

CHALICE — Rev. Gordon B. McKeeman (43 words)

“Let there be light!”

Let it shine in dark places,

in moments of pain,

in times of grief,

in the darkness of hatred,

violence,

oppression,

where there is discouragement and despair.

Wherever darkness is to be put to flight,

“Let there be light!”

#### STORY:

This story is very old. It comes to us from Greece. Before the Olympian gods ruled in Olympus, they had to overthrow the Titans. Even during the reign of the Olympians, Titans remained in the land, among them Prometheus (the fore-thinker,) and his brother, Epimetheus, (the after-thinker.) Prometheus had (fearing further reprisals) warned his brother [Epimetheus](#) not to accept any gifts from Zeus, because Prometheus had stolen fire from Olympus and given it to men. For this effrontery, Prometheus was punished, but

Zeus was always looking for other ways to prolong the punishment.

Pandora was the first woman in the mythology of Greece, created out of Earth by Hephaestus, the smith of Olympus, and every god gave her some allurements or virtues, so that she was the most beautiful, charming, and irresistible woman that Epimetheus had ever seen. As a matter of fact, she was the first woman that he had ever seen, because, it is said, that women did not yet exist, and the Gods, Titans and human men all lived in a kind of Golden Age of harmony, a paradise. She was sent as punishment, for she brought with her a jar (which, due to textual corruption in the sixteenth century, came to be called a box) containing "burdensome toil and sickness that brings death to men," diseases, and "a myriad other pains." Since Epimetheus could only think about the past, he could not foresee trouble ahead, so he accepted Pandora, who promptly scattered the contents of her jar. As a result, Hesiod tells us, "the earth and sea are full of evils." One item, however, did not

escape the jar. Only Hope was left within, Hope remained under the lip of the jar, and did not fly away. Pandora replaced the lid of the jar and kept hope inside.

READINGS:

“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.” — Henry David Thoreau

And I think that phrase is the best definition of hope that I have ever heard — an infinite expectation of the dawn. And this poem is by Denise Levertov, who sees that we are beginners in the business of hope:

**But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.**

*How could we tire of hope?— so much is in bud.*

**How can desire fail?— we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,**

*Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.*

**Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?**

*Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?*

**Not yet, not yet—there is too much broken that must be mended,**

*Too much hurt we have done to each other that cannot yet be forgiven.*

**We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.**

*So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud. — Denise Levertov*

*Hope is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—*

*And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
And sore must be the storm—  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm—*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land—  
And on the strangest Sea—  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb—of Me. — Emily Dickinson*

And others from Touchstones, read by various people in the congregation.

## SERMON: HOPE OUT OF THE BOX

I have been puzzling about hope, Emily Dickinson's sanguine view that hope sings in the soul for free, never asking anything in return, and the more ambiguous view of the Greek philosophers in the story of Pandora, that naughty girl, crafted by the gods, who never wanted human beings to prosper in the first place. Remember that Pandora was made and sent as punishment for Prometheus' consequential act of bringing fire down from Olympus and giving it to humans. Well, the gods may have thought, this will teach them to be so uppity as to capture and tame the fire of Olympus; this will keep them humble and obedient to us!

I don't know; sometimes hope is a good thing to have in one's repertoire of virtues; it gives one motive and energy to go on when going on seems hopeless. But is going on always a good thing to do? Sometimes, we mortals do come to the end, when a certain graceful acceptance might be more appropriate and less painful. As usual, when we encounter one of those profound mysteries, there are more questions than answers, but the study is fascinating.

Pandora was created by the Olympian Gods to be irresistible. Hephaestus, the master smith crafted her of earth, and some students say that her name implies that she IS Gaia, the Earth. So, it follows that earthly life is rife with troubles and ills and plagues and worry no end. But Earth has yet one more thing held in reserve — still unopened, unreleased, and one cannot help but wonder, why was hope not let out of the jar in the beginning, loosed along with all the troubles? Why was it kept apart, hidden?

Maybe because in this world, troubles and ills come to us on any given day, unannounced

and uninvited, while hope is a quality that is innate, hidden in the human heart or mind, and we find it only after begin exposed to all the usual trouble. Or, is hope not of a different species from the other ills but just the last one in the jar and just as loathsome? Hesiod, the writer of the tale, offers no opinion on this quandary.

Bear in mind that men born into a patriarchal political system told and wrote these tales — as a matter of fact, told and wrote most of the scripture of western society — Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These men, and most men, who want to maintain their power find themselves in a chancy position in relation to women — their mothers, sisters and wives, who know a little too much to believe in superior wisdom or their claim to omnipotence. So, we find in the ancient writings some pretty barbed put-downs of women — many false ascriptions of flighty and devious character. In the case of Pandora, and Eve, we find the accusation that the woman brought all trouble, diseases, and death into the world through her irresistible but flawed nature. Which, when we think

about it, is an understandable assumption, given that family is why men have to work so hard and why they have to become warriors — to preserve and protect the family.

And this particular ancient prejudice would not even be interesting to us except that it continues unabated into the present day. Senator Elizabeth Warren was silenced during the confirmation hearing for Jeff Sessions by Senator Mitch McConnell, who said, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless she persisted." What she persisted in doing was read a letter by Coretta Scott King that revealed ample reason to oppose the appointment of Mr. Sessions.

The fear and contempt that women in all walks of life and work are subjected to stems, in part, from some very old ideas, perpetuated by religions, and the story of Pandora, who was set by the gods in the midst of an all-male paradise to ruin it with love and death, is just one example.

I find the story compelling and odd, as most profound stories are. Compelling, in how

beautifully the writers complicate the story by describing the first woman as irresistible, beautiful, and dangerous. This is another in a long line of stories telling how things came to be as they are. When women entered the scene, then came birth, and growing up, aging, and of necessity — death. Odd, in that I cannot figure out what Hope is doing, sealed up in that jar.

Now, before we women start feeling all virtuous and superior to this sort of prejudice, let us recall that we have had our fantasies, too, about how the world would wag if we were the only ones. Remember the song, “Reuben, Reuben?” — “I’ve been thinking what a great life this would be, if the men were all transported, far beyond the Northern sea.” The man/woman thing is a difficult thing, and we are mysterious to one another, which makes it more interesting, no? Wait a minute — I should be talking about this in February, on Valentine’s day, not now. Enough about the origins of the story! Let me return to the point — which is hope.

Where is hope in troubling times, when the news is full of dire happenings, wars and rumor of war, fire and hurricane, and we are very aware of the ills that plague the world. How can we hope when power has been seized by people whose ethics are diametrically opposite our own. Where is hope when the earth is ruined to increase the wealth of the already wealthy? When poverty increases, suffering increases, and opportunities decrease?

Hope is hidden in a clay jar, and I think that jar is like Kabir’s clay jug in the reading in our hymnal

***Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of canyons and pine mountains! All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars. The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels. And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water. If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth: Friend, listen, the God whom I love is inside.***

Inside where; inside what? This clay jug of a body, and everyone's. It is a stern practice, to turn from the hypnotic suasions of television, twitter and all media. To turn our eyes away and inward and begin to move from our life-center, which is not located between our ears. If we listen only to the news, it is difficult not to fall into depression or despair, or martyr ourselves in some good cause. I'm not saying to ignore trouble completely. We do what we can to remedy what ills we see, but I'm not in favor of either depression or martyrdom.

There is life in these clay jugs separate and outside of politics where Spring comes after every winter, where, well, Wendell Berry says it well:

***When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives  
may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great  
heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought***

***of grief. I come into the presence of still  
water.***

***And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time***

***I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.***

I do not know where that place is for each of you, whether it is a place in the physical world or the imaginal, meditative world. But we all need to find such a place where we can rest in the grace of the world.

This is the season of advent leading up to Christmas, one story of the birth of the holy into this world. The wee ones among us will be making a list of things they want and need. Most adults I know do not want more things; they want the real stuff — shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, healthcare for the ill, books for everyone — simple things, but not so simply got.

Our wild colleague in faith, Nadia Bolz Weber was pondering the meaning of all the apocalyptic texts in the Christian lectionary for the advent season. They seem odd at first — Jesus will come as a thief in the night, when no one is expecting company. But then, maybe that is

precisely what we all need — a loving thief to come and take away the things that weigh us down and keep us stuck, and make us miserable. Maybe we need to make out a different sort of Christmas wish list — a list of things to get rid of, to pitch out of our lives.

Hafiz was a Sufi, a mystic in the tradition of Islam, who refers to the holy as “Love” or “The Beloved,” or “The Guest;” and he speaks of the dawning of truth as a violent encounter with the holy. And when he speaks of drunkenness, he does not mean drunk with liquor but intoxicated with Spirit.

***Love wants to reach out and manhandle us  
Break all our teacup talk of God.***

***If you had the courage and  
Could give the Beloved His choice, some  
nights, He would just drag you around the  
room By your hair, Ripping from your grip all  
those toys in the world that bring you no joy.***

***Love sometimes gets tired of speaking  
sweetly And wants to rip to shreds All your  
erroneous notions of truth That make you***

***fight within yourself, dear one, And with  
others.***

***Causing the world to weep On too many fine  
days. The Beloved sometimes wants to do us  
a great favor: Hold us upside down And shake  
all the nonsense out.***

***But when we hear He is in such a “playful and  
drunken mood” Most everyone I know  
Quickly packs their bags and hightails it  
Out of town.***

Now look at this book, fairly bristling with markers so I can find the wisdom and beauty of this splendid man — poet and prophet — Hafiz. When the profound questions and trouble come, here is where I look for — not answers, but better questions than I can dream. And occasionally, I find the lovely words that express how it is to be human in this world, which is the aim of the Pandora story — to tell how it is and why it is as it is. With complaint, probably, but not with argument.

I think that the reason I do not completely

subscribe to a hopeful outlook is because hope takes longer to work its will than I can see in one short lifetime. The work of hope transcends human life.

Wendell Berry offers this conversation in his novel, *Jaybar Crow*:

***You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out - perhaps a little at a time.'***

***And how long is that going to take?'***

***I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps.'***

***That could be a long time.'***

***I will tell you a further mystery,' he said. 'It may take longer.***

So maybe Hope is in a sealed jar, from our limited point of view, because it works in a different field of time — over centuries rather than years or decades, over millennia, even. Perhaps the most we can realistically hope for is to hope that we have found some worthwhile, lasting and benevolent principles to live by and to hope that they continue and spread. To hope that we can, with whatever courage we have, do all that we can, and activate the patience to live in hope, in

an infinite expectation, “an infinite expectation of the dawn” that we will not see.

#### CLOSING WORDS

*Small Joys* by May Sarton, excerpt

***...Small joys keep life alive. I give you these...***

***When the long winter lingered on  
and all the colors stayed an ugly brown,  
suddenly snowdrops had pushed their way through  
and their sharp whiteness made all new....***

***...Later in June, alive with silent fire,  
the fireflies pulsed their firefly desire  
and from the terrace I could watch the dance,  
follow their bliss.***

***It happened only once...***

***...One autumn night my cat ran to my call  
and leapt five feet over the terrace wall.  
A second, weightless, he flowed and did not fall,  
that silver splendor, princely and casual.***

***And last I give you murmur of waves breaking,  
the sound of sleep that is a kind of waking  
as the tide rises from the distant ocean  
and all is still and yet in motion.***

***The small joys last and even outlast earthquake.  
I give you these for love – and for hope's sake.”***