

Hope has been hard to hold on to for many of us this holiday season, as we age and as we agonize, as the loss of ones we love (just this year or multiple decades ago) feels frightfully unbearable, as we close out yet another *hottest year on record*, as the genocide in Gaza enters its second year funded by our tax dollars and The Little Town of Bethlehem has canceled Christmas yet again.

Hope has been hard to hold on to for many of us ... and yet here we are on Christmas Eve, like the Whos down in Whoville, insisting ... nay, even *celebrating*, Hope Is With Us once more in the birth of a baby. Here we are impersonating Friendly Beasts and welcoming actual ones. Here we are proclaiming Joy to the World from the manger to the mountains and everywhere in between.

And we mean it!

As long as we are still willing to show up, our worship says tonight, we hold on to hope. As long as we still gather around the story, our worship says tonight, we hold on to hope. As long as we keep making an effort to find the awe and the wonder and the mystery, our worship says tonight, we hold on to hope. As long as we have each other, our worship says tonight, we hold on to hope.

The author of the Letter to Titus is right. Do not ever forget, our Lesson insists, even as hatred and bigotry and violence threaten that hope, the grace of God is already and continues tonight re-orienting our reverence, reminding us that hope is not only a *gift* of spiritual serenity but also a *choice* of social connection.

Choosing Hope means making the most of decency and goodness and compassion through whatever times we find ourselves in. Choosing Hope means a posture of disciplined commitment to equity and integrity when it is easier to succumb to wealth and power. Choosing Hope means cultivating community that will hold us all together when that choice and that posture feel harder to maintain than the stamina we are able to summon on our own.

As long as there is Life, our Lesson tells us, there is Hope!

Hope is with us tonight, through an immigrant child protected by his parents. And because that child holds on to hope through even harder times than the ones we know tonight, we know we can, too.

Hope is with us tonight, through a homeless new mother finding shelter in a shed. And because that mother holds on to hope through even harder times than tonight, we know we can, too.

Hope is with us tonight, through night shift workers on the edge of exhaustion and friendly beasts on the edge of extinction finding delight in the happy havoc of a human newborn child. And because they hold on to hope through even harder times than tonight, we know we can, too.

*Some will say, in the words of Steven Charleston, how sad a season, so much sorrow, so little joy. But if so little, then so precious. If so rare, then so valued. So much the essence of all our hopes. A single drop of love like that can light up the sky for more dreams than we can count.*

Hope is with us tonight in the divine thwarting of tyranny gone amok through the sacred commitment of good people gathered here and beyond to treat all the world as a manger and all within it as holy.

This is the sacred task before us, as we tell the story and sing the songs and light our candles and offer our gifts. To claim the blessed hope, the vision of glory, the healing of the world through the grace and greatness of God as if it were our own.

And then to live as if that hope has already come to pass. Because in some mysterious and mystical way, it has!

Let the church say, Amen!