



# One Hope – Plenary Lecture

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## Introduction

Five years ago, Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg started her school strike for the climate in Stockholm. When she subsequently addressed the leaders of the world, her message was: “I don’t want you to have hope. I want you to panic!”

Even though Greta is the great-granddaughter of a Lutheran pastor<sup>i</sup>, who was influential in Swedish church life, including involvement with the LWF, I don’t think she made a theological analysis of her statement. So, what can we say about this fierce message: “I don’t want you to hope. I want you to panic!”?

Greta’s message rightly opposes false hope, the complacent and presumptuous “someone will fix it, no costly changes needed, just pray and carry on as usual”. Yet, panicking in despair is not an option either. As Martin Luther puts it: God hates both presumption and desperation.<sup>ii</sup>

Nevertheless, the disciples panicked and despaired when Jesus died on the cross. Paralyzed with fear, they hid behind locked doors and did – nothing. It took the testimony of the women who had the courage to visit the empty tomb to get them out of despair and lethargy. It took Pentecost, the intervention of the Holy Spirit, to turn them into apostles of hope.

Panic has a role to play if it, rather than causing despair, alerts us to the choices we get to make under stress and without guarantees for the outcome. In extreme situations, hope requires exactly this: with the abyss opening before our feet, making



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the leap of faith and love. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we cannot give up on the idea that there still is a way forward, that things can be done to stop business-as-usual, mitigate and adapt.

## The State of the World

Polycrisis is a word used to describe the state of the world. It means the occurrence of several crises at the same time: climate emergency and loss of biodiversity, war and conflict, global migration, economic crisis, the ambivalence of digitalization and AI. Polycrisis happens in a world widely marked by what I call the five poisonous P's of polarization, populism, protectionism, post-truth and patriarchy.

- Where polarization widens the gap between those who have too much and those who have too little, creating climate, education, health, demographic and intergenerational injustice,
- where populism pits people against each other and fails to do justice to the complexities of current crises,
- where protectionism blurs the view for the global scope of polycrisis, sacrificing the common good for self-interest and promoting egoism and nationalism,
- where post-truth with the dissemination of disinformation and lies undermines the honest communication that is vital to every democratic system, and
- where patriarchy boosts a global backlash on the rights of women and girls, promotes toxic masculinities and counteracts gender justice, hope is under attack and put to the test.

People are yearning for credible hope. Why is action on climate change so slow? Because there is too little hope that liberates people to give up things for the greater good. Why is there so much fear of those who are strangers or just “other”? Because too many people lack hope that nurtures the courage to think and act outside the box. Why are there so many tensions and conflicts, why so many mental health issues, not least among the youth – and so we can go on to ask. Lack of hope is a



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serious condition. And when lack of hope comes together with a surplus of fear, we are in real danger – as individuals, as a communion of churches, as humanity.

## What Hope is not

Hope is not optimism. Optimism builds on what we already know. It looks at what is at hand and draws out the trends. Rather than extrapolating trends, hope is the practice of spotting the promise. Optimism aims at extending reality. Hope wants to change it. Optimism builds on the known. Hope is motivated by the promise of the realm of God that breaks into and takes shape in our reality. Optimism relies on the facts of the past. Hope sees the past as a history of grace, and therefore looks forward in anticipation.

Optimism is fascinated with graphs and diagrams, especially when they point in the “right” direction. Because then, they support an optimistic view of reality. But remember, it is easy to use statistics for manipulation. With a particular choice of scale, time period and other parameters, a false aura of scientific rigor can be generated. Our wishful thinking is often strong. It can misguide us when we choose, present and interpret facts. Both optimism and pessimism can be deceptive.

But isn't hope also deceitful? We have all heard of vain hopes and false expectations. Yes, like all human endeavors, hope can also be distorted and abused, both theologically and politically. Preaching prosperity gospel is a theological misuse of hope, as well as the privileged telling the poor and oppressed: the worse you are off here, the greater your compensation in heaven, also known as “you get pie in the sky when you die”. In my native Germany, the Third Reich saw itself as the fulfillments of hope, and many a political leader has tried to give his appearance a messianic glow. Hope that builds on the disadvantage and condemnation of others is not a Christian hope.



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Hope can be painfully disappointed. The distress of disappointed hopes may make a mindset of cool selfcomposure more attractive, a stoic letting go of what you cannot control or an attitude of apathy and fatalism, a “what happens happens”. Yet, neither stoicism nor apathy nor fatalism is hope according to the gospel. If incarnation, God becoming human, is at the center of the gospel, then surely hope’s place is “life in the messy middle of things”<sup>iii</sup>. Hope has a place. It is not utopia, which literally means “no place”.<sup>iv</sup>

## What Hope is

### Hope is our calling

Christians are a people of hope. Ever since Jesus Christ overcame the power of death through his resurrection, there has been no other option. “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer,” Paul encourages the congregation in Rome (Romans 12.12).

Esperanza, Espoir, Hoffnung, Hope is a tough plant. It can bear a whole lot. And resist a whole lot. *Dum spiro spero*, the old Romans said – as long as I breathe, I hope. Nevertheless, hope is also vulnerable. We need to cultivate our own hope if we are to foster hope among other people. Like the security instructions on an aircraft: put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. Make sure you inhale what the Holy Spirit offers you and you will be a blessing to others.

This does not mean that Christians are unique supermen and superwomen of hope who can uphold the rest of the world. As Lutherans we know that everything is a gift before it becomes a task. So even hope. It is a treasure we hold in fragile clay jars (2 Corinthians 4.7). Sooner or later, they crack, and that is how the light gets in.



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While optimism rejoices at the continuity of a graph moving in the right direction, hope sees meaning despite and through the leaps and cracks of discontinuity. Hope never puts human failure first; it puts human rights first. In polycrisis, we are called to cultivate a spirituality of resilience, co-existence and hope.

### Hope is a gift and a virtue

Hope is a gift, like faith and love. At the same time, hope is a choice you make, a virtue if you like.<sup>v</sup> And virtues are like muscles. You get to train them if they are to make a difference. Part of the training is this: “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 reverence. Keep your conscience clear.” (1 Peter 3.15–16). Praying and confessing, singing both *Kyrie eleison* and *Gloria in excelsis*, reading and hearing the Words of Scripture, all of this nourishes the hope that makes us bold in advocacy and action.

### Hope is incarnational

Hope needs songs. We can be filled with the Spirit of hope as we “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5.19). One powerful song of hope, *Tenemos Esperanza*, beautifully illustrates the incarnational character of hope.<sup>vi</sup> I quote some lines:

... Because he was born in a dark manger,  
Because he lived sowing love and life,  
Because he opened up the hard hearts  
And lifted up the downcast souls  
... Because he exalted the children, the women,  
And rejected those who burn with pride  
Because he carried the cross of our suffering  
And tasted the bitterness of our ills



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And thus died for all mortals  
Because a dawn saw his great victory  
Over death, the fear, the lies  
Now nothing can stop his story,  
Or the coming of his eternal Kingdom  
(Chorus)  
That's why we have hope today  
That's why we fight tenaciously today ...  
That's why today we look with confidence  
To the future

## Hope is eschatological

Hope resembles faith, as Hebrews 11.1 points out: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And Paul says: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8.24-25). For hope, the future is not merely future, it is advent. It is waiting for God who is at work in us and comes toward us from the future, while we “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2.12-13). The fear and trembling applies to all the smaller hopes, for ourselves and our loved ones, our generations, our countries, and even the planet here and now. The big hope, namely the consummation of creation, is pure advent. Or, to say it with Cappadocian church father Basil the Great (ca 330-379), it is the eighth day of creation, which comprises all time and yet ultimately transcends it, thus making the eschaton present in the here-and-now, as foreshadowed in every celebration of Sunday.<sup>vii</sup>

In this, the Book of Revelation, as difficult as it is, is a source of hope. It deals with struggle and victory in apocalyptic terms and contains clear criticism of the imperial power of its time. Hope lies with the power of the lamb.<sup>viii</sup> The lamb is Jesus,



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crucified and risen, prevailing through non-violence. While the Book of Revelation is a narrative of great violence, it is primarily a story that exposes violence to fundamental change. The key to this book is the slaughtered lamb that has conquered death. The final victory is not attained by the mighty lion – not even a lion feeding on straw (Isaiah 11.7) – but by the slaughtered lamb.

This fundamental transformation of violence in the Book of Revelation may have inspired Jürgen Moltmann's description of judgement. He writes:

'The Last Judgement' is not a terror. In the truth of Christ, it is the most wonderful thing that can be proclaimed to humans. It is a source of endlessly consoling joy to know, not just that the murderers will finally fail to triumph over their victims, but that they cannot in eternity even remain the murderers of their victims.<sup>ix</sup>

Or what would you say about the description of judgement I heard from Sami theologian Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, namely, on judgment day, all humans are bound to be silent while the animals are given the gift of speech?<sup>x</sup>

## Hope is ecclesiological

A hopeful church is aware of its history, but its purpose is not to be a guardian of traditions. Rather, it is focusing on the here and now while looking forward to the consummation of the reign of God. Latino/a theologians in particular have emphasized that eschatological hope is about the transformation of society and the creation of community.<sup>xi</sup>

Rather than an emotion, hope is a serious theological notion. In its ministry of hope in the public space, the church needs to be prophetic (see and give voice to those who do not benefit from current developments), diaconal (listen, support and help),



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ethical (initiate and take part in public conversations about right and wrong) and theological (raise questions that are rarely being asked).

## How can there be ONE hope?

This was the question asked by a young person during one of the pre-meetings for our Assembly. How can there be ONE hope? Well, we could argue that there are more hopes than there are people on this planet, because everyone has small and big hopes. One could also argue that there are religious hopes and secular hopes, that there is Christian hope and Buddhist hope, even Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Pentecostal and Orthodox hope, and Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian Orthodox hope – and you can indeed find arguments to support such views.

However, God did not give God's only Son to save only the church or any specific people or culture, but to save the world (John 3.16-17). Therefore, Christian hope is never hope for Christians only. It is hope for the world. The hope that we are baptized into draws its energy from faith in the triune God and seeks to express itself in love. Hope is eager expectation toward the outcome of God's project of love for the world and our participation in this ongoing project of love.<sup>xii</sup>

We can be confident that God is involved in all true actions of hope. The cross of Christ stands at the centre of the universe, his outstretched arms embracing the whole of creation, not merely the Christian church, not merely humankind. In this sense, there truly is ONE hope.

Hope is ONE – but it has at least three elements. First, hope does not flee from reality; therefore, hope also consists of anger at the forces that contradict the true, the good and the beautiful. A credible hope must be able to harbour anger, frustration and grief.



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Second, hope is concerned with our human imperfections as well as with our resources as God's created co-creators. Therefore, humility is also an important component of hope. Humility is the art of dealing wisely with our power and our weakness, our creativity and our vulnerability, our accomplishments and our mortality.

Third, since hope is different from passively enduring the challenges of any given situation, together with anger and humility, courage characterises hope. In most situations, we still have a choice, and we can choose a more courageous path.

I want you to panic, Greta said. Yes, we should note the alarm bells that sound. And no, we should not succumb to panic, because panic leads to fear and paralysis, not to sensible action. Instead, we should cultivate hope that liberates to act wisely and boldly. The more reasons there are for pessimism, the more special the power of hope. As people of faith, we can always choose to be on the side of courage, impatient in hope!

Now, hope wants to move from head and heart to hands. It wants to get handy. It seeks embodiment. Therefore, I will conclude with a story of embodied and literally handy hope (please, grant me three more minutes for this ...)

One day, when I taught at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, the then head of what is now the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper came to speak at the Roman Catholic Seminary. I volunteered to give a response. A young Mexican woman was in the audience.

Afterwards, she came forward and wondered whether she might attend a Lutheran worship service led by an ordained woman, because she just could not imagine how that worked. Of course, she was welcome. Several years later, when I already was Bishop of Lund in Sweden, I received an e-mail from this same woman. Maricarmen was back in Mexico, living as a nun in a Catholic community, serving a socio-



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economically poor area. She asked for my postal address because she wanted to send me something. Some weeks later a thick yellow envelope arrived. It contained a stole. Maricarmen wrote: I want you to have this stole, it is made by women in Chiapas, a province heavily afflicted by conflict and violence. Amid the ugliest humans can do and suffer, these women responded by creating beauty. Stitch by stitch.

Martin Luther probably never said those often-quoted words about the apple tree that he would plant even if the world were to go to pieces tomorrow. But the flowers that the women of Chiapas in the middle of suffering planted on this stole are a powerful spiritual teaching. The seeds of hope have already grown into beautiful flowers, in anticipation of what the Bible describes as the gathering of all nations around the tree of life, “producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22.2).

This spirituality of ONE HOPE binds together humanity with all creation. It is well expressed in a much loved post-communion prayer in the Church of Sweden:

*Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for your  
inexpressible gift. You became the answer to  
our prayer, the bread for our hunger. Help us  
now to answer the need of those who lack the  
things we have in abundance. Help us to hear  
the cry you have heard, to understand as you  
have understood, to serve as you have served.  
**Reveal to us the secret of your table:  
one bread and one  
humanity. Amen.***

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The [Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation](#) takes place 13-19 September 2023 in Krakow, Poland. The theme of the Assembly will be “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” It will be hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.

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<sup>i</sup> Ebbe Arvidsson (1914-2006) [https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebbe\\_Arvidsson](https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebbe_Arvidsson) Her grandmother was a deacon in the Church of Sweden.

<sup>ii</sup> WA 44, 822, 13-14. (Commentary on Genesis 31-50) “Ideo timendus est Deus, qui et praesumptionem et desperationem odit.”

<sup>iii</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock: Losing Your Innocence But Not Your Hope, in: Maryanne Stevens (ed.): Reconstructing the Christ Symbol, New York/Mahwah 1993, 47.

<sup>iv</sup> For more on what hope is and is not, see also Antje Jackelén. “What May We Hope?” Dialog: A Journal of Theology vol.61, nr 1 (2022), 13-19. Antje Jackelén. Samlas kring hoppet, Stockholm: Verbum, 2016. Antje Jackelén. Otålig i hoppet: Teologiska frågor i pandemins skugga. Stockholm: Verbum 2020.

<sup>v</sup> Hope as virtue means “a more stable and enduring quality of character that helps to direct the emotion of hope toward the right objects in the right ways.” Quoted from Michael Lamb, [What can Augustine of Hippo’s philosophy teach us about hope? | Aeon Essays](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [Songs of Advent: Hope - This Crazy Call \(weebly.com\)](#) (Thanks to Martin Junge for drawing my intention to this song written by the Argentinian Methodist Bishop José Pagura).

<sup>vii</sup> Basil, Hexaameron. Cf also Mario Baghos. St Basil’s Eschatological Vision: Aspects of the Recapitulation of History and the “Eighth Day”. Phronema Vol XXV, 2010, 85-103 (91). [http://www.sagotc.edu.au/sites/default/files/files/baghos/St\\_Basils\\_Eschatological\\_Vision.pdf](http://www.sagotc.edu.au/sites/default/files/files/baghos/St_Basils_Eschatological_Vision.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Barbara Rossing, The Rapture Exposed. The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004, 103–122.

<sup>ix</sup> Jürgen Moltmann: Das Kommen Gottes: Christliche Eschatologie. Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1995, 284 (my translation).

<sup>x</sup> Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, researcher at Sami allaskuvla i Kautokeino.

<sup>xi</sup> For example Luis G. Pedraja, Eschatology and Hope, in: The Wiley Blackwell companion to Latino/a theology 2015, 231-248 (ed. Orlando O. Espín).

<sup>xii</sup> Cf. Werner Jeanrond. Reasons to Hope, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 179-185.



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