

Hope Struts (Psalm 85)
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When Professor Cornel West steps up to the lectern, he cuts an eccentric figure. He is not especially tall, but he looks that way thanks to his thinness. This feature is accentuated by the closely cut black suit that he always wears, complete with buttoned black vest, silk-knotted black tie, and topped off with a black scarf thrown around his neck for good measure. At the center of his chest, streaks of bright white shirt can be seen, and, at the ends of his arms, starched white sleeves extend with cufflinks gleaming. They complement the occasional shocks of gray in his hair. His hair, by the way, is truly fantastic. Worn in the style of an Afro, Cornel West's hair stands wildly atop his head. A bushy beard covers his chin, giving him a grizzled appearance. To round out our description of him we should note that his face is framed by prominent square-rimmed glasses and an infectious gap-toothed smile. So when Cornel West steps up to the lectern, he cuts an eccentric figure. He looks like a crazy kind of prophet, just stepped off a train from the 19th Century, with more a strut in that step than a spring. And before he ever utters a word to the audiences that fill college lecture halls and historic churches to hear him, Cornel West has already made quite an impression. Of course, then he leans into the microphone and the real show begins.

When West begins to speak, it is usually in the manner of a black preacher. He warms up by thanking this sister and that brother, recognizing the host institution and its planners, and shuffling for a moment with the room as everyone settles down for his remarks, which, once begun, will unsettle them all again. Then brother West begins to move into the body of his address, a body that is almost always woven out of the strands

of himself, the threads of American history, music, philosophy, and Christianity. Using his talents as both an academic philosopher and a soulful public orator, Cornel West launches into a deep critique of the status quo. While this critique is oftentimes painful to hear, it is also infused with as real a hope as I've heard from anyone speaking in this country. So, with the second Sunday of Advent's theme of hope in mind, I'd like to offer some of the hope I have gathered from Cornel West. His hope is not naïve about what will be required, it is not ignorant of the facts, and it is not blithely optimistic. Rather Cornel's hope is as critical, gritty, funky, and beautiful as he is. It is a hope that will not sit still, but jumps from its seat to strut its stuff and ask us to join in. And in gratitude this morning, I'll offer us just a sketch of Cornel's hope for our season.

I mentioned that, in my estimation, West draws his hope from four primary sources. The first of these sources, strangely enough, is American history. In many ways this is an unlikely place for a black man to look for a hopeful word. For our history, as we all know, contains deep undercurrents of oppression and suffering. More than undercurrents, really. The nation that we extol for so many of its democratic ideals was also built on the backs of slave labor and in places seized by Europeans after genocidal crusades against the indigenous people. Our history is brutal and bitter and Cornel knows this and speaks to it. His hope is not optimism and he has said time and time again that you cannot be black in this country and be optimistic. But, he adds, with a gleam in his eye, you can be hopeful. We can all be hopeful. What does West mean by this and why should we consider it during Advent of all times?

Cornel means that the ability to speak honestly and with courage about the horrors of our history is a critical ingredient in hope. As we remember those who have suffered, tell

their stories, and hold them up, we refuse to let them fall into the silent margins of an earlier chapter. And along with remembering the darkest nights of our history, we also remember the countless dawns when people rose up to speak the truth in love. West remembers W. E. B. Du Bois, Marnie Till Bradley (Emmett Till's mother), Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The struggle goes on and we need not be optimistic that it will conclude in our lifetimes. Rather, we find an element of hope in the stories of these ordinary people who showed an extraordinary willingness to join their lives to the struggle for justice and peace. And the hopeful question that Cornel so often puts to his audiences and would certainly put to us is, "Well, what are you going to do?"

There is a second source for brother West's hope that is closely linked with the first. That source is the unique music that arose from the experiences of black folk in this country, namely, the strands of spirituals, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, and jazz music that derive from American history. In such music, Cornel reminds us, we can hear the voices of sisters and brothers with the resilience to make their suffering into a song. The songs were a kind of sustenance for a people on a journey. West writes, "When you look at this tradition from the spirituals on through Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughan, Curtis Mayfield, Luther Vandross, and Aretha Franklin on up to Prince and Gerald Levert, music sustained our humanity, dignity, and integrity."¹ Such music gave people a different language of hope, a language made of rhythm sections, blaring horns, and the angelic voices of soulful working men and women. And it is next to impossible to listen to some of this music without feeling moved by it. Moved to consider where we have

¹ Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom* (New York: Smiley Books, 2008), 110.

been. Moved to consider where we might go. Moved to get up off the couch and dance around the living room as Curtis implores us to get ready for the train that is coming or Aretha belts that she'll say a little prayer for us on her coffee break. Here Cornel's question isn't quite, "What are you going to do?" although that question is still operative. Here he simply wants to know what music will get you up to do it, what you'll sing as you write that letter, raise that placard, or, better yet, speak up in the workplace or the public square on behalf of all the people who still live and work on the margins. "What are you going to sing?"

The third source of Cornel's hope is perhaps the most unlikely. The grounding for much of his academic work, this source is the genealogy of classical American philosophy, also known as pragmatism. That philosophy, which Cornel traces from Ralph Waldo Emerson through Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and on to a host of moderns, is essentially a philosophy that understands ideas very differently than other schools of thought.² For American pragmatists, ideas did not hold truth or value in relation to a kind of metaphysical reality. Rather, ideas held truth or value in relation to what they did, how they caused their adherents to act, and what difference they made in the actual world of lived experience. In many ways, American pragmatism is less a doctrine than it is a method of testing ideas by means of the results to which they lead. To put it in a preacher's language we might ask what are the fruits of a given idea? This is another question that Cornel wants to ask. After rigorous intellectual inquiry and philosophical speculation, one must always return to the question

² See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

of how to be in the world. And, for pragmatists, an idea is only as good as its practical effects. The question, then, for a pragmatic hope is “What are you going to think that will get you there?”

The final source of hope for Cornel West is, in my view, his primary source. It is his deep rootedness within the prophetic Christian tradition. He speaks of this often, and, when he does, he gets especially animated. Because the prophetic Christian tradition isn't the predominant strand of Christianity in America today and Cornel's cadence changes, his voice rising as he begins to draw a distinction. The obvious brand of Christianity today is what Cornel calls Constantinian Christianity, in reference to the early church's collusion with the culture and empire of imperial Rome. Most Christians, Cornel would say, have wedded church, state, and culture in grotesque manner that does not allow them to critique historic or present oppression from the standpoint of prophetic love. Prophetic Christians, Cornel preaches, cannot help but raise a strong voice of protest at the way our nation state prizes capitalist economics and the accumulation of personal wealth and imperial power at the expense of the countless millions of people at home and abroad who suffer while a relatively few elites get richer year after year. To be sure, West has been influenced by his study of Marxist theory, but his critique of our society comes from a different place.

Standing at the lectern, Cornel West offers that it is his commitment to prophetic Christianity that leads him to constantly question the status quo. He writes, “The legacies of prophetic Christianity put a premium on the kind of human being one chooses to be rather than the amount of commodities one possesses.”³ Prophetic Christians are meant

³ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 163.

to be deeply suspicious of the powers of the empires under which they live, whether those empires be of the historic Roman or the present American variety. Following an ethic of prophetic Christianity, we may ask ourselves not how much money, status, or power we have accumulated, but how much we have understood that every person on earth is our sister and brother and how well we have lived our lives in ways that reflect this truth. The question, then, for prophetic Christians, is “What (and who) are you going to love?”

In our morning psalm we heard an ancient Hebrew poem that asked a few questions of its own. Its author wanted to know how to move from a place of estrangement with the divine to a place of reconnection and renewal. And the answer offered in those old verses, the hope that the writer identified, was the idea of a day when “Steadfast love and righteousness will meet; [and] righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”⁴ This, I think, is similar to the hope that Cornel preaches as he paces the stage and admonishes his hearers to take their precious lives and add them to the ongoing struggle for justice, righteousness, and peace. But for brother West our hope need not only preach and pace to the audiences who have come to hear it. Our hope struts out onto the world stage and gets to work. It struts not as a peacock, fanning its vainglorious feathers for all to see. It struts not as a caricature, funnily dancing in front of those who snicker cynically. It struts not nervously, failing to believe in itself or the possibilities of what it might achieve. No, hope struts its stuff with confidence and resolve. Hope struts its stuff with a backbone made of history, music, philosophy, and faith. Hope struts its stuff as boldly as it knows how, saying to the world that today is the day when righteousness and peace will kiss and we are the people who will help them to embrace. Hope struts right into the season of

⁴ Psalm 85:10, New Revised Standard Version.

Advent to sit next to each of us and ask, with all the bravado of an eccentric preacher-professor. “What are you going to do?” “What are you going to sing?” “What are you going to think?” “What (and who) are you going to love?”

This day, this season, may we find within ourselves the hope to live out our answers.

Amen.