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March 30 2014  
Theme: Struggles  
Sermon: The Bottom of the Box

**Reading: “Hope” by Lisel Mueller**

It hovers in dark corners  
before the lights are turned on,  
it shakes sleep from its eyes  
and drops from mushroom gills,  
it explodes in the starry heads  
of dandelions turned sages,  
it sticks to the wings of green angels  
that sail from the tops of maples.

It sprouts in each occluded eye  
of the many-eyed potato,  
it lives in each earthworm segment  
surviving cruelty,  
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,  
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs  
of the child that has just been born.

It is the singular gift  
we cannot destroy in ourselves,  
the argument that refutes death,  
the genius that invents the future,  
all we know of God.

It is the serum which makes us swear  
not to betray one another;  
it is in this poem, trying to speak.

**Sermon: The Bottom of the Box**

There is a trough in waves, a low spot, where the horizon disappears.

If we rest with the flow, then time will bring us to another place,

Where we can see the horizon and where we need to swim.

“Hope hovers in dark corners  
before the lights are turned on,

Hope is the argument that refutes death.”

Our worship theme this month has been Struggles, and I planned all along that for the last sermon I would try to end on an up note—I would preach on “Hope.”

People want hope, right? I went to a Shabbat dinner this Friday for the Follen members with Jewish heritage. There was a speaker on Jewish history and we learned about some of the longstanding struggles of the Jewish people. At the end someone called out—“Now give us some hope!” and the speaker said, “Well, we are still here.”

We are still here. Let’s start with that. Just think, you are here, taking a little one-hour break from whatever struggle life is giving you, sitting in the very spot where someone sat last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, going back about 8,000 Sundays to when this sanctuary was built.

If you, like so many people, like to sit in the same spot most Sundays, then think of all those earlier versions of you that have sat in that place. Sad versions, happy versions, versions of you that had no idea about some of the things you know now. And here we still are, in this day we have been given.

Hope is the argument that refutes death.

Do you remember the story from Greek mythology about Pandora’s box?

Pandora is the first woman on Earth, created by the gods out of water and earth. She is given many gifts by the gods: beauty, music, speech and—a sense of curiosity.

She is given one last gift: a beautiful, unbreakable box, tightly closed. (Depending on your translation of the Greek, it is a jar or a box.) The gods tell her not to open it under any circumstances.

Yet her gift of curiosity wins over the gift of this mysterious box. She opens it and out flies all the evils on the earth. War. Pestilence. Famine. Hatred. Yet at the bottom of the box, one more spirit is hovering: it is Hope.

Hope flutters up, about to escape. Pandora quickly catches hope on the lip of the box and slams down the lid. Hope remains.

This story has many interpretations. It can mean that the ancient Greek gods intended humans to have the relief, the blessing of Hope, to get them through all the suffering of the world.

But the message of the story isn't as simple as that. What did it mean that Hope was keeping company with Evil?

Perhaps Hope was one of the evils, instead of a respite from evil.

And then what does it mean that instead of letting hope fly out, free, Pandora hung on to Hope, wouldn't let her fly away, trapped her in the dark airless unbreakable box.

Emily Dickinson said "Hope is the thing with feathers."

Neitzsche said "Hope is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs man's torments."

A lot of people have argued that the opposite of hope is despair. But to me they seem like two sides of a coin. Sometimes you can't find real hope if you haven't truly despaired—given up on the impossible. Perhaps the more complicated opposite of hope is denial.

When I was just starting out in my training to become a minister, one of the first things I did was an internship as a chaplain at Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston. I was 23 and sometimes was the only on-call chaplain overnight in this big trauma-center city hospital. There is nothing like learning by doing!

One day I was the chaplain carrying the pager and I was paged to a room where a large number of family members had gathered, probably at least 15 or 20 in one small room. The patient was lying motionless in the bed. From the doctors and nurses, I learned she had taken a drug overdose and her brain had died—though her heart was, for the moment, still slowly beating and her lungs were still processing oxygen, the medical professionals told me they did not see a possibility for any type of recovery.

The family had already been praying and weeping with their loved one. I gathered everyone in a circle holding hands and started to lead a prayer. In the middle of the prayer, the patient shot up into a seated position, her hands out in front of her, her eyes still shut. I literally screamed. Not very pastoral of the chaplain. But I am not sure anyone noticed because everyone else had started screaming too.

The patient flopped back down in the bed, her hands twitching. The screams turned into explosions of praise and thanksgiving from the family members. Hallelujah! They cried, she is *alive*, she will *live*. I was completely speechless. The doctor heard the commotion and came in.

He frowned at everyone and shouted over the crowd: “This is what brain death looks like. Her brain is just sending out random signals to her body. She is like a chicken with its head cut off, running around in the yard. There is no hope. No hope. No hope!”

He stomped out. I wish I could remember what happened next but I think I was so traumatized my memory-making ability shut down. My last memory is just standing there in that crowded room, with people crying and wailing and praying and embracing their dying loved one.

What I *probably* did next was go down to the Au Bon Pain in the lobby and eat a cookie while staring at the wall. There were a lot of days where the only way I was able to process my chaplaincy experiences was by eating a cookie and staring at the wall. That café was my trough in the waves, my low place to rest and conserve my energy, until I was ready to swim again.

That family wanted to hold on to hope. Hope was keeping them going, giving voice to their prayers. The doctor felt their hope was more like denial, he thought their hope was empty, deluded.

“Hope is the argument that refutes death.”

But everyone dies, eventually.

The poet Donald Hall once wrote:

You think that their  
dying is the worst  
thing that could happen.

Then they stay dead.

The story of Pandora’s box is kind of a test for how we look at the world.

Here is this beautiful and broken world.  
Is the world more beautiful than broken?

Or more broken than beautiful?

I suppose that is just the minister's way of asking the age old question of whether the glass is half full or half empty. That's actually a theological question, when you get down to it!

Hope is the singular gift  
we cannot destroy in ourselves,  
the argument that refutes death,  
the genius that invents the future,  
all we know of God.

I believe hope is different from denial. Denial makes us close our eyes and close our ears to harsh realities. Denial makes us ineffectual, weak. Hope is muscular, strong: it sees the harsh realities and moves forward anyway. Hope gives us faith that we will see the horizon again, hope shows us where we need to swim.

One modern-day Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams, argued that there are a few things that distinguish our religion from other more orthodox traditions. And two of these distinguishing factors are Hope and Curiosity. (Adams was sometimes called "the smiling prophet"—he was a glass-half-full kind of theologian.)

Hope keeps us moving forward. Curiosity gives us the openness to ask, rather than demand: "What is going to happen next?"

Curiosity and Hope. Just what Pandora was given, to face the evils of the world. Complicated gifts from the gods. It's up to us to figure out what we do with them.

In James Luther Adams' theology of hope, hope isn't something that we can trap in a box, or let fly away:

[H]ope is like a river's current—without it there would be stagnation; in excess there would be destruction; but a current refreshes and renews and leads on.<sup>1</sup>

There are times when hope is just too hard. When our grief feels absolute, our pain overwhelms us, the unknown torments us.

The best thing I have heard about hope in those times is this:

...[Sometimes] having hope is more than a person should expect of themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://uubedford.org/spirituality/sermons/55-five-smooth-stones-of-religious-liberalism-the-legacy-of-james-luther-adams.html>

[There are] times just to *get through*, step by step, breath by breath, when hope is something people around you, your family and friends, hold for you until you are ready to receive it back.<sup>2</sup>

I just celebrated my second daughter's first birthday. Every day I am grateful for her because I wasn't sure if she would ever exist. After my older daughter's birth I had some unexplained auto-immune arthritis. That led to unexplained infertility.

My husband and I embraced modern medicine and did everything we could. But with all the unknown and unexplained factors, we weren't sure if we'd end up with another child or not.

During this time I felt like hope was a thing I had to hold very gingerly.

I felt like Pandora catching the feathered thing on the lip of her box, and just trying to get it to balance there.

I didn't want Hope to fly away.

But if I held on to Hope tightly with no acknowledgement that my desire might never be attained, then I felt foolish and weak.

I felt like I couldn't let myself hope too hard, to desire too much, or my despair would be too great.

This week I asked a young mother I know about her experience facing a terrible cancer diagnosis. At one point, as a last resort, she had to go through a bone marrow transplant, and was in isolation for months, unable to see her four year old daughter.

The major concern was that if the cancer didn't kill her, the treatment would. This week I asked her what her relationship with Hope was during that time. She told me:

I did my best to ride the wave of whatever was happening from day-to-day during the harder weeks or months of treatment.

Often I used imagery of floating on water—a wave or the current of the river—to surrender the impulse to aim for [or] hope for any particular outcome. In some ways...I did actively avoid “hope” as part of the effort to remain fully present.

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Sawyer, “Got Hope?”

She rode the waves and rested in that deep trough.  
There was no horizon to be seen.

And then as time passed, the current brought her forward. She didn't die from cancer, and she didn't die from the treatments for cancer.

The horizon reappeared, and she could swim again, and see her daughter, and live her life.

Sometimes there is no hope.

Sometimes we have to let other people hold on to hope for us.

Sometimes hope is there, fluttering in the dark corners of the box, waiting for the lights to be turned on.

Sometimes Hope, the thing with feathers, rests lightly in our open hands.

Hope is in this room, trying to speak.

May we listen,

and may we do our best  
to create the world we hope for.

*Amen, and may it be so.*