

**Hope**  
December 7, 2008  
Mark Belletini

**Opening Words**

We are here  
*after the first snowfall of the season,*  
to worship together,  
*to climb high,*  
that we might regard our world  
*and our lives*  
from the lofty perspective of hope.

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

**Affirmation:**

I know you can't live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. And you, and you, and you and you have got to give them hope."

Harvey Milk 1978

**Sequence**

Singing in me. Singing in you.  
Singing voices tempered by December.  
The voices of memories past  
drifting through the silent snow  
to fall into human hearts...  
echoes in the kitchen,  
the clatter of cookie sheets,  
noisy bustle in the market,  
a wooden box of clementines,  
and barely vocalized worries  
about paying the bills.  
Singing in me, singing in you,  
voices in carol and candelabra  
surrendering to the mystery of great things:  
like a babe nesting in an unlikely cattle-feeder  
or oil glistening within an empty jar  
or light glittering from a thousand small candles  
that replace the waning sun for a while.  
Singing in me, singing in you,  
worries about getting through,

and hopes for transformation on the other side;  
passions for what is possible  
quicken our pulse,  
and a warm welcome to this silence  
around which all of December wheels.

*silence*

Singing in me. Singing in you. Singing within.  
Voices of loved ones present and gone,  
voices forever woven into our own  
tapestry of memory.  
Voices of love, of challenge,  
of hope and sorrow,  
voices singing with and without words,  
and voices speaking with and without music.  
And now, voices of remembrance  
and honor and thanksgiving  
as we name these other voices  
within us, either aloud or silently within.

*naming*

Voices of December, singing in concerts and  
caroling in congregations. Voices of December,  
kindling candles of hope in human hearts  
through the power of music, jazzing our colder days with singing warm as a hearth.

**Readings**

***The First Reading*** *this morning comes from the book Who Are We by Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor of ethics and political policy at the University of Chicago.*

What does it mean to live in hope? Reaching a new millennium “concentrates the mind wonderfully.” We take stock. We look back in order to peer ahead. We ask ourselves: Do we dare to hope, having looked back, having surveyed the shipwreck that is so much of the twentieth century? Taking stock honestly and forthrightly, refusing to avert our eyes, it is clear that optimism isn’t warranted. But then, optimism never is. Hope, however, is something else. While optimism proffers guarantees that everything will turn out all right and that all problems are solvable, hope, that great theological virtue, urges us to a different stance, one aware of human shortcoming but aware also of our capacities for stewardship and decency and our openness to grace.

***The Second Reading*** *is from the first chapter of the Book of Shmu’el, or Samuel, in the Hebrew Scriptures. We date the written form we have to the year 621, but the stories were first crafted orally as much as 400 years earlier than that.*

There was a man from Ramahthaim in the Honeycomb district, there in the hills of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, of long and noble lineage.

Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Penninah. Penninah had children; Hannah was childless.

Elkanah used to go up from his town every year to offer sacrifice to, and bow to, the ground before the Eternal at Shiloh Shrine. Hofni and Finehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Eternal there along with their father.

One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. Afterward, he used to give many portions of the meat to his wife Penninah and all of her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he would give but one portion only, even though he actually favored Hannah; but her womb was closed up.

All the worse, Penninah rived with her, mocking her, taunting her by pointing out her childlessness. This went on for years. Whenever the family went up to offer sacrifice, Penninah would jeer at Hannah so much that she eventually stopped eating and just cried all the time. Her husband, Elkanah, would say things like “Hannah, why are you sobbing so, and why are you refusing to eat? Why are you so depressed? Am I not more devoted to you than even ten children would be?”

After suppertime, Hannah rose and went to the shrine. The priest Eli was sitting at the doorpost on a seat. In her misery, Hannah went past him, and sought justice from the Eternal inside the shrine, weeping the whole while.

Now as she poured her heart out, praying for a pregnancy, she moved her lips, but otherwise remained silent. She did not vocalize her concerns, but expressed them only inside her heart. So the priest, Eli, seeing her lips move in that way from his perch at the doorway, decided she must be drunk. So he went up to her and said: “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? It’s time for you to sober up.” But Hannah responded “No, sir. I am *depressed*, not drunk. I have not had so much as a single glass of wine. I have just been pouring myself out to the Eternal. Do not dismiss me as someone on a binge of some kind. I am in a state of deep anguish and distress.”

“Then, go in peace,” said the priest, “and may you be granted your prayer.” “You are so kind,” responded Hannah. So Hannah left in a better mood. She began to eat regularly, and was no longer downcast all the time.

## **Sermon**

Some weeks ago, Bishop Bill Polley, one of the clergy I work with in our local interfaith social justice organization, BREAD, emailed me. He asked if I would give my interpretation of a biblical reading, his choice, at our regularly scheduled meeting on the First Thursday of the month. Two other clergy would also offer be offering their

comments. All of my BREAD colleagues know that our Unitarian Universalist practice is mostly not centered on the Scriptures, but they seem to get a kick out of my particular way of reading things. So I get asked to do this from time to time. Bill gave me the passage by chapter and verse, and I took it down.

Next day, I read the passage. It was just the first half of the one you heard just a few minutes ago, but with a whole lot of added genealogy, which I kindly removed for this morning's reading. Vs. 1-10 just like he said. So I emailed Bill. "There must be some mistake," I wrote. I see at most a half of a story, and not a terribly useful one at that. Are you sure you gave me the right verses, 1-10?"

"Yes, that's it. 1-10" So, even though I was mystified, I decided to give it a go. I went to Hebrew lexicons and looked up every important word. I read up on my Shiloh archeology. I found out some fascinating things not really apparent to anyone on a surface reading. For example, we justly are proud, here in the US of A, of our melting pot culture, what we now call multiculturalism. The text of Samuel suggests we are Johnny come-latelys....the melting pot was already hot three thousand years ago. For example, according to the text, Eli, the Hebrew priest of the shrine at Shiloh, had two sons with entirely Egyptian, not Hebrew, names, Hofni and Finehas.

But this first story in the Book of Samuel is not about multiculturalism. It's not about religious ritual and shrine worship. No, it seems to be entirely about hopelessness. Hopelessness that hurts and pains the spirit, causing a serious depression. The Hebrew words in the story are all strong: distress, misery, and even the word *beliyaal*, which means *a feeling of utter worthlessness*.

Who feels worthless and depressed?

The woman Hannah.

Why does she feel worthless and depressed?

For many reasons.

One, she does not have a child in a patriarchal culture which has determined that her worth as a woman is only determined by her capacity for bringing babies into the world...preferably male children.

Two, she is being constantly put down, quite cruelly, by another woman who happens to have plenty of children.

Three, she has a narcissistic husband who thinks that she should just be glad he's around. He neither sees her misery, nor takes it seriously when he does. Nor does he reprimand his other wife, the mother who is tormenting Hannah.

Four, her local clergyman, although a liberal (we know this because he lets her enter the shrine, ordinarily a place reserved for men alone) is so out of touch with womanhood that he thinks she's just tied one on, and cannot see her misery until she tells him plainly: "I am depressed."

All good reasons to feel good and miserable, it seems to me.

The Hebrew text tells us that Hannah goes into the shrine to “palal”...which is often translated as “to pray.” But as far as I can tell, it does not really mean to pray in the ordinary sense of that word, but rather, *to seek justice*. In other words, although she feels terrible, she knows, up here in her head, that she *is* worthy. She knows that she is a fine person. She has come to realize that it’s the society around her who is feeding her the malarkey that she can only be a good woman if she produces children. It’s the people around her who are invested in making her miserable.

Now please, don’t imagine for one moment that because this story is situated three thousand years ago that we brilliant moderns have left this pattern of living. Twenty years ago I read a convincing study demonstrating with compelling evidence that women who were a part of cultures, families or religions that relegated them to second-class citizenship were far more likely to experience discomfort during their monthly periods, or during the menopausal time when such periods cease. Why? The sociologists interpreting the data came to the conclusion that if your worth is not in your intrinsic personhood, but in your reproductive capacity only, then a monthly reminder of your captivity to this ideology would be painful; and the cessation of this monthly reminder would be all the worse.

But after coming out of the shrine, Hannah begins to eat again, to smile, and not be so downcast. What happened?

1. She *named* her misery. She described its awful pain. When she spoke to the priest, she used only the strongest words. But in naming it, refusing to avert her eyes, or pretend that she’d be better off not feeling such things, she actually felt them.
2. Next, she showed up and spoke up. When the priest at Shiloh tried to define her as a drunk, she refused to accept it, and told him what was really true instead.

As a woman in a patriarchal culture, she did not have a right to speak in such a way to the authority in the shrine, but she knew if she didn’t speak up for herself, no one else would in such a culture, including her husband.

3. In seeking justice, *palal*, in the shrine, she re-organized her thinking about herself. She decided that she was the one who knew who she was, and that others were simply mistaken.

From that moment on, she was living in hope, not hopelessness.

She ate. She smiled. She refused to be put down when she was put down. She lived in hope.

But she did not become an optimist.

Oh, I know, for many writers, hope and optimism are synonyms. But not for me. I rather agree with Jean Bethke Elshtain in the first reading who sees optimism as very different from hope. She describes optimism like I describe magical thinking, a form of denial and “let’s pretend.”

Hope, however, she says, “urges us to a different stance, one aware of human shortcomings but aware also of our capacities for stewardship and decency and our openness to grace.”

So Hannah became aware of her capacities for decency and her openness to grace. Grace? I’ll talk about that in a sermon another time, but suffice it to say here that openness to grace for me means to be open to the possible. And hope is not optimism, pretending that everything will be OK, “somehow.” Hope, rather, asks that we first *name* both the systemic and emotional reality of suffering and oppression (all that depression and distress) so that we can get unstuck, and free ourselves to be enlivened by *a passion for the possible*. The words are the late Bill Coffin’s words, but I think they paint a terrific picture for the word *hope*. A passion for the possible.

Note, a passion for the possible is not a sense of entitlement. That’s optimism, which pretends, at least Elshtain says, to offer guarantees. And it’s not magical thinking either, the belief that if I do such and such a thing, my wishes will come true automatically. No, hope, a passion for the possible, is nothing like the game of four-year-olds, who, at their developmental level, might think they are invisible because they have covered their faces with their hands.

I saw a film about hope on Friday night. I went to see Gus Van Sant’s film about Harvey Milk. I went to see it because I am part of that story. Not because I had met him once briefly on Castro Street. But because I was working as a bank teller two blocks away from City Hall in San Francisco when he was shot. I was one of the earliest to know what happened. I marched among the 30,000 carrying candles down Market Street in silence that very night. (Our Association, in Boston, is asking me to write a Study Guide on the film for their Website, partially because I was there at the time, and I will probably do that.)

The film is true to my memory of those days. And as I have said to a few of you already, Sean Penn’s performance was not so much a performance as a transformation. Penn was gone. Milk was there instead. I have never seen anything like that in film in my life before.

But the point is, it was a film about hope. Why? Because, like Hannah, Harvey Milk grew up in a culture where he could be hurt just by being who he was...in his case, he could have been arrested just for being alive and holding hands with someone among the streets of the city. The film shows twenty such filmed arrests in New York City during the opening credits. Harvey could be beaten, locked away in a mental hospital, and certainly,

insulted and demeaned daily. Not just by a few other people, like Hannah, but by many, many people. He lived in fear and trembling, as Hannah did.

And yet, little by little, he too sought justice... he too wanted to *palal*. Oh, he didn't go into a shrine...after all, though he was Jewish by birth, he had become a non-theist as a young man. But just like Hannah, he poured himself out before what was Eternal in his own life...his inherent dignity. It slowly dawned on Harvey that he was not what other people said he was. He was the person *he himself said he was*.

And so he began to live in hope for the first time in his life. He began to develop a passion for the possible. He opens a camera shop on Castro Street, and when the local business association refuses to let him in, he starts his own business association. Then, when he hears of a young man who is beaten to death for being who he is, a murder without any response from the law, Harvey realizes he has to get acquainted with the law. He organizes and creates relationships with people who share his concerns. Our BREAD practice could very well have been modeled on *his way of doing things* had not Saul Alinsky invented it first.

Milk runs for City Council three times. And is defeated, three times. He does not give up, even then, though he is counseled by most everyone who loves him to do just that. (And he is a loved man.) So even though no gay man had ever been elected to office before, anywhere in America, he lives in hope, and he runs again. But, like the renewed Hannah, he eats. He smiles. He is no longer downcast. And he wins.

And, yes, yes, he dies. Shot by another City Council member. He knew he would die young. We *all* knew he would die. I was a bank teller in November of 1978, the year he died. Two blocks away from city hall at Golden Gate and Hyde. When the police teller at the bank who worked next to me got the call on his walkie-talkie, he blanched, and then said, "O my God. Someone just shot and killed the mayor. And that guy." I knew who "that guy" was without having to be told. We all did at the bank that day.

But Milk had *lived* in hope all the way to his death. And living in hope means not necessarily getting all the results you dream about. But to live in hope *is* to go forward with confidence, facing your very real fears. You go forward because you know in your heart that who you are is not determined by others, but by yourself. It's not determined by spouses or lovers or clergy or systemic prejudice and cruelty in our societies. It's determined by ourselves. Look, I know my value as a person is intrinsic, not because it is a Unitarian Universalist principle, but because when someone tries to demean me for who I am, I feel hurt and distressed. My deepest deep is trustworthy, and knows that I am who I am, not what others think I am, so it responds with hurt and anger. Those feelings, and my naming of them, are a confirmation of that. I am becoming who *I* am becoming. I will be what I will be, not what others want me to be. That phrase...I will be what I will be (ehyeh esher ehyeh, or YHWH in Hebrew) is translated as The Eternal in some Bibles. But that is why a theist like Hannah and a non-theist like Harvey can *both* claim the power of pouring their troubles out and naming their pain before the Eternal, for the eternal is nothing less than that which will be what it will be. In a shrine or in a human

heart, it makes no matter. So for me, naming it YHWH/God, or naming it the human spirit, makes no difference, since what is important is not theological niceties or worse, theological conformity, but hope, the passion for the possible. The power to go forward in our lives to do what is right and honest and possible not because we are guaranteed ultimate success, but because we will be what we will be, not what others want us to be. We will be the sure flame of what we know and do, and what we know and do will ignite other lights, and together we can create a bright path for justice on this earth. We can, if we will, give off hope the way the stars give off light. Harvey and Hannah are both good examples.

So I am glad that the good Bishop made a little mistake. You see, he did send the right verses, 1-10, just the wrong chapter. The other presenters lifted up a different text entirely. But the mistake was fortuitous. It led me to the Hannah passage, and her transformation from hopelessness to hope. And it helped me to see the connection between an ancient text and a present day film that crosses my own life history.

So now, it will make sense to you that I can end my sermon with the very words that end the film, Harvey's best known words, words for all of us, no matter our sexuality, gender, age, ability, ethnicity, color or spiritual practice, words you know because you said them earlier: "I know you can't live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. And you, and you, and you and you have got to give them hope."

### **Offering**

It takes many little lights to light up a great room.  
It takes many people to accomplish great things.  
It takes many committed men and women and  
teens and children to make a congregation  
like this thrive and sing.  
The morning offering will now be given and received.

### **Closing Prayer: Song For Those who Persist**

Let patience and impatience hold hands.  
Let organization and passion hold hands.  
Let realism and vision hold hands.  
Let feelings and honesty hold hands.  
Let persistence hold hands with persistence.  
Love, guide us each and all as we run this race.