

## **“Hope Is the Thing That Shines”**

I say it because we can't hear it enough: You are loved...by me  
And our ministers and this church and one another.

And it is our love that I remind us:

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.*

*Be not afraid.*

*Because this is what we are about:*

*We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.*

*We plant seeds that will one day grow.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

*We cannot do everything,*

*But we can do something.*

*So forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That is how the light gets in.”*

It is the weekend and I have jobs to do.

Up in the kitchen there is a cool breeze whistling underneath the window sill, which I felt on the bend of my elbow as I sat down for coffee earlier

In the week,

So I need to root for the caulking down in the basement to plug the hole.

And once down in the basement I remember there is the broken crockpot

To clean-up, broken because I piled it high on some other dishes

Because that is what we tell people do,

But that made it dangerous for Karyn to reach,

Which is why she said it was my fault when it fell and broke into  
A hundred pieces even though I was all the way upstairs when it happened,  
And she is pretty much right....

And once cleaning that up,  
I see the holes in the stone foundation I was supposed to plug  
With that toxic whipped-cream like insulation stuff that is pretty  
Much death in a can,  
But in order for me to get back far enough to reach those holes  
I need to take all the boxes off the shelves,  
Some of which really need to be gone through and thrown away,  
And others of which are the all-important Christmas decorations  
That need to get brought upstairs,  
Because as a family we promised were going to go ‘step it up’  
This year because if the world is going to go to hell in a handbasket  
That basket might as well be decorated with holiday cheer, right?

But before I can get to any of those jobs, the strum buzz of my phone  
Reminds me I have another job, that of a clergy person,  
Whose job it is - which in fact less a job and much more a holy calling  
That makes me better than I would ever be, believe me –  
To preach the good news that we hold hope for each when hope is hard  
find...

Hope another word in a long line of words that has been lost to the hallmark  
isle of CVS on cards with white ribbons and printed in big swooping cursive  
letters so that we come to think of hope as something fluffy and cuddly  
And naïve and Pollyanna-ish,

But that really deserves to be redeemed  
Because hope isn't the same as optimism, says Vaclav Havel.  
It isn't the conviction that something's going to turn out well,  
Or a belief that something's going to succeed,  
Or a comment on the state of the world.

Instead, the job I have to do is remind us that hope is a state of mind;  
It's a dimension of the soul that says the good is worth working for because  
it is good, and that is reason enough.

And what the buzz strum of my phone is reminding me to do  
Is call the woman who left a voicemail message at the church,  
And sent this letter right here,  
Telling me: "*Rev. N Detering,*  
*You should be ashamed of the racist banner you hung in front of your*  
*parish.*

And then in caps: *ALL LIVES MATTER – NOT JUST BLACK ONES.*"

I have her name and number not because she gave it to me,  
But because the wonders of caller ID mean that we're never as anonymous  
As we might like to think we are.

When I got the call and the letter, can I tell us the truth?

The truth is that I knew it my job was to call her,  
Because the good thing worth doing in this case, the hope-filled thing,  
Was to open dialogue and not just sit all comfy in my bubble,  
Because there in my files of finished sermons there is a sermon from me  
encouraging us to do that very thing,  
which I need to hear as much as anyone.

And so I knew it was my job to call and tell her that I would welcome the  
opportunity to sit down with her,  
To ask her what the banner provoked in her,  
And, if she was willing, to listen to me share how hanging the banner is an  
expression of our religious values,  
How all lives do indeed matter, you're right, in the eyes of God,  
But that politically some lives, black lives, are treated differently than other  
lives,  
And if Universalism means that all are worthy and all are welcome,  
Then it's my job – our job – to address when and where and how  
That worthiness and dignity is being threatened.

I knew it was my job to make that call, but the truth, can I tell us?  
The truth is that I wanted to hide.  
Because conflict avoidance is a Detering family tradition.  
And because it's easier to preach the hope  
Than it is to practice the hope that says a good thing is worth doing  
Simply because it is good.  
So the truth is I wanted to hide the hope. You follow me?  
I wanted to cover it. I wanted to avoid tending to it.  
Because sometimes it feels like such a small, fragile light.  
So small in me and maybe you in you  
That maybe that no one will know if we just let it go out,  
Put a shade over it, promise to help it shine another day,  
Another moment, another time.

Because, I mean, who would know?

No one would really know. I wouldn't have to tell anyone.

No one would really know....except, well, I would know.

I would know and my vocation would know, which is your vocation, too,

Because remember we're all ministers now,

All preachers and practitioners of good news of hope that

Won't let us down or – and this is inconvenient – let us off.

Damn.

*“Dad....!”* The voice says, traveling down the basement stairs

And calling me from my hiding place.

*“Dad...! We've got a job to do!”*

*Really? I'm thinking. Another one? Don't I have enough going on?*

But I'm actually grateful for the distraction, the opportunity

For avoidance.

And even though it is still afternoon,

The light outside is already so low, so dim,

And it is not even yet 4.

It is out of such afternoons, such darkness, that this holy season

Is made.

If we unlearn what Amazon Prime and Route 9 are teaching us about our holidays,

We will remember that it was pagans, which is just a word for rural person,

Who lit fires on such afternoons, and carried greenery inside,

As signs and signals for the returning of the light after the winter solstice.

And if we unlearn whatever negative lessons given us about Christianity,

We will remember that Advent - meaning longing, waiting, anticipation -  
 Is meant to have us locate our own longing,  
 asking: *where for us and how for us will the flame pierce the night?*  
 Asking: *where for us, how for is the hope being lit?*

So it's telling the job I find, there in the dim light  
 are my two children,  
 the marks we've made on the basement door jam reminding me how much  
 they have grown,  
 but not too old, still, to be holding in their hands the outdoor Christmas  
 lights,  
 they telling me the job we have now....  
*Is to make, as Ella says, the outside shine.*  
 Which is maybe we scripture tells us that *'a little child will lead them.'*  
 Even if those children are now teenagers.

Because what do I need to be led toward?  
 What is the longing, the hope, I need to be lit in the long night?  
 Well, that's easy:  
*I want to remember that God is still at work in the world.*  
*That the gospel of hope is still operating in the world.*  
*The hope that says there is freedom for the oppressed.*  
*Riches for the poor.*  
*Food for the hungry.*  
*Comfort the mourning.*  
*That the good is worth working for because it is good.*  
*Even when we don't know how it will work out.*

*Even if we just want to hide and slink back in the shadows.*

*Even if just want to avoid making that call.*

*Even when we doubt that the hope is the light working through us and in.*

*“Here Dad, says the Emerson, ‘Hold this; hold the lights.’”*

(Go down; have front row hold lights across sanctuary ).

And he unspooled them, winding them up the columns, and down

The edge of the grass, and over the top of the rhododendron

And the azalea...

And when they were all unspooled...Ella says *“time to shine.”*

(plug in lights...)

And it was such a small thing. These light lights.

These little sparks lighting up the night.

But it was beautiful. And enough to pull me from my hiding,

From my covering.

Later that night, I pick up the phone and dial the woman’s number,

Our vocation dialing for me.

Nervous. One ring, two rings, three...voicemail.

*“Hi...this is Rev. Nathan...you called the church last week about the Black Lives Matter banner, and maybe sent a letter.*

*I’m calling to reach out and let you know I’d like the chance to talk,*

*If you're willing, about how the banner made you feel,  
And about why we're hanging it in front of our church.  
I know such a conversation might seem hard or awkward,  
But I would welcome the chance....please call me."*

It has been six days...and I'm still waiting. But that's ok.  
Because it was the right thing to do, and right things are worth  
Working for even if we don't know the outcome.  
That's our hope.  
That's our light.  
We may possess a small light, but we can let it shine.  
What is the hope waiting, advent-ing in you?  
What hope is waiting on you and in you to light?  
Don't despair.  
Because we hold the light together.  
We hold hope when hope is hard to find.