

A FAITH TO STAND ON AND A HOPE TO BUILD ON

Hebrews 11: 1-13, 12: 1-3

Anniversaries... How important are anniversaries to you?... What anniversaries are special for you?... Is it when that someone special was born?... Is it an important milestone that was reached - a graduation, a retirement, being clear of a disease, coming out of a surgery successfully, a special birthday, a marriage or hitting those milestone decades together through thick and thin?... Anniversaries are all this and more...

But anniversaries are also about significant losses in our lives too, no?... It's about the passing of those who are no longer with us in the flesh... And sometimes, it's about those terrible accidents, moments or news we receive that totally alter our lives in ways not good... We remember those moments, those days... and we remember seasons where the heaviness of loss and the grief that follows such loss are with us... How do we live through Christmas, Thanksgiving, special places traveled to and enjoyed, the same?... How do we mark such times in ways we can find some gratitude and peace for the beauty of who and what was that no longer is?...

Anniversaries... they're special, they're wonderful and joyous, and they are sad and difficult too... They are important points in our lives shaping and altering how we live them, what is important to us, and the ways we live our lives going forward.

Anniversaries are also important events in the lives of communities and this community we call Armour Heights too... There are times of celebration and there are times of collective mourning and grief... When we ponder the 74 years of this community and 87 years of Melrose Park church which joined Armour Heights in 1998, there are many members and friends who are no longer with us in the flesh. Many have died, some have moved away, but many special days and seasons were marked where together we have been the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world despite the loss, the struggle and sometimes the conflict too... It's all part of being a community with individual members deeply invested and engaged.

So how do we celebrate our anniversary today in a way where we build on faith that has been, is now, and looking forward in faith and hope of what can yet be?... How do we celebrate recognizing all those of our ancestors in the faith who continue to be among us in what we call the communion of saints?

Well, let's begin with the words themselves: faith and hope. One way to understand faith is as: trust. I trust you. I trust what you are telling me. I trust that I am in good hands. I trust that I

am loved even and beyond my imperfections. I trust that all is well and I can go to sleep in God's care. Faith is trust in the present. But hope, is trust open to the future and what may come. I may worry about many things that may happen, but hope opens me up to trust that good possibilities can become real and new doors can open despite anything I may legitimately fear. Hope is trust open to the future.

But does hope have to block out the hard realities of life in order to remain hope? Does hope have to be optimistic in a way that we close our ears to anything negative and wrong around us and before us? Or is hope something different?

Andrea Curtis is a thinker and writer. Her latest book is entitled: *The Story and Science of Hope*. It's hard, Curtis writes, to feel hopeful these days. She refers to the recent election of Donald Trump and the changes happening in our world destabilizing long held and trusted relationships. Such changes have fuelled conflicts around the world. People are angry and divided. They feel betrayed. And many are struggling with their finances and existential fear for the future.

And such feelings, she writes further, are only amplified by the media. "If it bleeds, it leads" as they say. Conflict and the problems of the world are the focus 24/7 because crisis, grief and rage sell. But how does all this affect our minds, hearts and souls? Here's what Curtis writes more personally: "Among my friends and family - people who care deeply about the earth and its inhabitants and worry about the future - it can sometimes feel as if looking away, even for a moment, is an abdication of responsibility. For isn't it our job as concerned citizens to bear witness to the atrocities of our fellow creatures, to staggering inequalities, to war and murder and mayhem of all sorts? Isn't that how we both acknowledge other people's suffering and also move to end it?" Yes, she says, yes. But, it doesn't really work. Constant vigilance and focus of this sort also gives way to despair and ultimately to withdrawal with maybe guilt or inadequacy or a helplessness which doesn't help anyone in the end.

OK, so how may we find our way to faith as trust in the present and hope as trust open to the future without it simply becoming escapism or superficial optimism?

Let's begin with the revelatory wisdom we may discover in our scripture reading this morning. The book of Hebrews is written to people struggling to find hope, just like us. It begins with a definition of faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, faith is trust even before and beyond any tangible outcome of what it is that's trusted. We trust in a person even before they have acted. We trust in a situation even before the outcome has been decided. We trust in a promise even before it has been fulfilled. We trust because we know the person or we trust the process. How?

Are we simply going into it blind, crossing our fingers that things will work out well? No. After offering us a definition of faith, our reading goes on to offer numerous examples from the

ancestors of faith who trusted in hope and acted on such hope. Their actions led to marvelous possibilities that became actualized. They believed in what could be despite fears and even odds stacked against them. They trusted in goodness and fulfillment of promises. They trusted and acted on such trust, and sometimes paid a heavy price for such trust. Nonetheless, good things emerged out of such trust. The author is telling these struggling Christians that they are the inheritors of such trust. Without the actions of their ancestors over many generations, they would not be here. They need to stand on their shoulders and find inspiration, courage and hope upon their achievements. This is how they move forward in hope despite the difficult realities around them and the problems among them.

So how may such spiritual perspective, this looking back and finding strength on the shoulders of those who have come before us help us find faith in the present and hope open to the future?

One of the things Curtis discovered is a source of news that focusses on all that is happening in our world that is positive. "Positive News" as it's called, first emerged in the U.K., but is now also coming out of other nations of the world including Canada. It is rigorous journalism that documents all the wonderfully positive ways people are responding to the crises and troubles of our world by doing good things for others and the earth. There are creative practices, scientific innovations, conservation projects, and people coming together to do wonderful things with art, music and other creative projects and endeavours.

Here's what Curtis writes further: "Actively seeking out these hopeful stories and actions forced me to reconsider my responsibilities as a concerned citizen. Perhaps in addition to bearing witness to the horrors of our world, we can also pay attention and engage with the things that are going right. Perhaps we can also choose hopefulness..."

She also refers to scientists and other researchers "from behavioural psychologists to nurses to neurosurgeons, economists, educators and social workers who... through rigorous research and experimentation... have found that hope is not magical thinking but is, instead, real and measurable. It's different from optimism, which is a feeling that things are likely to work out. Hope is about leaning into and working toward something meaningful to you. It's an action. Hope is a verb..."

Researchers "have also found evidence that hopefulness guards against depression and helps kids do better in school. Hopeful people live longer, are healthier and have stronger friendships. One of the most exciting elements of the research is that hope isn't something you're simply lucky to be born with... it can be learned and nurtured. Even people who've experienced trauma, dislocation and loss feel hope, and they can be supported to experience greater hopefulness, with all its myriad benefits."

By "actively looking for hope - whether in news stories or nature, in innovative people and organizations, in individual acts or mass marches, in a child's face or a community garden" we are not abdicating responsibility or being naïve. No. Hope is "a radical act of resistance... Hope is a shoring up of resources for the struggle ahead..."

"Hope is not about avoiding the difficult realities of our world. It's not about individual comfort. In fact, it exists alongside deep discomfort," Curtis writes... "Hope grows in community and it demands much of us. It demands, first of all, that we shift the narrative away from the sense that we are helpless in the face of forces beyond our control - even though it sometimes feels that way. After all, nothing good ever happened in the world without hopeful people coming together to push for change."

Wow, I find such statements encouraging, don't you?... And I think especially of this community we call Armour Heights church, and our purpose to become the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world... How has faith as trust in the present and hope as trust open to the future lived out in us?... We've evolved and changed over the years as the world around us in this community and city has changed too. Building community partnerships in mission with organizations like ARISE and Evangel Hall Mission, or with Mosaic toward creating a community hub, and also beginning to live into our identity as an intercultural church, along with our focus on justice through inclusion, and truth and reconciliation... to me, this is all about faith and hope.

And this is also leaning on the strength of our ancestors here at Armour Heights, those who were seeking ways to build identity in the community, city and cultural ethos of the time, a time when more people went to church on a Sunday and got involved because church was the main cultural community hub existing. Today we have to be intentional in carving our own space and identity as this is no longer a given, with so many other draws on our time and attention around us... How may we continue to grow in ways that really respond as Jesus in a world that is in crisis and yet also one where wonderful possibilities exist, ready to be noticed, supported and adopted into our own practice?

On this Anniversary Sunday, we say thank you to those who have gone before, our ancestors in the communion of Saints, and we honour them in our continuing commitment to do as they did and respond in faith, hope and love to a world that desperately needs what we, in Christ, have to offer... Amen.