



THE LENTEN MEDITATIONS 2023 – WEEK 1

HOPE IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA & MARY

BY TARA LUDWIG

The English Cardinal Basil Hume once famously said, “the great gift of Easter is *hope*.” But as we enter the Easter season of 2023, hope can feel difficult to access, as many of us are weary of a world that has seemingly just been limping along from one calamity to the next for years. There is a sense, perhaps with varying levels of optimism, that we are all waiting around for things to just get better already.

I’ve seen a lot written about this lately, along with “strategies” or “techniques” to increase feelings of hopefulness. But in the Christian understanding, Hope, (along with Faith and Charity), is a theological, or supernatural virtue; meaning a virtue that is only given as a grace directly through God, not one we can conjure up for ourselves. In other words, while we may be able, by means of self-discipline and practice, to become more optimistic or more positive people, it is only through God’s grace that we can actually be filled with any *real* hope; that is, the sort of hope described in Hebrews 6:19, that acts as an “anchor for the soul”, hope that roots us firmly in God’s love and goodness even when the rest of the world feels like a raging storm at sea.

But where is our hope? We, in this complicated modern era, seem to be a people on the precipice of hopelessness. And more and more I hear a real temptation in people to just give up.

This sentiment is one that was not unfamiliar to the people of ancient Israel. The God of the Jews had promised his people a savior, but even after hundreds and hundreds of years of expectation, this Messiah had yet to show up. So just like today, the people were tired, worn-out with waiting; why has God not fulfilled his promise? Where is the one who will deliver us from evil? And I’m sure it occurred to more than one Israelite to wonder if their hope had been nothing more than a fool’s hope.



But then, a most unexpected thing happened: Jesus came into the world. And Jesus didn't just wax poetic about a light in dark places, he *was* the light shining in the darkness. People were completely taken aback when, in the dust and grit of a hopeless landscape, they somehow encountered Hope itself.

So in this year's installment of the Lenten Meditations, we will seek an experience of genuine hope, not by evoking artificial, cheerful feelings but by going back in history to 1st century Palestine to encounter hope in the person of Jesus Christ. In every episode of the meditations, we will watch what God did with his people when they too were living in a culture of hopelessness. We will each week visit a different Gospel text, to notice how the people of Jesus' time also had become caught, and ensnared, by hopelessness, sometimes without even realizing it, and we will observe how beautifully and skillfully Jesus worked to free them.

To begin, today we will spend time in a small village, in the house of two sisters, named Martha and Mary, in the Gospel of Luke:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; And a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving and she went to him and said "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." but the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the better portion, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42).

At first hearing, this may not seem to be a Gospel passage about hopelessness at all, but in my experience, one of the tell-tale signs of an unsettled heart is a person who can't slow down. Staying occupied and distracted is an effective strategy (at least, in the short term) to keep our minds off of something that we really don't want to think about. So there is a certain type of person, and perhaps Martha was one of them, who, when they feel discouraged or hopeless about things beyond their control, will throw themselves into work, activities, appointments, exercise, anything to keep busy enough so that they won't have to face something that's emotionally too scary or uncomfortable. Perhaps you noticed, like I did, that as soon as the effects of the pandemic began to loosen their grip, it seemed like people immediately went right back to filling up their calendars to the



brim again. Maybe the idea was to make up for lost time, but I also wonder how much of that desperation to plunge back into activity was the need to focus on something, anything, other than the ugliness that the pandemic highlighted in our society.

In our reading, Jesus, in his gentle way, doesn't let Martha hide away under the guise of being absorbed in domestic duties. I wonder if he sensed that there was more going on in her than the fussy puttering of an eager hostess. Notice that he does not say, "Martha, you are anxious and troubled about your cheese soufflé," which I think is more along the lines of how the passage is usually interpreted, but "Martha, you are anxious and troubled about *many things*." What were the "many things" that Jesus saw in her, things that maybe Martha herself was trying to avoid by staying busy and out of the way in the kitchen? What was she afraid would happen if she went and knelt before Jesus like her sister Mary? That she would cry? That it would just be too raw and vulnerable, that people would see her heartache too clearly? I don't know. But I have a feeling that we, too, would be mightily overwhelmed by the prospect of putting down our calendar, our phone, our fitbit, our busyness, and reclining at the feet of Jesus to listen to his teaching. How disarming, to have nothing standing between us and the gaze of those eyes.

And yet that's exactly what Jesus, with such courtesy, is encouraging Martha to do. He's not trying to chastise Martha, or shame her, he wants to free her from the bonds of whatever it is that's making her keep her distance from him. He wants to bring her closer. So, though the Gospel story doesn't tell us what happens next here, I like to think that Martha put down her mixing bowl, untied her apron strings or whatever, and went and plunked herself right down on the rug next to Mary.

This Lent, Jesus invites us to do the same. Because how could looking up at Jesus, and listening to the love in his voice, not fill us with wild hope?

So my invitation to you, as I send you off into your life in this first week of Lent, is to take inventory of the busyness of your own life, and with honesty and steadfastness discern which of your activities are necessary and life-giving, and which might be in the way of you sitting at the feet of Jesus unshielded to be filled with hope? What are you willing to put aside so that you can slow down this Lent, and, in words of writer Jessie Bazan, "be where you are and be there well"?



I'll close today with a quote from theologian Kevin DeYoung:

“Jesus was busy, but never in a way that made Him frantic, anxious, irritable, proud, envious, or distracted by lesser things. Jesus knew the difference between urgent and important... he understood that all the good things he could do were not necessarily the things he ought to do.”

May the hope of Christ fill you and enfold you in this first week of Lent. Amen