

“Got Hope?” / Ephesians 1:15-23 / Ascension / 20 May 2012

Paul says, “I pray that you might have the eyes of your heart opened, so that you might know the hope to which you have been called.” What is the hope to which you have been called?

The film *A Serious Man* is supposedly a black comedy by the Cohen Brothers, the same guys who gave us *O Brother, Where Art Thou* and *No Country for Old Men*. However, as much as I liked the movie, I don’t think it made me laugh more than two or three times. It was one of those films that you watch and you go, “Huh.” And you decide you weren’t crazy about it. But then you find yourself thinking about it as you’re falling asleep that night, and thinking about it as you’re waking up the next morning, and—if you’re me—thinking about all the many ways that you can work it into...a sermon. It’s a movie about hope.

Larry Gopnik is just a regular guy, a Jewish guy in the suburbs of Minneapolis in the 1960s. He’s a mathematics professor, and he spends his time with numbers, and equations, and mathematical formulas. The only time he ever really talks all that much is when he’s standing at the blackboard, explaining how numbers work. Larry spends his evenings grading papers at the kitchen table. He’s forever crawling up onto the roof of his little, one-story suburban house to turn the TV antenna so that his whining, marijuana-smoking 12-year old son can watch “F-Troop.” And from up there on his rooftop, Larry looks out on a sea of similar little houses, all boxy and plain, all with about forty feet of backyard-space, all flat, and bland, and treeless. At first it seems as if Larry is just too boring to have any real problems in life. His son just watches TV. He doesn’t know it, but his 14-year old daughter is gradually stealing money from him and saving it up so that she can get a nose job. Larry’s depressed older brother has been sleeping on the family’s couch and spending most of his time in their one and only bathroom. Every once in a while Larry might ask, “So, Arthur, any luck finding an apartment?” Other than that, life is uneventful for Larry. And then his moody, malcontent wife tells him that she’s in love with an old family friend. And she wants a divorce.

If there’s anything really humorous about “A Serious Man,” it’s Al, the guy that Larry’s wife is in love with. Al is a tall, overweight Jewish man, about 60 years old, and every time he sees Larry he promises him, “Larry, Larry, we’re going to make it through this.” Then he hugs Larry with a long, drawn out, protracted hug, as if he weren’t the one having an affair with Larry’s wife. And Larry stands there in Al’s awkward embrace with the same exact expression on his face as always. Something like this... Larry’s wife and her boyfriend, Al, convince Larry to move into a motel. And one day while he’s hanging out with his brother at a lake beach, a Jewish friend tells Larry, “You know, we’re Jews. Whenever we have problems in life, we have stories to turn to, stories about other people with problems just like ours. You really need to go talk to a rabbi about this.” And so, with a glimmer of hope, Larry makes for the synagogue to talk to his regular old rabbi.

Instead, Larry gets an appointment with the associate rabbi, a very eager and very young man, with a tiny little closet-sized office. And the junior rabbi advises Larry, “You know, what you really need is to see things with a fresh perspective. What you need is new eyes to see what God is doing in your life. I mean, look at the parking lot!” And the eager little rabbi hurries over to the window and draws back the curtain. And there it is, a regular parking lot with cars. “It just looks like a parking lot to you, but if

you had fresh eyes to see it, it would look fascinating and marvelous.” Larry doesn’t buy it. He sits in the junior rabbi’s office with that same expression on his face, while the young rabbi mutters, “Just look at it! The parking lot. The parking lot.”

Then Larry gets an appointment with the senior rabbi, a cold, somber man in his sixties with a bigger, more comfortable office. Larry tells the rabbi his sad tale, that his wife is leaving him for another man, and this rabbi tells Larry a story about a Jewish dentist who found Hebrew letters engraved on the inside of a gentile patient’s teeth. It was a whole Hebrew sentence that meant, “Help me.” At first the Jewish dentist was consumed with curiosity to learn how the Hebrew sentence got engraved into the gentile man’s teeth, but with time, he gave up caring, and the dentist’s life went back to normal. Of course, the senior rabbi had been even less help than the junior rabbi.

Finally, Larry decides to go see the much-revered rabbi emeritus, the wizened, frail old man who sits in a beautiful, spacious office full of antique Judaica, ancient relics, and fine paintings. Surely the wise old rabbi would know what to do, but he refuses to even see Larry. His burly, glaring secretary says, “The rabbi is busy; he can’t see you.” Larry protests, “But he doesn’t look busy.” And the secretary replies, “He’s thinking.” Larry cries out, “This is not a frivolous request. I’m a faithful member of this synagogue, and I need real help. I’m not here to waste the rabbi’s time. I’m a serious man,” which of course is the name of the movie, “A Serious Man.”

Well, I won’t tell you any more because I don’t want to ruin the film for you. And there is a whole lot more to tell. But none of it goes anywhere. Larry is a just a guy living from one small hope to another: hoping his brother will find a place and move out, hoping his wife will change her mind and stay with him, hoping his son will lay off the marijuana long enough to get bar mitzvahed, hoping that he’ll get tenure, hoping one of his rabbis will give him some little shred of wisdom to live by. And just when one of his little hopes is realized, another hope is squashed like a bug. And ironically, the only rabbi that said anything that stuck with him was the eager young rabbi who told him he needed a fresh perspective to see the parking lot.

That’s hope. Even when it doesn’t have much to go on, it goes on. Our theme on this Ascension Sunday is hope—the hope that the life, the very ethos, of Jesus will somehow rise up and hold a beautifying, peacemaking, life-giving influence over all the world. What is the hope to which *you* are called? Hope is not usually heroic or glamorous. Hope is the humblest of creatures; it frequently goes unnoticed. Sometimes you only notice hope when it starts to make itself rare. But be it great or be it small, no one can live without at least some form, some tenacious little glimmer...of hope. You and I, much like the hapless main character in “A Serious Man,” live most of our days from one small hope to the next small hope, never too much to ask, just regular, everyday hopes. There are people in this world who wouldn’t know *joy* if it descended on them like a rainstorm. There are people in this world who wouldn’t know *love* if it knocked them over like an ocean wave. There are people wouldn’t know *faith* if it suddenly perched on their shoulder like a flock of friendly sparrows. But hope! Everyone knows—or has known—hope. Even people who’ve had little reason for it, little cause to hope, know hope. The person who has thoroughly lost hope is to be pitied...and sometimes feared.

Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, “I pray that you might have the eyes of your heart opened, so that you might know what is the hope to which you are called.” Do

you ever think about hope? It costs about a nickel a pound, cheaper at Sam's Club. And yet, everyone lives by hope. Hope is so abundant that we take it for granted, like water. And, like water, hope can be found wherever there's life.

I once heard of a woman with a terminal disease. She had no hope in any afterlife; she just didn't believe in such things. She was diagnosed in the winter, and her final hope was to live long enough to smell the honeysuckle in bloom before she died. Sadly, she didn't live till spring, but at least that commonplace hope gave her something to aim for, some goal to attain, and in its own way, something to make the final days of her life purposeful and sweet. And so, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "What is the hope to which *you* have been called?" And what's so extraordinary about your hope that you need the eyes of your heart opened just in order to see it, just as Larry needed new eyes to see the parking lot?

Our hopes are so many—hopes for our children, our world, ourselves. I think in the end, we mostly hope for a deep sense of security and peace. We hope for Life, Love, Beauty, Truth. To my way of thinking, these are just other names for the One we also call God. This is the hope that drives all our disparate impulses and desires. That hope for connection to God usually comes across as a simple desire for something like love, or power, or sex, or a chemical buzz, or even just plain old chocolate. And yet, all of our desires and drives, everything we enjoy, betrays our spiritual longings, our deep, persistent hunger for God, our Source. In chasing after this thing or that, little do we know that we're actually just trying to achieve a tighter grip on Life itself, and by "Life," I mean God. Everyone hopes for more life, and in hoping for more life, we're secretly wishing to somehow be connected more deeply to God, the Source and definition of life.

Most of our never-ending desires don't feel very holy most of the time. Some are perfectly innocent, like the desire to knit or put together model airplanes. But some of those desires are downright unholy. When the addict digs under the couch cushions for a handful of dimes and quarters, discovers enough change to buy a big bottle of Miller's Highlife, then puts on his winter coat and trudges off into the snowy night to feed his addiction, that doesn't seem like the pursuit of a holy desire. But at its heart, what is that alcohol addiction but one person's misguided attempt to feel a little bit less encumbered, a little bit more alive, a little bit closer...to God? When the respectable father of four sneaks down to his wife's computer and looks at dirty pictures till 2am, that hardly seems like a holy drive. And yet, what is that man trying to do but to feel a little bit of life coursing through his veins, a little bit of excitement, in his mistaken way, a little bit of union with...God? He's not trying to harm anyone. All he wants is to feel alive, and by "alive," I mean united to God. Isn't it ironic to think that crimes are committed, people are murdered, wars are waged all because somebody's great, holy hope to get more out of life has gotten twisted and perverted into something ugly and destructive?

And there are harmless, even beneficial ways that we seek that holy union, some of them effective and some of them in vain. Our soul's deep craving for God drives us to seek fulfillment in our unions with other people, always hoping, hoping against all past experience and evidence to the contrary, that we can find ultimate completion in our spouse or partner, or—lord help them—in our children. And our best unions with other people do contain a spark of the divine in them. And so we never lose hope. Some hope to discover oneness with God through gardening, and I bet they find it from time to time. Some hope to find it through quilting, and I'm pretty sure that it's been known to happen.

Some hope to find God in animals, or gaming, or kayaking, or golfing, for in all these activities they're hoping to grasp a fuller, deeper dose of Life, and by "Life," how can we mean anything but God?

Hope! It drives us forward. As the Reformer Martin Luther said, "Everything that has ever been done in this world was done by hope." "What is the hope to which you are called?" Whatever your hope, it might not look like the pursuit of God until you have your eyes opened to it.

A young Baptist minister in the Deep South was asked to hold a graveside service for a homeless man. The deceased had no family, no friends, and the burial was to take place out in a field, a way out in the countryside. The minister ended up getting lost while he was looking for the grave and arrived a whole hour late. But he saw a backhoe and a work crew, taking a lunch break, out in a field. And so he pulled up to the open grave, where he saw the vault lid already in place, and he opened his Bible, and he began to preach. He preached from Genesis all the way to Revelation, and the longer he preached, the more excited he got, so much so that some of the workers looked up from their sandwiches to shout, "Amen," "Glory!" Finally, the minister said a prayer, closed his Bible, and walked back toward his car. As he was driving away, he heard one of the workmen say, "I've never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years." Even a preacher plies his trade with his own brand of hope. My hope, week after week, is that I can bundle together a pack of words in just such a way that the Spirit can touch them, and bless them, and put them to work in people's lives.

What hope drives...you? Of course, all of us hope for more life, to be more closely united to God—whether we know it or not—but what specific hopes do you end up pursuing most of the time? "What's the hope to which you are called?" And what would it look like if you stopped every once in a while in the middle of some busy, or not so busy day, to ask yourself, "Hey, hold on. What do I hope to accomplish here? What am I hoping to do?" You might find that you don't always know what you're hoping to achieve, or what you're hoping to do. And yet you, too, have been called to a life of hope. And hope is everywhere present, no matter how small. And so, what is the specific hope into which you throw your life's energies and time?

"I pray for you that the eyes of your heart would be opened, so that you might know what is the hope to which you are called." Sometimes our eyes need to be opened to hope. For then you begin to see that all of life is a calling to offer your own unique brand of hope to a world that very much needs it. Hope is not usually heroic or glamorous. Hope is the humblest of creatures; it frequently goes unnoticed. Sometimes you only notice hope when it starts to make itself rare. But be it great or be it small, no one can live without at least some form, some tenacious little glimmer...of hope. What is the hope to which you are called today? Amen.