

Accounting for Hope
(Easter 6)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Acts 17:22-28

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown God.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. God doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed something, since God is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek God, perhaps even reach out to God and find God—though indeed God is not far from any of us. For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we, too, are God’s offspring.”

1 Peter 3:13-16a

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Accounting for Hope

There are a lot of wonderful things about me. (It's Mother's Day, so I'm allowed to say that out loud.) But one of the things I take the most pride in is my patience. In many ways, it is something I'm wired for and can't take credit for, but I do also work hard at it because it is such a key part of my own self-identity. I'm not perfect at it: I have my pet peeves and there are certainly times when I want to pull my hair out, but I am intentional about not losing my temper and remaining calm.

And yet. A few weeks ago, Adam had to leave town somewhat unexpectedly for the second time in as many weeks as his mom experienced some significant complications related to her recent cancer diagnosis. This time, however, his return date was more vague and the worry was greater, and after a few days, the disruption to our family life and daily routines on top of the uncertainty proved more than Hannah's nervous system could handle on its own.

I don't know how other nine-year-olds manage their anxiety, but my children seem to default to meltdowns when their systems are overloaded. And, like everything Hannah does, she takes meltdowns to a new level. And so we lost our minds when our cleats didn't feel right, when Caleb chewed chips too loudly, when I asked if she wanted to change clothes before softball practice, when it was time to go to bed, because her rice was too watery. The day before Adam came home we had six separate meltdowns. It felt like a world record.

And I get it. We all need ways to release anxiety and manage uncertainty, and at 9-years-old, this is the only way she knows how to do it. But it is also the polar opposite of how my own anxiety manifests, and it immediately kicks my fight or flight response into high gear. I think I yelled at my daughter more in one week than in the first nine years of her life combined. It was not our finest week. But more than that, it began to erode my own sense of who I am as a parent.

It is hard to find yourself in a moment that feels both unsustainable and unending.

In his book, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, Professor Thomas Long recounts a conversation between two college chaplains about the moral character of students. Both agreed that the students they were working with were good kids who studied hard and volunteered frequently. But the Jewish chaplain worried that the students were missing a vision of salvation. It mattered, he said, because "if you don't have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can't get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It [will beat] you down."¹

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 147-148.

One might argue the same about parenting.

Volunteering, giving, not strangling your children when they scream, these are all good and important things. But if they're not rooted in something deeper, then at some point we will be crushed—beaten down by the world and the hardships it contains.

In 1885, George Frederick Watts painted a work he titled *Hope*. (You can see a copy of the painting on the last page of your bulletin.) It's not what you might expect. In the painting, a blindfolded woman sits on a rusted globe, hunched over a broken lyre, her ear pressed to the one string that remains unbroken.

Writing about the painting, author G.K. Chesterton described the disconnect: "suppose you find yourself in the presence of a dim canvas with a bowed and stricken and secretive figure cowering over a broken lyre in the twilight. What would [you] think? [Your] first thought, of course, would be that the picture was called Despair; [your] second (when [you] discovered [your] error...) that it has been entered under the wrong [title]; [and your] third, that the painter was mad."²

And yet, Chesterton went on to write, if you stand before the painting long enough, you begin to see a greater truth about what it means to be human, something that defines hope more truly than we might expect. Namely, that "the most delicate thing in us, the most fragile, the most fantastic, is in truth the backbone and indestructible." That there is a string in each of us, "which is always stretched to snapping and yet never snaps."³ For Watts, hope was more than expectancy or optimism. Hope, he argued, was the music that can come from the one remaining chord.⁴

I love this painting. Every time I return to it, I am struck by something new. This time, it was the woman's blindfold—by her inability to see the despair of the world around her. Or, perhaps, her decision not to see it. Her posture makes clear that she knows it's there—she is not naïve. But she has chosen not to orient herself toward it. Instead, she presses her ear to the one remaining string, to the music that can still come from that one remaining chord.

Hope, it turns out, is not the absence of brokenness. It is the decision to keep listening for music even when only one string remains.

² G.K. Chesterton, *G.F. Watts* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1904), 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴ George Frederic Watts, *Hope* 1886, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/george-frederic-watts-hope-r1105604>, accessed 09 May 2026.

It is this kind of hope, this longing for something more, that Paul recognizes in Athens. In our reading from Acts, Paul finds himself in a city surrounded by altars, gods, and idols. Rather than berating or lecturing the Athenians, however, Paul sees the longing beneath the displays, evident most clearly, perhaps, in the Athenians' altar to an unknown God.

"You are so religious," Paul says, "that you have set up altars to every god you can think of. And just in case you missed one, you have an altar to an unknown God. But I know who this altar is for. I recognize the longing that none of these other gods could satisfy. It is a longing for a God who needs no temple or name engraved in stone. This longing that you feel is for the God in whom we live and move and have our being. This God is the very ground of our existence. This God is both the Lord of heaven and earth and the one who holds us even before we know what name to give." The altar to an unknown God, Paul preaches, is not idolatry. It is evidence of faith—of hope reaching toward the God who is already there.

"Always be ready," Peter writes in our second passage for this morning, "to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." This is what Paul does in Athens. He doesn't argue, doesn't convince, he simply points to the hope the Athenians have and names it for what it is: faith reaching toward the God who is already there.

Peter doesn't ask us to be able to explain why everything will be okay, which is good because I'm not sure we're capable of doing that some days. Peter asks us to be able to account for our hope. Not certainty. Hope.

Because even though hope might only be the music from a single remaining string, when we name it, it becomes something we can share. Not proven or argued, but pointed to. Something that helps others begin to recognize and name the hope that is already present in their own lives.

It's Mother's Day, so it would be fitting to end this sermon by telling you what a world class mother I am and how I found the secret to stop all melt-downs in their tracks. But that would be a blatant lie. The meltdowns continue and we are still trying to help Hannah find ways to regulate what her body and mind don't yet know how to hold, still working on being the kind of parents we want to be even when our very sweet child is screaming bloody murder at a decibel only banshees should be able to hit. There are still many moments when it feels like all of our strings have frayed, and it takes a lot of work to hear the music coming from that one remaining chord.

It's not just children who can push us to the edge. Being human means we all know what it feels like to find our internal resources frayed to the point of breaking, whether from pain, grief, the state of the world, or something else. In those moments, the invitation—the work of faith—is to press our ear to what remains, to listen for the music that comes from that one remaining string; and, when we can, to name it. To trust that the music we hear is not ours alone, and that even the faintest sound may be enough for someone else to find their own remaining string.