

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 25, 2019 (Christmas Day)

In 1862 Emily Dickinson wrote a short poem called “Hope is the Thing with Feathers.” Actually, that’s not what it was called since she never titled any of her poems. But that’s the first line and that’s how it’s become known. In her simple, yet profoundly moving way, she compares hope to a feathered bird that perches permanently in the soul of every human being.

I’ll read the poem but there’s also a copy in your bulletin so you can follow along. And, as I know poetry, like Scripture needs to be read again and again, you can take it with you if you’d like, for further reflection once all the presents have been opened and the last guest has left.

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.

A few things to point out. This “thing with feathers,” never stops singing — “it never stops - at all.” In other words hope never dies; it is omnipresent at the deepest reaches of our souls. And this bird sings its never-ending tune “without words” — that’s what birds do after all. Which reminds me of that line from Paul’s Letter to the Romans which speaks of the Spirit interceding for us with “sighs too deep for words.” And I find that often the most effective prayers are wordless ones, the moments when we simply rest in God’s presence. Times of adoration, like the Wise Men gazing upon the baby Jesus lying in the manger. Their hearts overflowing with grace upon grace.

And in the second stanza we hear that this bird sings its sweetest song when the storms rage. It is heard at its sweetest in the midst of the gale. So when life is hardest, when chaos reigns in our hearts and the situation seems dire at best and hopeless at worst, the thing with feathers, this personification of hope, makes its presence most fully known. And I think again of the Magi, traveling great distances, following the star, following hope even in the midst of an arduous journey.

This is why this poem, at least to me, feels like a Christmas poem. Because this “thing with feathers” that sings sweetly in the midst of the storm, is like “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” That phrase which we hear in the poetic prologue to John’s gospel that is proclaimed each year on this day.

And that light is the light of Christ, the light of hope, the light that illuminates the darkness, the light that has entered the world as God in human form. Despite the raging tempest, the “thing with feathers” sings

its song of hope. And despite the darkness, the light of the still small voice within can never be extinguished from our souls. That's what the nativity of our Lord is all about. The presence of hope in the midst of darkness, the song of hope amidst the storm.

In the final stanza of Dickinson's poem, she introduces the personal pronoun for the first time. "I" makes an appearance. And we are reminded that while hope is cosmic and eternal, it is also deeply personal. That's the beauty of coming to church on Christmas Day. After the pageants and the crowds and the four services of the night before, there's something more contemplative and personal about this day. We can revel in the fact that Jesus came into this world for all of humanity, yes, but also for you personally. That Jesus tends the hope that has been sown in your own soul. That the "thing with feathers" flaps its wings and stirs within you. And we can rejoice with angels and archangels and all the host of heaven that Christ Jesus came into the world for each one of us.

That's the reminder for us on Christmas. That hope is embedded in our souls. That the great gift of the Christ child, of God entering the world in human form, changes everything. So often we focus on the darkness of this world — the fear, the violence, the injustice — and fail to see the light of hope in our midst. The light that stands in contrast to the darkness; the light that illuminates the dark corners of our hearts and minds.

On Christmas Day we testify to this light; we give thanks for its never-ending presence in our lives; and we revel in the Light of Christ that sustains us with peace, hope, and joy.

Hope is the thing with feathers

By Emily Dickinson (1830-1866)

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