

EXTRAORDINARY HOPE IN ORDINARY TIME...

A Call to Action

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

As I prepare for an extended trip, first to our General Convention in Baltimore, and then for the Lambeth Conference in Canterbury, England, a gathering of all the bishops in the Anglican Communion that occurs every ten years, I am struck by how many people have recently shared with me a sense of discouragement as to all that is happening in our country and world at this time.

We are now fully into what our liturgical calendar calls Ordinary Time, that long period between Pentecost and the first day of Advent. It is appropriately the longest of our liturgical seasons, as life itself is lived primarily in the “ordinary,” where joy and hardship, and life and death, intertwine.

William Blake, the 18th/19th century English poet speaks to this quite powerfully in one of his poems:

*Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Thro' the World we safely go.
Joy & Woe are woven fine,
A Clothing for the soul divine.*

Certainly, the list of woes is long these days - from unspeakable and seemingly never-ending war atrocities in Ukraine, to tragic gun violence, as recent as yesterday at a July 4th parade in greater Chicago, and in Uvalde, Buffalo, St. Louis and even in one of our own Episcopal churches in Alabama, to ongoing environmental catastrophe, to increasing political polarization. As the late novelist Madeleine L'Engle said in her marvelous book *A Wind in the Door*, "It isn't just in distant galaxies that strange, unreasonable things are happening. Unreason has crept up on us so insidiously that we've hardly been aware of it. But think of the things going on in our country..." Psychologists and clergy of all faith traditions are reporting that they are seeing an all-time high of what they are calling "crisis fatigue."

Many are asking, "What can we do?," which is another way of asking, "How should we live?" Some feel that "thoughts and prayers" are not enough when it comes to addressing the particular conflicts and challenges of these times, believing that prayers have little effect, and hence they are calling for action. Others quite simply feel a sense of helplessness, wishing they had some sort of power to do something to bring about change. Others find themselves closing off from the world, as it is all just too much to bear.

All of these responses are of course truthful and authentic. As followers of Christ, we do believe in the efficacy of prayer. At the same time, we are also called to action, to be "little Christs" in the world, which is the fullest meaning of the word "Christian." We also need to live in such a way that protects our own emotional and spiritual well-being, and sometimes that means taking shelter to care for our souls.



Kim Phuc Phan Thi © May Truong for The New York Times

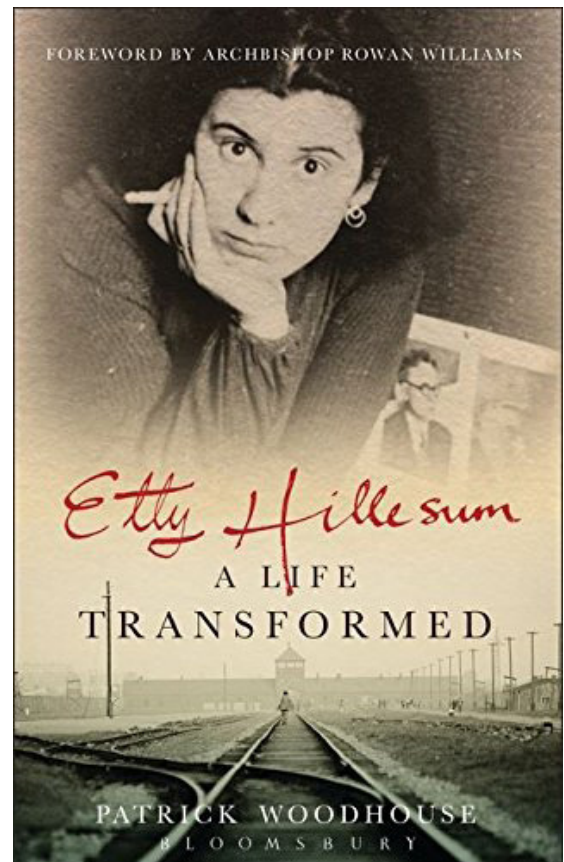
At times like these, I find myself remembering the childhood experience of the 19th century beloved writer Robert Louis Stevenson. As he was looking out the window of his house one night at the man lighting the street lanterns, his mother asked him what he was doing? He responded, "I am watching a man punch holes in the darkness." This is what I believe we are called to do as we are each able - "to punch holes in the darkness" - however and whenever we can. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk put it this way: "The real job is to lay the groundwork for a deep change of heart on the part of the whole nation so that one day it can really go through the 'metanoia' we need for a peaceful world." (*Metanoia = a transformative change of heart, especially a spiritual conversion*)

The question of course is how do we do this? Not long ago I read a poignant article in the *New York Times* written by Kim Phuc Phan Thi, a Vietnamese woman often known as the “Napalm Girl.” She was the nine-year-old child depicted in the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken during the Vietnam War on June 8, 1972, showing her running naked on a road after being severely burned on her back by a napalm attack. She lived, thanks to the life-saving assistance of AP photographer Nick Ut, and went on to found the Kim Foundation International, that provides aid to child victims of war. That heart-wrenching photograph has become a symbol of the barbarity of war. She concluded her article with these words: “That picture will always serve as a reminder of the unspeakable evil of which humanity is capable. Still, I believe that peace, love, hope and forgiveness will always be more powerful than any kind of weapon.”

Her statement reminds us of St. Paul’s inspirational words in 1 Corinthians 13: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.” While perseverance is what is called for at this time more than anything else, we persevere by faith, with hope and in love. It is in times like these, when we are required to persevere in the midst of life’s struggles, that we are reminded that God is present - to walk with us—and lead us through.

I recently read about the life of Etty Hillesum in *A Life Transformed* by Patrick Woodhouse. Etty was a young Dutch Jewish woman killed in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, who left behind her journals, which were published in the 1980s. Remarkably, Etty persisted in believing in the beauty God intended for all of life in the midst of the war and even the genocide of her people. Those who knew her during the war described her as a “luminous personality.” She wrote, “If I have one duty in these times, it is to bear witness.” Throughout the horror of her times, she bore witness to both the beauty of life as God intended it to be, and to God’s comforting presence in the midst of the hardships she experienced. In the last entry of her journal she writes, “We must be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”

We are called these days to “keep on keeping on,” and our beautiful Creator promises us an inexhaustible supply of faith, hope and love, in order to live in and give to our world. For those who question whether our investment in God’s kingdom, large or small, really makes a difference in the long run, I share with you the encouraging introduction to the late Anglican theologian Michael Green’s book on the Early Church.



“It was a small group of eleven who Jesus commissioned to carry on his work.... to the whole world. They were not distinguished; they were not well educated; they had no influential backers. In their own nation they were nobodies and, in any case, their own nation was a mere second-class province on the eastern extremity of the Roman map. If they stopped to weigh up the probabilities of succeeding in their mission, even granted their conviction that Jesus was alive, and that God’s Spirit went with them to equip them for the task, their hearts must surely have sunk, so heavily were the odds weighted against them. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the obstacles that lay in their way. How could they possibility succeed? And yet they did.”

I close by drawing our attention to a contemporary expression of hope in the inspirational music video of the English indie rock band *Florence + the Machine*’s song “[Free](#).” The video is filmed in the Ukraine and stars the well-known British actor Bill Nighy, who creatively represents the feeling of anxiety that exists today. I found it deeply moving. It reminds us of all those, who like the Ukrainians, suffer under conditions we can’t even begin to imagine. However, in listening to it several times, I found it a profound witness of hope, as Florence sings these words halfway through the song (at 2:36):

*Is this how it is?
Is this how it’s always been?
To exist in the face of suffering and death
And somehow still keep singing
Oh like Christ up on a cross
Who died for us? Who died for what?
Oh, don’t you wanna call it off?
But there’s nothing else that I know how to do
But to open up my arms and give it all to you*

And Florence movingly concludes the song with a cruciform prayer. Let us never forget Jesus’ words of encouragement: “I’ve told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I’ve conquered the world.”

Take hope,
+ Paul-Gordon



Florence + The Machine - Free