June 14, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If you are like me, then the radical changes of the last few months have been quite disorienting. In a way, our collective experience has been a lot like that quintessential American fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz*. This story remains a perennial favorite – after all, how many times have *you* seen it? It’s hard not to identify with its messages of struggle, hope, and transformation. What might be easily overlooked however is how the story’s displays of magic are not entirely magical at all. [[1]](#footnote-1)

While there are many theories about embedded subversive messages in the story, they all seem to agree that it is an example of art imitating life that makes a flying monkey out of society. The land of Oz is a technicolor parody of the very same world we are in already. This is underscored by the recasting of the characters in Kansas as exaggerated versions of themselves in Oz.

The story revolves around Dorothy who, as an orphan, is no stranger to loss. Neither is she immune from life’s storms as she is literally swept up from her sepia-toned existence to take a hazardous acid-like trip through a garish land of hardship and chaos. Along the way, Dorothy accumulates friends for her journey; the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, all of whom are convinced that their only hope lies with the great and powerful Wizard of Oz. And all of them incur the wrath of the water-soluble Wicked Witch of the West who is determined to stop them.

Nothing is as it seems (except maybe Toto). Dorothy is not the hero everyone thinks she is, and her triumphs result more from chance and accident (like when her house dropped on the Wicked Witch of the East) than from any superior virtue or bravery. Likewise, the “stupid” Scarecrow is brilliant, the “heartless” Tin Man is deeply caring, and the “cowardly” Lion is courageous. They seek what they already have and receive bogus tokens from the Wizard, who is clearly a fraud. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Dorothy and her three friends are a parable about life itself. They have baggage, they have real fears, and they have great needs. Dorothy and her friends pin their hopes on the Wizard giving them what they need. [[3]](#footnote-3) But their hope is disappointed because the Wizard is no Wizard at all – just a charlatan behind a curtain.

Like Dorothy, we have been uprooted from our familiar lives by a perfect storm of pestilence, civil unrest, and recession - oh my! Circumstances have removed the emerald-colored lenses from our eyes and confronted us with the flying monkeys of ignorance, racial hatred, and fear that always lurked just underneath the veneer of everyday life. Events have lain bare our great needs and justifiable concerns, but the man manipulating worldly levers behind the curtain can’t do much for us. So, in a broken world where hope seems to be in short supply, where do we turn?

This is the same question and the same broken world that the Apostle Paul addresses in his *Letter to the Romans*. Paul was writing to a group pf Christians on the precipice of darkness. They lived in the shadow of Caesar, who declared himself to be Lord and, in many ways, *Romans* is a parody of the Roman imperial cult intended to bring the whole world to the justice of the true God. [[4]](#footnote-4) And because Christians dared to proclaim that, in effect, the emperor had no clothes, they would soon be actively persecuted and Paul himself would be executed.

If you are going to preach hope to people living under such conditions, you had better not be pumping sunshine. It would be beyond cruel to offer rainbow promises and unicorn hopes that would only make their bad situation worse. But Paul is not selling false hope – the good news he preaches pulls back the curtain of eternity to reveal a hope rooted in the risen and reigning Christ. [[5]](#footnote-5) This hope cannot disappoint, because it transcends all suffering. And it cannot die because it was forged in the fires of death itself. [[6]](#footnote-6)

G.K. Chesterton said that: *“hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all. As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength.”* [[7]](#footnote-7)What he means is that those who have a *why* to live can endure almost any *how.* [[8]](#footnote-8) True hope is not about being delivered *from* life’s storms; rather it is about being delivered *through* them. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Poet Emily Dickinson wrote: *“Hope is the thing with feathers/ That perches in the soul/ And sings the tune without the words/ And never stops–at all.”* Today, when so many things seem up in the air, and all of our customary solutions are found wanting, we need more than ever to hear that never-ending song of hope that springs from the love of God poured into our hearts.

Only then can we keep moving toward an unknown future, confident that the God, whose light we are moving toward, is walking with us hand in hand; caring for us as we care for one another.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Bob

1. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190808-the-subversive-messages-hidden-in-the-wizard-of-oz> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.grunge.com/165193/the-real-meaning-of-these-wizard-of-oz-characters/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://fbccov.org/what-the-wizard-of-oz-can-teach-us-about-truth/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/paul-and-caesar-a-new-reading-of-romans/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Romans 5:1-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. S. Hoezee, *“Lectionary Epistle: Romans 5:1-5,”* (Center for Excellence in Preaching), ***2016,*** on [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sermonillustrations.com [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Viktor Frankl [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *“Suffering and God are not a contradiction, but rather a unity, and the idea that God himself is suffering is one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity.”*  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)