

The Realm of Hoping

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 8:24-25

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Today is the beginning of Advent and one of my annual Advent traditions is to read The Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. There are now enough televised versions of it that in a busy year, I will cheat and watch it instead of reading it but none of the televised versions capture the full liveliness of Dicken's writing, such as this wonderful passage early in the story when Ebenezer Scrooge expresses his sentiments about the Christmas season to his nephew, Fred.

"... I live in such a world of fools..." Scrooge grumbles. "Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," he adds indignantly, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

I love Scrooge's grouchy wit that makes you suspect you may come to love this man before the story is through, and in fact, Scrooge is famously converted through the efforts of the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and yet to come. Nevertheless, I suspect that our enduring love for the character of Ebenezer Scrooge is due less to his ultimate conversion to Christmas cheer than to his initial assessment of Christmas as "humbug." Many people who read Dicken's Christmas Carol secretly sympathize with that cynical Scrooge at the beginning of the story. They can't help but wonder if Christmas *is* really nothing more than a few weeks of sentimental piety, a polite cease fire in hostilities for a few weeks until December 26th after which everyone goes back to their self-centered ways. Some of the Scrooge's among us who grumble "Bah, humbug" at this whole Christmas thing are just grouches and grinchers, but some of the Scrooges are people who, in their despair at the state of the world, wonder whether the hope we proclaim at Christmas *is* nothing more than escapist thinking. Maybe they wouldn't go so far as to call Christmas humbug — at least not out loud — but some wonder — maybe you yourself have wondered — if all of the candlelight and evergreen is just a way of hiding the enduring drab reality of a world that stubbornly refuses to practice peace on earth and goodwill to all.

Is the hope that we proclaim at Christmas real, or is it humbug? Is there a genuine promise here or is this all just wishful thinking, an escapist fantasy in which we communally indulge every year for a few weeks?

The prophet Isaiah, who we read every Advent, proclaimed a day when the city of Jerusalem, the house of God, would be raised above all of the nations of the earth, and people would stream to God's house to learn the ways of the Lord. He envisioned a day when the city of Jerusalem would become the hub of world peace.

"People will seek out the city," the prophet said, "to learn how to turn their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; their implements of war will be transformed into utensils of economic well-being and nations shall no longer make war on one another."

When people heard Isaiah's words, surely some were moved by the promise of the images he described, but just as surely there were those who responded, "Bah, humbug!" Those Scrooge-like detractors looked around at the Jerusalem of their day and saw rich people lining their pockets with the money of the poor; they saw beggars on the street and children stunted with malnutrition; they saw nations rattling their arms at one another; they saw neighbors eyeing neighbors with fear and distrust.

"This corrupt filthy city," they thought, "will one day lead all of the nations to peace? Bah, humbug." So too, when we look at the brutality and injustice and hurt of our society, there are times when we despair of ever getting the stink out of the world. Is the Christmas proclamation just empty sentimentality or does it have anything we can really hang our hope on?

I believe that understanding the true meaning of the proclamation of Christmas depends on understanding a crucial distinction in grammatical construction, a distinction that is the difference between humbug and hope. You know how editors pull a quote out of an article and put it in a text box so that you can get the gist of the whole article by reading that one pithy sentence? Well, here is my pithy sentence for this sermon: **Understanding the Christmas proclamation requires understanding a crucial distinction in grammatical construction, one which is the difference between humbug and hope.** In other words, the real meaning of Christmas is all a matter of grammar. Last week, you got a science lesson on the scatter hoarding behavior of nuthatches; this week you get a grammar lesson. You never go away empty handed from my sermons!

So, let's look at some grammar for a minute. How would you define the word 'hope?' Most of the time, we define 'hope' as the desire for a positive occurrence in the future: I hope that the weather improves. I hope that I get a good night's sleep tonight. When we take apart those sentences, we discover that our typical understanding of hope is always followed by the word, "that." The word "that" functions in those sentences as a relative pronoun, something that describes the thing to which it refers. If you say to a friend, "I hope" and then stop talking, your friend understands that you are experiencing a state of hope but they aren't sure exactly what the nature of your hope is until you describe it by adding the relative pronoun "that." I am hoping *that* they have blueberry pie at the Jet. Almost every time that we use the word hope, we follow it with the relative pronoun "that" which points to what it is we are hoping for. I hope *that* I'll get an A on my test. I hope *that* my child gets into Harvard. I hope *that* my child graduates from high school. We describe our feelings — we are hoping — and we follow it with the relative pronoun 'that' to point at what it is we are hoping will materialize.

This is usually how we talk about hope, but this grammatical construction begs the question, "How do we expect that hope to come to fruition?" Many times, we have to admit that our hopes are really just an expression of a desire for an outcome over which we have no control. I can hope all I want that it is sunny tomorrow, but my hoping isn't going to change the tilt of the earth or the cloud cover over Alfred. And if you leave your hope stuck in that grammatical construction with its relative clause "that", then almost anything you hope for is little more than wishful thinking. I can hope that poverty is vanquished; I can hope that injustice ends, I can hope that all the world knows peace, but I am saying nothing about how I think those things are going to happen and frankly, I in my small frail oh-so-short human life, have little control over making any of them come to fruition.

And so, if we think about the hope proclaimed at Christmas as hope "that," the Christmas proclamation is little more than a sentimental expression of what we wish could be but is not. Bah, humbug! The proclamation of Christmas hope, however, is not "hope that." We don't follow the message of Christmas hope with the relative pronoun "that;" we follow it with the instrumental case¹ represented

by the word, “in.” The instrumental case describes not what *we wish would happen* but the means *by which* it will happen. We don’t have hope *that* the world will know peace; we have hope *in* Christ who was born into our world to show us the way of love and peace. We don’t have hope *that* injustice will be vanquished; we have hope *in* the liberating God who in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. is bending the arc of the universe toward justice. We don’t have hope *that* somehow we will be better tomorrow than we are today; we have hope *in* the power of Christ’s word to transform our hearts and minds and make us into new creatures. We have hope *in* a God who is eternal and whose work will far outlast the limits of our mortal short lives. We have hope *in* a strength that is greater than the strength of one frail human being; we have hope *in* God’s love that is more encompassing than the limits of a weak human heart, that is wiser than the feeble human brain, that is brighter than the light any human eye can see. If we follow our hope with the word “that,” we are expressing nothing more than a wishful desire that the molecules of the world will randomly align in the way that we want them to and for the person who believes only in what their eyes can see and their ears can hear and their minds can know, there *is* nothing more on which to base their hope. But we as people of Christ, believe in something more than what we can see, greater than what we can know for as the apostle Paul said, “...Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” As people of faith, we are not sitting around awaiting a chance alignment of circumstances or a random unpredictable arrangement of particles and patterns that will just happen to work out to our benefit; we are grounding our hope *in* God who is at work right this moment in human history bringing about justice and creating pockets of peace, and redeeming us from our fallen and broken nature, even when we cannot see it.

As Christians, we are humble enough to confess that there is more to the world than our eyes can see or that our minds can know, and it is what is unseen that is our salvation. There is a strength greater than my own that can lift me up when the world has brought me to my knees. There is a mercy greater than my own that can restore my heart when it has been broken by guilt and grief. There is a compassion greater than my own that can give me the courage to love my enemy and stand up for those so unlike myself. There is a power greater than my own that is at work moving us all toward peace. I can’t see it; I can’t even understand it, but I ground my hope in it.

This is the hope of Christmas: not a hope *that* but a hope *in*: hope *in* Christ who came into our world to embody for us God’s grace and to show us that nothing, not even death, can defeat the power of God’s unconquerable love.

Footnotes:

1. While the Instrumental case is a recognized case in many other languages such as Greek (where it is part of the Dative,) it is not usually discussed formally in English grammars but grammarians do note its use in constructions such as the one I cite.