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Sowing Hope Where There is Despair (Chapter 4 of Practicing the Prayer of St. Francis)

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Chapter 4

Sowing Hope Where There is Despair

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Introduction

Elijah was at the top of his spiritual game. When we see him, he has just won a major public challenge to a “call-down-the-fire” contest against the prophets of Baal and Asherah, all four hundred fifty of them. They prayed and pleaded with their gods to no avail. Then, Elijah, in total control of the situation, taunted them and asked for water to be poured on the altar to make the feat even more remarkable, not seeming to remember how precious water was since the land was in the middle of a terrible drought, a drought he had predicted. No matter. After he won the contest and dispatched of the competition, the rains came. He was the ultimate victor, recognized by all as the true servant of God (1 Kgs 18:16-45).

So, given all of this, why do we find Elijah, the champion, the winner, the victorious servant of God, sitting under a broom bush a day’s journey into the wilderness, afraid for his life and wishing he could die (1 Kgs 19:3-5)? True, Queen Jezebel had angrily threatened him, but why would despair creep in immediately following such a great spiritual victory? Did he forget God’s faithfulness to him over the years? Did he forget being fed by ravens in the desert (1 Kgs 17:2-6)? Did he forget having a never-ending supply of flour and oil at the widow’s house (1 Kgs 17:15-16), or God bringing her son back from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24)? And how could he forget that God, just the day before, demonstrated his might by crushing the prophets of Baal and Asherah and replenishing the drought-stricken land with rain?

Good questions, indeed. I think great successes can cause spiritual amnesia. It seems the wilderness is only a day's journey away for any of us. We either forget the faithfulness of God or we are dizzied and distracted by our accomplishments or both, but even big successes can somehow leave us feeling terribly inadequate and very much alone. We often associate despair with failure, frustration, fatigue, and injury—times when the roof caves in, which it is, but being at the top of our spiritual game does not exempt us from these feelings either. Despair, it seems, is an equal opportunity offender.

So, how do we sow hope where there is despair? That is the major question we will address in this chapter. First, we'll look a bit more at despair and why it troubles our spirits so deeply before turning to the subject of hope, something we all can embrace. Then, we'll pick up the story of Elijah once more. I believe that it is a textbook example for how to sow hope in the wilderness of despair. Before closing, I will offer a few practical steps we can take when we despair or walk with those who do, choosing to find and sow hope rather than sitting under a broom bush and wishing to call it quits.

Despair

Let's face it. Despair is tough; it is a serious matter. It can debilitate us both mentally and spiritually. When we feel that we have no options to change our circumstances, it can drain the life out of life. But hope, I will argue, is the great motivator. I believe that faith sends all of us on a spiritual journey and love bids us home, but it is hope that keep us going in good times and bad. And, fortunately for all of us, it is a renewable resource.

Despair is a feeling of helplessness, realizing that something is profoundly wrong and there is nothing we can do to make it go away or make life better. Circumstances are simply beyond our control, too much for us to manage or change. We feel that we have no choices, so

we trudge through each day without any sense of meaning, joy, or hope. Each day is miserable, and there is no end of the misery in sight.

Just look at some of the words that are associated with despair: gloom, melancholy, pain, desperation, sorrow, despondency, misery, discouragement, anguish, ordeal, dejection, trial, tribulation, wretchedness, forlornness, and disheartenment. You can easily sense the misery in these words. Living without hope or feeling that a situation is hopeless kills the spirit. We end each day not anticipating a better tomorrow. In fact, the dread is that all our tomorrows will be just like today—pure misery.

And despair can come upon us at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. It might be a word from the doctor, an accident, the loss of a job or relationship, an embarrassment, or a phone call in the middle of the night. One day we are taunting the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and the next day we find ourselves sitting under a broom bush wishing that it was all over. In fact, feeling that it *is* all over.

One thing is for certain. This is not a pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps kind of moment, and there are no easy answers or quick fixes. No “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” or “when God closes a door, a window will be left open” bromides to perk up your spirit and brighten up your day. When in despair, what we need most seems in short supply, totally out of reach—hope. So, how might we walk with someone who so desperately needs to find some hope in the circumstances they face? Is it even possible to sow hope where there is despair? Admittedly, it can be a daunting task, but I believe that there is much to be learned about sowing a sense of hope and purpose from the story of Elisha, but first let’s be clear about what we mean when we speak of hope.

Hoping

Hope can be a verb, something we do, akin to wishing. When I was twelve, I received a weather station from my parents as a Christmas present, capable of measuring temperature, wind speed, barometric pressure, and humidity (well, sort of). I had dreams of becoming a weatherman, working for a local TV station in Saginaw, but that all changed when my least favorite uncle arrived for Christmas dinner. He took joy in unkindly teasing and embarrassing his nephews, and this occasion was no exception. In a loud voice in front of the entire extended family (about 25 in total), he demanded a prediction: “Since you are so smart now with your new weather station, when will it snow? We want a prediction.” I don’t think he knew how shy I was or how much I hated to be embarrassed—just hated it! All eyes were on me, and I felt my face getting red. Honestly, I didn’t know what to do, but from somewhere deep inside these words spilled out: “It will snow by four o’clock today.” “Really,” my uncle retorted, “we’ll see how good of a weatherman you are.”

That last statement ruined my entire day. From eleven o’clock on, my uncle called out each half hour, “Is it snowing yet?” with a not-so-nice grin. “Not yet,” I would say, looking to the west, hoping for any sign of snow. There was none—mostly clear skies. The waiting was terrible painful, and the closer it got to four o’clock, the worse I felt. This was certainly not the Christmas I had anticipated.

Honestly, I nearly lost all hope. Then a miracle happened. Just a minute or two before four o’clock, some tiny snowflakes came drifting down, looking more like ashes from a campfire than snow flurries. It wasn’t much, and it didn’t last very long, but I declared it to be a snowfall and my family didn’t protest. As we sat down for Christmas dinner, somehow my spirit was renewed. Christmas had been saved.

I learned a few lessons that day. To begin with, hoping and waiting are really hard. They test your spirit, especially so when the stakes are high—like hoping the latest lab tests bring good news, waiting for the phone to ring after a job interview, or praying for someone to make it home during a bad storm, and for a shy, fragile, tender young boy, for it to start snowing before four o'clock on Christmas day. Hoping isn't always easy, but I have come to believe that it is an honest act of faith, a prayer for what we do not yet see. And it can be a spiritual practice, too, shaping us in ways known and unknown.

I learned that we sometimes put ourselves unnecessarily in situations where hope is fading, and despair is pulling in the driveway. On that Christmas day, there were several ways that I could have avoided having the weather determine my Christmas experience, something totally out of my control. For example, I could have brushed off my uncle's demand for a prediction, stating that the station was not yet functioning or that I needed several days of data to make a prediction. I could have made it clear that it wasn't possible to precisely state when a storm would arrive without radar, or I could have just laughed at his comment and returned one of my own: "Ha! That's funny. Maybe next year!" Of course, these are adult responses, and I was a child. However, I wonder how many times we find ourselves hoping beyond hope in situations we could have avoided with a little wisdom and forethought. I think it is always a fair question to ask when we begin to despair and lose hope—what is it that we are hoping for? Could it be that we set ourselves up for despair by depending on circumstances that no one can influence or control?

And I learned to believe in miracles. Now I realize that predicting snow in Central Michigan in late December is not really going out on much of a limb, but the skies were mostly clear that day. Of course, it could have been just a lucky coincidence. I grant you that. But then

again, could it be that the God of the universe saw a little boy losing hope and praying for snow in the face of ridicule, embarrassment, and shame, and decided to send just a few tiny snowflakes his way? I honestly believe that that's what happened. Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that you either believe that nothing is a miracle or that everything is. I tend to go with the latter. To this very day, I smile every time I see falling snow, acknowledging all the snowflakes in my life—the remembered and forgotten signs of hope, the manifestations of God's love and grace.¹

Hope

Hope can also be a noun, something we carry with us, the feeling of expectation or desire for a certain thing to happen. The expectation that something will happen implies more of a sense of certainty or confidence, while the desire for a certain outcome seems a bit more like wishing, but they are both manifestations of hope, the fuel that keeps us going in tough and terrible times, and good times, too. However, hope can be placed in many things—in our gifts and graces, our popularity, our contacts, our resources, our education, our jobs, our families, even our churches, and despair comes quickly into play when these places let us down, and at one time or another, they all will.

So where can we place our hope? “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint,” the prophet Isaiah tells us (Isa 40:31). I think he's right. And the Apostle Paul writes this about hope, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13). I like that very much, too—the God of hope brings joy and peace as you trust in him, and hope overflows by the power

¹ Much of this reflection about Hoping for Snow first appeared in Patrick Allen, *Love at Its Best When Church Is a Mess* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 144-145. Used by permission.

of the Holy Spirit. So, where can we place our hope? We can place our hope in the character and promises of God.

All of this begs two essential questions: what *are* we hoping for, and where *do* we place our hope? Our answers will reveal much about our ability to sow hope where there is despair, especially in our own lives. Let's look at how God planted seeds of hope with Elijah, and then turn our attention to how we might sow seeds of hope as we put the Prayer of St. Francis into practice each day in our own neighborhoods.

Scripture

We pick up the story of Elijah, the famous prophet, sitting under a broom bush in deep despair and asking the Lord to take his life (1 Kgs 19). He takes a nap but is awoken by an angel who brings him fresh bread and a jar of water —twice, and both times urges him to get up and eat. The second time Elijah is told that he needed to set out on a long journey to Mount Horeb, a pilgrimage of sorts, and there God would meet him. When he reached Mount Horeb, he spent the night in a cave (v. 5-9).

The Lord asked Elijah: “What are you doing here?” (1 Kgs 19:10). Elijah reports that although he has been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty, he is now the only faithful one left. God speaks to Elijah, but not in a great and powerful wind, not in a mighty earthquake, and not in a roaring fire. Rather, in a gentle whisper the Lord asks Elijah again: What are you doing here? Elijah repeats his answer—he has been zealous for the Lord but is now the only one left. The Lord instructs Elijah to go back the way he came and go to the Desert of Damascus where he was to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, Jehu, a king over Israel, and Elisha as the prophet to take his place. This trio would take care of all who worshiped Baal. And incidentally, the Lord mentions to Elijah in passing that there are “seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not

bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kgs 19:18). Obviously, Elijah wasn’t the only faithful one left. It only felt that way.

Practicing the Prayer of St. Francis

Elijah’s story is truly amazing, full of wisdom for all of us who pray to sow hope where there is despair. I want to highlight six insights from the story and discuss how we might learn to practice what we pray by offering fresh bread, embracing a long journey, asking honest questions, letting God be God, challenging false assumptions, and accepting a new mission—practices that can lead to hope and spiritual renewal.

Offer Fresh Bread

As Elijah curled up under a broom bush in deep despair, an angel brought a loaf of fresh bread. For me, this is a metaphor for offering spiritual comfort and nourishment to someone in need. I don’t know about you, but when I am on my own, alone, weekends are the hardest. I guess that during the week, there are enough activities, appointments, lunches, meetings, and projects to keep my mind occupied and my heart distracted, but everything slows down on the weekend. Uninvited thoughts and feelings creep in, and the nights can be very, very lonely. I experienced this phenomenon full force while working in San Diego. Going through a divorce, even under the best of conditions, if there is such a thing as the best of conditions, is painful to say the least, and particularly so in a conservative Christian community. Honestly, my constant companions were guilt, shame, and fear—uninvited companions who whispered in the dark of the night: you are not worthy, you are not trustworthy, and you are no longer welcome in this place. I thought that I would lose my job and there was nothing that I could do about it. I carried and nurtured these feelings like a newborn baby. I was in despair.

Then out of the blue, three friends stepped forward and each volunteered to be my companion—committed to helping me make it through the long and lonely weekends ahead. I don't think they colluded, but each one took a specific block of the weekend. The first companion simply wouldn't let me attend church on my own. When you are suffering and down for any reason, attending church on your own is very difficult. On several occasions, I would come to the side entrance of the sanctuary, look in, and simply turn around and go home. At other times, I would slip in and sit by myself, and make a hasty exit as soon as the benediction was pronounced. That was even worse. However, my friend would not let me stay away. He insisted that I come to church, sit with his family, and then come over for Sunday lunch before joining the family in some rousing table games. From time to time, I would purposely cheat just a bit, doing so obviously so that his children would see what I was doing. They loved to catch me and call out my transgressions. We would all have a big laugh as I promised to learn all the rules. I don't think I ever won even a game, but I was the true winner. To this day, I have fond memories of those Sunday afternoons when I was offered a loaf of fresh bread—literally and spiritually.

The second friend took the Friday night shift. Even though he was working two jobs and had teenage children, he told me that he was committed to spending each Friday evening with me over the fall semester. I immediately protested, pointing out that he had a family of his own, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He told me that he had already talked it over with his wife and family, and they all thought that this was a good thing to do. So, every Friday evening that fall we met for dinner, then went to a movie or a hockey game or just drank coffee and talked theology and church politics. And as we did, he walked with me and watched over me, offering me another loaf of fresh bread each week.

My third friend became my Saturday companion, or more precisely, I became his shadow. Sometimes we would hike or attend a sporting event, or go to Home Depot, or just hang out at home with his family. I became quite good at helping mow the fields, trim the trees, and even repair a fence post or two. I simply joined in with whatever his family was doing that day, and it was life-giving. He would always ask me how I was doing. On one occasion, I admitted that I was having trouble going through each day being sure that I didn't act *too* happy. After all, I was damaged goods, and I was told that I shouldn't be joyful. I should just be thankful that I still had a job, at least for the time being. He stared at me for a minute, then cleared his throat and asked, "Has anyone given you permission to look to the future with some anticipation, even joy?" Of course, my answer was "no." "Well, I do!" he barked as he gave me an even longer and more intense stare. I received that loaf of bread full force. As I look back, that was the turning point for me. I started to look ahead, albeit self-consciously, to better days, and in due time they did come.

Clearly, these three friends held my hand and walked next to me. In one of the darkest times I have ever known, they were with me, affirming their hopes and dreams for me even when I didn't have any of my own. They offered fresh bread, and it sustained me. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think of their care for me, and I pray for opportunities to share a loaf of bread—literally and spiritually—with other suffering souls. As it turns out, they are everywhere.²

Embrace the Journey

When we are walking with someone in despair or dealing with our own, it is important to understand that the healing process is a long journey, not a quick fix—a marathon, not a sprint.

² A previous version of this story first appeared in Patrick Allen, *The Good Shepherd, Gentle Guide, and Gracious Host* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 111-113. Used by Permission.

Notice that the angel didn't send Elijah back to the place of his last victory, although it was only a day's walk away. Instead, he was told that he needed strength for a long journey. According to 1 Kings 19:8, Elijah was to travel forty days and forty nights to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God. As we noted in Chapter Two, the number forty can literally mean forty, but it usually means a very long time, a period of new life, new growth, a transition from one great task to another. I think it fair to understand Elijah's journey of forty days and forty nights as a transition from one great task to another, one that would take some time to process and embrace.

This is a good reminder for all of us when we deal with feelings of despair. The recovery process is a marathon, not a sprint. The approach to training and the strategy to complete these races are totally different. If we enter a marathon thinking that it is like a sprint, just longer, we won't make it through the first five miles. Much the same can be said when dealing with despair. If we think there's some kind of quick-fix or presto moment when despair simply and quickly goes away like a mild headache, we are traveling on the well-worn wishing road. The right road stretches out before us, a journey to be embraced, requiring a long-view perspective, patience, persistence, and courage.

Ask Honest Questions

A third way to practice the prayer of St. Francis when we desire to sow hope where there is despair is to ask honest questions. The temptation, of course, is to provide answers and sayings instead of asking questions. It is not helpful to inform someone in despair that your aunt experienced much the same thing and then go on to tell them in great detail just how she dealt with it, or to tell someone that all they need to do is pray harder and read the Bible more. And offering such encouragements as "it could be worse" or "diamonds are formed under conditions of intense heat and pressure" are not encouraging at all, no matter how well intended. I even

heard a radio host exclaim this encouragement: “When God shuts a door, he will leave a window open—or at least keep the doggie-door unlocked!” In my view, such statements invite more despair, not less.

The key, I believe, is to practice holy silence as best you can, and if you do speak, ask honest questions about how despair is being experienced instead of dispensing uninvited and unwelcome advice. God asked Elijah, “What you are doing here?” Elijah’s answer provides a clue to his despair: “I have been zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kgs 19:10). Here, for the first time, Elijah puts his fears and disappointments into words—I have been zealous, but the Israelites have rejected your covenant. I am the only one left who has not abandoned you, Lord. And by the way, where were you when I needed you and why haven’t you come in a mighty way to rescue me? I don’t want to die!!

This is a good start. Elijah begins to put into words how he is feeling and what he believes is going on, even if he is a bit mistaken about some of it. When we ask honest questions, we are letting others give voice to their despair, to lament, and in doing so, we are putting our prayers into practice.

Let God Be God

Elijah was a zealot of sorts, a firebrand, and that was his understanding of God, too, so when he journeyed to Mt. Horeb, he looked for God in the mighty wind, then in a massive earthquake, and finally in a raging fire, but God was not there. Rather, God came and spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. He almost missed hearing from God because he was looking and listening for a big display of power and might, the way he perceived God to be. It is a formative spiritual

practice to let God be God, to look for his work and listen for his voice all the time, in places you expect God to be, and especially in places where you don't expect him to be, and let God speak in a gentle whisper even though we would rather see a firestorm. When we are in despair or walking with those who are, it is easy to limit God by our own preconceived notions about how God works and what we want to see happen. To practice the Prayer of St. Francis, we let God be God and listen for his voice as an act of faith, seeds sown in hope.

Challenge False Assumptions

Earlier I suggested that when we ask honest questions, we are letting others give voice to their despair, to lament, and in doing so, we are putting our prayers into practice. I truly believe that to be true. We ask honest questions, and we listen as despair is put into words, even our own words. But just because we think or feel a certain way doesn't make it true. There will be times when we will need to lean in gently and challenge the facts of the lament we hear. And if we are dealing with our own despair, the honest questions and a reality check from a trusted friend or advisor can be hope-giving.

Elijah firmly believed that he was the only faithful one left in Israel. I'm sure he felt that way, but it just wasn't true. God reminded him that there were seven thousand in Israel who did not bow to Baal (1 Kgs 19:18). This news was important for at least two reasons. First, in large part, his despair was because he thought he was the only faithful one left in all the land, and that he had to fight the battles all by himself. Of course, this was not true. And second, God wanted to give Elijah a new mission, a mantle that would be unrealistic to even consider if he thought he was all alone. When we challenge false assumptions or our own false assumptions are challenged, it clears the way to consider what God may have in store for us, things full of challenge and hope.

Accept a New Mission

After Elijah understood that he was not the only one left, in fact, there were seven thousand eager to fight, he was probably ready to return as the zealous prophet and lead them into battle, but God had a different mission for him. He was to go back and anoint Hazael king of Aram, Jehu king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor as prophet. He was to pass the torch to the next generation of leaders. I doubt that this was what Elijah expected or necessarily wanted, but after taking spiritual bread, embracing his journey, giving expression to his despair, hearing God in a new way, and seeing that he was not alone, he was willing to believe that God had something different for him to do. In fact, he was the only one for this new mission. Out of despair comes the possibility of a renewed faith in God and a hope for the future.

A Final Thought

There is much that we can glean for the story of Elijah as we deal with our own despair or walk with those who do, but one question remains. Did Elijah find hope or did he remain in despair? We are told that Elijah did as God requested and went back to work. He anointed the trio and the battle against the prophets of Baal was on, and Elijah began grooming Elisha as his successor. When it was clear that Elijah was about to die, he asked Elisha, "Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken from you?" Elisha replied, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit" (2 Kgs 2:9). A double portion of your spirit, indeed. Clearly, his spirit was back.

The last obligation of a leader is to make a graceful exit, to look to the next generation, to pass on wisdom, spirit, and hope. Well done, Elijah.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. On a personal and a spiritual level, what are you hoping for?
2. Who is the most hopeful person you know? Why so?

3. At a low point in your life, who offered you a loaf of bread? Explain.
4. Has God ever spoke to you in an unexpected way? How so?
5. Can you point to a leader who made a graceful exit, passing the torch to the next generation of leaders? What personal and spiritual qualities made a smooth transition possible?

The Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;