

Renewal and Hope—  
Renew Your Own Joy  
by Creating Hope for Others

Introduction

Something has occurred to me, over the course of my last few years of going to seminary, reading the Bible; being a priest in a small parish; doing mission work to help those less advantaged than I; and encountering life. My discovery is that the two most important words that surround all of the stories and histories of our lives, are the words “Renewal” and “Hope.” I take a large part of my thoughts about Renewal and Hope from my experience of doing mission work to help the poor. This book is about that experience and I tell my experience by telling the stories about those whom I have encountered in my work—those whose lives have been the actual expression of Renewal and Hope. I tell those stories in the chapters of this book to demonstrate two things: First, that the stories are current and meaningful and powerful ways to engage in introspection about ourselves; and Second, that the hearing and understanding of those stories are the windows through which we can have new hope for our own selves. If you have ever found yourself wandering, floundering, in a meaningless life, in a life crisis, in a funk over what is happening in your life, then these stories are for you.

My stories in this book about the mission work I have done demonstrate more than just the history of the people about whom I write. These stories are really about the history of humankind. The way I demonstrate that is by using the history from of the people of the Bible, which covers a period of time from the calling of Abraham, which scholars believe to be in about 2000 to 2100 BCE, up to the writing of the latest book of the New Testament, around 100 CE. So there is a period of about 2100 or 2200 years articulated by the writers of the Old and New Testaments. The amazing thing about the Bible is that the events of the narrative are told by the people experiencing those events, and the stories seem to repeat themselves—just as our stories seem to repeat themselves. Those stories all seem to me to be about how life is constantly renewing itself, and how God is constantly renewing God’s people. Those two facts serve as the hope for everyone. The centuries covered in biblical history have now expanded into the 2000 years since Christ, and the stories of Renewal and Hope continue to abound.

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The Apostle Paul expressed this Hope and Renewal so eloquently in his second letter to the Corinthians:

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”- 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18 (NRSV).

All of the things in God’s world are continually being renewed. Among the things that are renewed and transformed by God’s work of redemption come from the world of human action. Christian moral theology describes this renewed and transformed world of action in the realm of how our own works carry out God’s plans for Renewal and for giving us Hope in each other. We live with Hope every day. Hope is different, in both its origin and its scope, from optimism. Optimism and Hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things—the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on, will get better. Hope is the belief and faith that God will fulfill God’s promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The person who exists in Hope lives in the moment, but always lives basking in the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands. The optimist is more about concrete changes in the future.

All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of Hope. When we look at the story of Abraham, the earliest of God’s chosen people, we see that he was guided toward the future without the need to know exactly what it would look like. He was living with a promise in his heart. The question that Abraham raises for us is this—Can we live like him, with the Hope of God’s promise to us being fulfilled?

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All of the stories of the Bible are connected to our stories and each of our current stories are connected to our neighbors as individuals. In the chapters of this book I will talk about Renewal, and how the prospect of Renewal is what always gives us Hope. And that Hope, in a continuous cycle, leads itself to Renewal. They are, together, self-fulfilling. The Hope and Renewal we see in all parts of God's creation are what give us our own Hope and Renewal. We give, so we receive. And it never fails that we get more back than we ever give. We can never give too much because we can never give enough. The struggles of humanity, the prayers of the people in their stories, and the histories of the people in the events of the Bible, always speak of the need for Renewal of relationships, either with each other or with our God; and the constant presence of Hope for all of humankind and the world.

So the bottom line here is that the stories of God's creation in the Bible are relevant. It is not just the lives of those from our history, it is OUR life, too. We share it with others because it is so rich. We learn from others' histories because their stories are all enmeshed with our stories. Our lives are not lived in isolation.

The stories of the Bible, and the stories of our current predicament and endeavors, are stories of falling and rising. Just like the reality of Good Friday and the Resurrection. If we never fall we never rise. If we don't fall, we have never been at a real height. Nobody climbs Mt. Everest, or any other height for that matter— just for the view going up—they always want the view looking down once they get to the top. Without that view, the ascent has made no difference. Without that view, you have no idea of the places which you have reached, the heights to which you have ascended, nor the depths from which you arose. Without that view there never was a bottom from which you sprang. Without that view, down never became up. That is the meaning of Renewal and Hope. It is the constant change in us that governs our lives, makes us alive, and gives us an appreciation for the way in which the Holy Spirit guides us, prepares us for, and sustains us, on life's journey.

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As you walk with me through my stories and the stories of others that have been important to me on my journey, perhaps you will encounter a view of God that is different from the one you have had in the past. I find that my view of God changes as a result of many of my personal experiences, because with each experience I encounter something new and exciting. I find that one of the things that keeps my eyes open is my own recognition of my failings. Recognition is a difficult task—to admit those failings is always difficult, but that task is a critical one; for without performing that admission, I am unable to accept and acknowledge God's miracles in my life, and I am likely to continue in the things of the past that did not work for me. Those miracles can be small or grand, but they force me to admit flaws, and seek God's forgiveness for my own failings. Failings, or fallings, give rise to risings, or joy, that surpasses all comprehension. The stories of those risings and fallings tell us that Renewal and Hope are abundant, just waiting for our recognition. These stories can sustain us in our own lives, and give us fodder for sustaining others.

One thing that is so very wondrous about Renewal and Hope is that the joys and sorrows encountered along our paths of Renewal and Hope are never separated. When our hearts rejoice at a spectacular view, we may miss our friends who cannot see it, and when we are overwhelmed with grief, we may discover what true companionship is all about. Joy is hidden in sorrow and sorrow in joy. If we try to avoid sorrow at all costs, we may never taste joy, and if we are suspicious of ecstasy, agony can never reach us either. Joy and sorrow are the ancestors of our spiritual growth.

Each day holds a surprise. But only if we expect it can we see, hear, or feel it when it comes to us. Let's not be afraid to receive each day's surprise, whether it comes to us as sorrow or as joy. It will open a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new friends and celebrate more fully our shared humanity. At some moments we will experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend. It may happen when we have an

intimate conversation or a family meal. It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: "This is it ... everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here." Those moments are glimpses of God, if we can only perceive them.

The stories of Renewal and Hope resound throughout the New Testament. These experiences are related in countless events and experiences. This is the experience that Peter, James, and John had on the top of Mount Tabor when they saw the aspect of Jesus' face change and his clothing become sparkling white. They wanted that moment to last forever (see Luke 9:28-36). This is the experience of the fullness of time. These moments are given to us so that we can remember them when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless. These experiences are true moments of grace.

Keeping our eyes on the moments of Renewal and Hope in our lives, makes us more aware of the fact that Jesus, the Blessed One, is gentle. Even though he speaks with great fervor and biting criticism against all forms of hypocrisy and is not afraid to attack deception, vanity, manipulation and oppression, his heart is a gentle heart. He won't break the crushed reed or snuff the faltering wick (see Matthew 12:20). He responds to people's suffering, heals their wounds, and offers courage to the fainthearted. He is their Hope for Renewal. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to prisoners (see Luke 4:18-19) in all he says and does, and thus he reveals God's immense compassion. As his followers, we are called to that same gentleness which gives the Hope upon which all of God's people rely. His peace is the fullness of well-being, gratuitously given by God. Jesus says, "Peace I leave to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you" (John 14:27).

Peace is, in Hebrew terms, Shalom --- well-being of mind, heart, and body, individually and communally. It can exist in the midst of a war-torn world, even in the

midst of unresolved problems and increasing human conflicts. Jesus made that peace by giving his life for his brothers and sisters. This is no easy peace, but it is everlasting and it comes from God. The knowledge of that peace is what brings us the Renewal of spirit and the passionate quest for the Hope, not only for ourselves, but also for the world around us, even in the midst of unthinkable tragedy, death, war, and suffering.

Even though Jesus is persecuted, and even though he is poor, gentle and mourning, he hungers and thirsts for uprightness. He is merciful, pure of heart and a peacemaker, but he was not welcome in this world. The Blessed One of God was a threat to the established order and a source of constant irritation to those who considered themselves the rulers of this world. Without his accusing anyone he is considered an accuser; without his condemning anyone he makes people feel guilty and ashamed; without his judging anyone those who see him feel judged. In the eyes of his persecutors, he cannot be tolerated and needs to be destroyed, because letting him be seems like a confession of guilt.

When we want to become like Jesus, we cannot expect always to be liked and admired. We have to be prepared to be rejected. It is commonplace that by our rejection we become the icons for the Renewal and Hope that must be created for others—for not only do we thrive on the promise of Renewal and Hope, we create that promise for others.

There is such promise in our joining Jesus in calling God "Abba, Father." When we do this, we enter into the same intimate, fearless, trusting, and empowering relationship with God that Jesus had. That relationship is called Spirit, and that Spirit is given to us by Jesus and enables us to cry out with him, "Abba, Father." It enables us to join in solidarity and unity with others, just as Jesus did, when he created a sense of Renewal and Hope for the most downtrodden in his society. Calling God "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6) is a cry of the heart, a prayer welling up from our innermost beings. It has everything to do with claiming God as the source of who we

are. This claim does not come from any sudden insight or acquired conviction; it is the claim that the Spirit of Jesus makes in communion with our spirits. It is the claim of love.

Can we choose love when we have experienced so little of it? We choose love by taking small steps of love every time there is an opportunity. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a card, an embrace, a kind greeting, a gesture of support, a moment of attention, a helping hand, a present, a financial contribution, a visit ... all these are little steps toward love, and all of these steps create a sense of Renewal and Hope for others. But the most amazing thing happens—we never create or give more than we receive. Each step is like a candle burning in the night that brightens the path for all—ourselves included. It does not take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness. When we look back after many small steps of love, we will discover that we have made a long and beautiful journey, filled with Hope and the comfort of Renewal.

The spiritual knowledge that we belong to God and are safe with God even as we live in a very destructive world allows us to see in the midst of all the turmoil, fear, and agony of history "the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27). Even though Jesus speaks about this as about a final event, it is not just one more thing that is going to happen after all the terrible things are over. Just as the end-time is already here, so too is the coming of the Son of Man. It is an event in the realm of the Spirit and thus not subject to the boundaries of time.

Those who live in communion with Jesus have the eyes to see and the ears to hear the second coming of Jesus among them in the here and now. Jesus says: "Before this generation has passed away all will have taken place" (Luke 21:32). And this is true for each faithful generation.

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Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of Christ's great unifying work—bringing us closer to knowledge of God. And then several decades after Jesus died, John, the beloved disciple, had another but similar vision: He saw a new heaven and a new earth. All of creation had been transformed, dressed with immortality to be the perfect bride of Christ. In other words, all creation, in John's vision, will be renewed. The risen Christ will speak from his throne, saying:

'See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'" (Revelation 21:3-5).

Are these great visions more than just utopian fairy tales? Yes, they are! They are parallel to the deepest longings of the human heart and point to the truth waiting to be revealed beyond all lies and deceptions. These visions nurture our souls and strengthen our hearts. They offer us Hope when we are close to despair, courage when we are tempted to give up on life, and trust when suspicion seems the more logical attitude. Without these visions we will be dulled and our lives will become flat, boring, and finally destructive. With these visions our deepest aspirations, which give us the energy to overcome great obstacles and painful setbacks, enable us to live the full life. Life is unpredictable. So what is there to hold on to? What is there to feel secure with? What is there to trust at all times? The answer is not a "what," but a "who."

Christ Jesus, our Lord, our shepherd, our rock, our stronghold, our refuge, our brother, our guide, and our friend—in short, he is our Renewal and our Hope. He came from God to be with us. He died for us, he was raised from the dead to open for us the way to God, and he is seated at God's right hand to welcome us home. With Paul, we can also be certain that:

"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be



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able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39).

Jesus teaches us about the love of God in Christ Jesus. He says:

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:17).

Jesus is our fresh wineskin, both in his incarnation and in his second coming. We are the new wine. We are the drink of life for others around us. We can be the Renewal and Hope for the world, as Jesus was and is the Renewal and Hope for us.