sin and immorality have consequences. We know there are things that *ought not to be done* but are; and we know there are things that *ought to be done* and aren't. We are moral creatures. Pity the person, agency, or company that feels no guilt.

It's true: guilt and judgment can paralyze and polarize us. But, in proper doses, guilt and judgment can lead to repentance and modification of attitudes and behavior. And time and time again they have. Judgment often precedes grace. And that's reason for hope.

All around the world people lamented the devastation of Haiti in the wake of the earthquake. And sure enough, people arose as one to bring salvation and redemption to the Haitian people. We now possess tools for instant, global communication and that could be a way Christ is "preparing room" for us to be one. And that's reason for hope.

All around the world people lament the economic destruction inflicted by reckless financial institutions on innocent people and families. We are learning again that there's enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed, enough for livelihoods, not enough for lifestyles. We keep learning and re-learning. And that's reason for hope.

All around the world, like never before, people are condemning wars that fatten the coffers of warlords and military industrial machines while destroying lives and nations and what human hands took years to build. People are repenting of ancient animosities and pledging to work for peace and justice. And that's reason for hope.

All around the world people lament contaminated water, contaminated food and the inhuman treatment of animals. We are once again growing safer, healthier food closer to home. The Shepherdstown Farmer's Market is an example. And that's reason for hope.

In this moment things may look hopeless. But remember: we belong to an ancient tradition of *hopeful realism* reaching back to Jesus and through Jesus into Judaism and through Judaism to an even older wisdom tradition. If we allow it, this dynamic tradition will nurture and cultivate hope in our hearts.

Firstly, our tradition proclaims that the universe arose out of love, as a sheer gift, not out of chance or necessity. Love throbs in every atom, every molecule, and every vein. The earth, it proclaims, is good and that goodness includes us, its most complex and wayward child.

Secondly, our tradition acknowledges that we mess up, time and time again. There's no use pretending we don't.

And, thirdly, our tradition affirms the continual presence of grace to lead repentant and humble souls back to our senses when we go astray. The spirit at work for 4.5 billion years in this awesomely beautiful world is the same spirit in us. And we believe that the heart and face of that evolving spirit is "The Anointed One," Christ, the Beloved, the First Word.

Many Christians think Christ suddenly appeared for the first time 2000 years ago in Bethlehem. But that's not the full truth. Not by a long shot.

Christ, the First Word, which is to say, Love, was present 15 or so billion years ago in the first burst of light, in the first moment of time and space, wending her way through atoms, minerals, molecules, stars and galaxies; wending her way through earth's soupy waters, seaweed, starfish, grasses, trees, animals and into humanity, playfully calling and nudging all things to greater and greater complexity and communion, greater and greater freedom and awareness. Over eons of time Christ has been arising in and through it all, blessing all things and all matter of things all along the evolutionary path. Nothing in heaven or earth can destroy that love. It keeps rising out of death, going ahead of us, preparing even more communion and community to come.

We have, you see, been loved into being over a long, long time. So, why would we ever think the love of our life would leave us or forsake us in dark times?

Yes, we are tempted to refuse love. And, yes, we are tempted to resign in despair and give up. But we mustn't.

Hope is hard work.

None of us can save or redeem the whole world. But we can do holy work in the world close at hand, inch by inch, marsh by marsh, bird by bird, person by person, community by community.

Hope is hard work.

Once upon a time a little girl came upon a beach covered with starfish. Starfish had washed ashore by the thousands and were slowly dying in the sun. She stood frozen in shock. Tears filled her eyes. Then she stooped and picked up a starfish and flung it back into the sea, and then another and another, furiously working her way down the long beach. An older man watched at a distance and called out to her. *Little, girl,* he said. *Don't bother. It doesn't matter. There are way too many.*

The girl stopped and looked at the man. Then she reached down and picked up another starfish and flung it back into the sea. And then turning toward the man she pointed out to the sea and said: *It matters to that one.*

We have assumed dominion. May God help us.