

Obligated to Hope: An African American Perspective

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“We are obligated to hope.”

Bishop Yvette Flunder

I don't remember the first time I heard Bishop Flunder say “we are obligated to hope.” I know that I have heard her say it many times since. Almost every time I've heard her say it—whether in person or reading her response to a public event—the United States, the world writ large, or the church has been in the throes of chaos, pain, or some documented injustice, a hurricane ripping through a community or an unarmed black person shot dead by a police officer, for example. And this year, we have experienced an unprecedented pandemic, where lives have been lost and other lives hang in a balance. Her choice of the word *obligated* has always captivated me, mainly because I think it undergirds what I believe is a Christian mandate. We *must* hope. And with Advent, the Christian calendar is set up to reinforce this notion.

Advent begins in anticipation, as the first Sunday of Advent lights the candle of hope. As it is postured, this hope is an eschatological longing for the now and future coming of Jesus, an inbreaking on the mundane with divine power and intention. This hope is apocalyptic, a revealing of what is and what could be. This longing, this hope, is prophetic in that it reflects the “we believe” of a people in the presence of what seems like insurmountable despair. It is the prophet's cry that God would “tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). Even when that hope is infused with dread and an anxious watchfulness as described in Mark 13, asking us to be alert, we always are asked to keep hoping. We are asked to hope because of God's faithfulness. And in a pandemic, I confess, it is not always easy to see God's consistency. But, as Christians, we hold on to it because the proclamation comes from a trusted source.

In African American settings, though, it seems counterintuitive to keep hoping. How, and even why, should anyone who is both African in heritage and American in location and birth hope? Under the scourge of the coronavirus, COVID19, black and brown peoples especially have been devastated, both with death and with economic despair. And yet, a survey of essays and books, podcasts, and social media postings would reveal a stubborn persistence among African American people to hope. This stubborn hope in African American communities is not optimism or an Enlightenment-style expectation that the world gets better and better as time progresses. This brand of hope, as ethicist and theologian Barbara Holmes argues in her book *Race and the Cosmos*,¹ defies the reality that the universe expands and contracts, that racial “progress” advances and then is pounded back by forces that do not want black peoples in the workplace to flourish. Thus, to approach racial justice as a one off event, e.g., the voting rights act was signed so there's nothing more to do, or we elected a black president so we're post-racial,” is not only faulty, but it's an unfaithful expectation of the way the arc of justice bends. In other words, hope is not dependent upon individual acts of justice, but rather the belief that the One who stands among us intends justice, and in the end, at the culmination of all things, justice will prevail, even if we

must endure contractions of justice along the way. This hope testifies that God will strengthen us to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8), even with setbacks and contractions, so that we may stand before God blameless.

Thus, hope in Advent is not generic, and neither is the strand of hope in the DNA of African American culture(s) generic. This hope lives in particular contexts and struggles, like the struggle for health and economic justice that this pandemic uncovered. Or, as the Rev. Peter Gomes argued in his sermon on advent hope, hope is not optimism. He argues that, especially among African Americans, “our bitter experience of the past has taught us to expect little of the present and even less of the future, so we have substituted a shallow optimism for a deep hope,”² and “Black people in America have never been optimistic, for we know better; but we have always been hopeful, full of hope.”³ For Gomes, optimism requires some looking away from horrors and perhaps even some self-deception, but “hope, you see, is not an act of will so much as it is an act of imagination and courage.”⁴ Advent is, in many ways, the opposite of Christmas celebrations as they have come to be designed in our culture, where we numb ourselves with parties and gifts and pretense. Advent, by Gomes’s definition, is a great time to cultivate imagination and courage, the ability to ground oneself, not in the belief that humans will get it right, but that God will help us live into God’s own vision for humanity and all creation. Hope is a call to look up rather than away from the horrors of the world. We look up, not in a way to deny what is, but to imagine what could be, and to work for that with God’s help. Such hope begins with the understanding that while we might not know the day or hour of Christ’s inbreaking—this Advent or in some consummate future—we can be “awake,” i.e. attentive to his inbreaking (Mark 13:35-37).

Two particular books come to mind for me that highlight what Gomes means by hope in African American communities. In the turn of two elections, two different African American preachers churned out books about communal hope. One book, *Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Election of Barack Obama*,⁵ was a collection of essays in which African American Christian leaders contributed musings about what the election of Barack Obama meant culturally and theologically. Reading each essay, one might see exactly what Gomes argued. Almost to a person, contributors argued for people to relocate any optimism they experienced because of Obama’s election into hope in God’s activity in the world and not to lay upon Obama’s election some unbearable expectations. I don’t know what Dr. Marvin McMickle expected when he called for those essays, but what he got was Gomes’s distinction between prophetic hope and cultural optimism. To be sure, people were excited, but also tempered. The other monograph, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope*,⁶ was published immediately after the election of Donald Trump. Judge Wendell Griffen, also a Baptist pastor, argued through a study-style book that people could not descend into despair, but rather the times called for prophetic hope, a trust in God’s activity beyond what some might have experienced as a complete reversal of optimism generated by Obama’s election. In both books, it is an eternal hope that God is at work to bring a just and righteous consummation to the world, in spite of who is in the U.S. White House.

In her 1992 essay titled “African American Advent and Christmas Spirituals,” Professor Melva Costen demonstrates that fragments of Advent hope may be seen in the music of enslaved persons who adopted or converted to Christianity. In the

essay she notes that the longing for a returning or coming redeemer makes sense for people “yearning for justice and liberation,” thus making the assertion that “it is natural that they would turn to the coming of the risen Lord. Eschatology, as understood by the slave, had as much to do with the change of situations in the present world as it did with the end of the world. One needed to be properly prepared for both.”⁷ This understanding of Advent—now and the future—permeates African American understandings of what Griffen called *prophetic* hope. While reflecting on Costen’s work is outside the purview of this essay, it does allow us one more example of the difference Gomes points to between optimism and hope. In the end, for many African Americans who claim Christianity as their spiritual path to God, the first Sunday of Advent might be the best one of all to mine the history, the struggle, the successes, the faith, and yes, the hope of a people, even in the face of a ravaging pandemic. This first Sunday may give us a chance to testify to the larger Christian family about a God who specializes in changing circumstances that are dire. That witness is beyond optimism. It is the very substance of our faith.

Notes

1 Barbara Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Trinity Press International, 2002, passim).

2 Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (HarperOne, 2002), 181. A more contemporary book that reflects Gome’s definition of hope can be seen in Leah Gunning Francis, *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community* (Chalice Press, 2015).

3 Gomes, 185.

4 Gomes, 182.

5 Marvin McMickle, ed., *Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Election of Barack Obama* (Judson Press), 2009.

6 Wendell L. Griffen, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press, 2017).

7 Melva Costen, “African American Advent and Christmas Spirituals,” in *Journal for Preachers* 16, no 1 (Advent 1992), 2-10, 2.