

As conference themes go, the theme of the conference I attended from Thursday to yesterday was about as timely as I've ever seen: "Hope for a weary world." I registered based mostly on the theme, feeling optimistic and, well, hopeful, that attending would help me as a preacher and as a person. And I wasn't disappointed. Even though one of the first speakers pointed out that hope is best understood and practiced not as wishful or fanciful thinking, but as founded on brutal honesty, an acknowledgement of the reality of all life's difficulties, from disappointment to despair, anxiety to anger, sin to shame. And many more. Because of course, no one hopes for what they already have.

Another went even further, pointing out that hope is closest to us and most powerfully transformational in our suffering, and ended her talk by wishing suffering upon us. Ironically, her talk was also the funniest of the conference. And then there was the talk about imagining what we'd regret most at the moment of our own deaths, and encouraging us to address the issue now, whatever it might be. But the conference was actually quite uplifting, I swear!

I still left feeling hopeful, in part because by acknowledging how deeply wearying the world can be, the speakers earned credibility that no credential ever could have given them, in part because they kept their messages grounded and managed our expectations, and in part because of how adeptly they reminded us that God is with us even in our darkest moments, brightening them with his grace and his mere presence.

Even in Easter, the Church's most joyful season, there are some dark moments, including the literal darkness in which the story from John's gospel begins, although in John, darkness is never just literal. The symbolism of Jesus appearing at daybreak is obvious, but still grounded.

It may well be that in this story, as in the story of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene outside his tomb, there is deep theological significance to the witnesses' failure to recognize Jesus at first, but it was also pointed out to me that both of these stories happened when it was still quite dark. It could be that Jesus's friends just couldn't see him well, and you can make as much or as little of that as you wish.

Darker, however, is the beginning of the story from Acts, where Saul, who had already earned a terrifying reputation among the first Christians, was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Saul already had blood on his hands when he sought, and received, even more power. Into this foreboding moment, the risen Jesus breaks in with blinding light and transforms a persecutor into an evangelist.

As shocking and awe-inspiring as this moment is, I like the quieter story from John better, because it's so much more relatable. Human experiences of grace and hope are far more frequently quiet and dimly lit, than dazzling and overpowering. And I suspect that Jesus much prefers nudging his friends to a successful night of fishing and inviting them to hang out and have breakfast, than he does intervening in a sinner's life

with sharp words and overpowering force.

But Jesus's quiet breakfast is also an intervention in sin.

During the conference, I met up with an old friend who lived in New York and had heard about the conference, but decided not to go. He had been a fan of the organization at first, but found that their emphasis on simply receiving grace and their rejection of spiritual disciplines and other intentional practices as unable to confer grace, left him cold. His own life-changing experience of grace — which is not mine to tell — left him eager to do as much as he could, to participate as fully as possible in the joyful and marvelous life of Christ. "I like a lot of the things they're saying, but I need something to hold on to," he said.

Both the stories from Acts and from John show that an experience of the grace of God is an invitation to engage in the Christian life. It is absolutely true that nothing we can do, or refuse to do, can earn God's love and grace. God's love for us is unconditional and everlasting. But it does not follow from those statements that there is no reason, no benefit, to doing anything.

As I mentioned, by Jesus's intervention, Saul became Paul, the fearsome persecutor became a fearless evangelist. Perhaps more relatable is how Jesus intervenes in Peter's life, as a trusted friend offering kind words and actions. No less than Paul, Peter experiences the grace of forgiveness, embracing the opportunity to repent of his three denials with three declarations of love, even as the reminder of his sin, which was inevitably part of the grace-filled experience of forgiveness, weighed on him. Then, having experienced this grace, Jesus commissioned Peter to his service, consecrating the remainder of his life, even all the suffering it would entail. Peter fulfilled his commission not because he felt a need to earn God's grace, but because he had been transformed by his experience of God's grace freely given. He could not have hoped for grace because he had just received it.

But this story should give us great hope. Wherever we are fearful, hurting, separated, or ashamed, God is with us in those parts of ourselves, not as a bizarre terrifying alien force, but as an old friend who loves us dearly. God certainly won't change the past, and he usually doesn't obliterate the problems we're concerned about — even the risen Jesus still had the wounds of his passion — but by his presence in those dark places, God does equip us to bear the burdens of this life until we are truly free of them.

Even though we are the community of the baptized, the community transformed by grace, we will still suffer in this life. God might relieve some of our sufferings, but all of us will suffer death. God will be there for us just as much then as at every other moment, or perhaps even more, for our need for God's grace is greatest then and none of life's distractions can intervene.

So despite the very real weariness of this life, our hope is great because we know that our God is greater than any suffering, and because by grace God turns our

wailing into dancing, by grace God puts off our sack-cloth and clothes us with joy. Therefore we respond to grace by following Jesus, holding on to joy and peace on earth until we enjoy their fullness in heaven; therefore our hearts sing to God without ceasing and we will give God thanks forever.