



The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture † Hope

Introduction

Hope. It's a catchphrase on our bumper stickers. It's a buzzword on the lips of our leaders. It's the youth sitting in our churches and the futures we dream for them, but still we ask: what is Hope? We see the word everywhere from ad campaigns to refrigerator magnets, but in an era of constant war, unending poverty, and pervasive indifference, we want to know: where can we find Hope?

The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore the radical theological and missional significance of Hope and the practical implications for our youth ministries. These lectures look at Christian Hope through the eyes of two current practical theologians and educators, a world-renowned university minister and author, and an ordinary radical.

The hope in the world, ubiquitous though it might seem, may be running out, but we do not despair. Because it's also the journey of the cross. It's the mystery of the empty tomb. It's the God who stands in the gap of a broken world and holds us in a divine embrace as we pray, "Our Hope, Lord, is in you."

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young. May these lectures inspire you in your ministry with young people.

Faithfully,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds
 Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
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2010 Lectures

Kenda Creasy Dean	"Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as Laboratory for Hope"
Rodger Nishioka	"The Uniqueness of Christian Hope" "Hope as Cruciform"
The Reverend Peter J. Gomes	"The Christian Hope for a New Generation"
Shane Claiborne	"Becoming the Church We Dream Of"



Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as a Laboratory for Hope † Kenda Creasy Dean

“If Christianity be not altogether restless eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ.”
—Karl Barth¹

Of course, I was expecting a children’s movie. Like countless other families who lined up for Pixar’s 2009 animated feature *Up*, Kevin and I had brought our children (okay, they were sixteen and twenty-one, but still), and the four of us armed ourselves with popcorn and settled in for another feel-good Pixar adventure.

If you’ve seen *Up*, you know what happened next. Ten minutes in, we were blowing our noses into our butter-stained napkins, weeping for balloon-man Karl as his beloved Ellie slips the surly bonds of earth. In mere moments, we had witnessed their long and happy marriage’s simple joys and bitter disappointments. Suddenly, we shared Karl’s desperation, anticipating life without Ellie. We hated those smarmy developers who wanted to bulldoze his home. Our hearts sank when anxiety seized Karl and he whacked a construction worker with his cane. We seethed at the injustice of the court ruling, and despised the laughable aides sent from the Shady Oaks Retirement Village to fetch him. But above all, we ached for Karl’s remorse about never taking Ellie to South America, a promise that he forgot to keep until it was too late. At the movie’s ten-minute mark, regret weighs heavily on Karl. “Now what do I do, Ellie?” he sadly asks, leafing through her childhood scrapbook. He can feel—we can feel—his past, his identity, slipping away. Then he gets an idea.

Spoiler alert: Karl does go to South America, escaping his pursuers by ascending into the heavens—thanks to thousands of helium balloons that lift his house, and his spirits, sky-high. Like all fairy tales, *Up* takes place in a secondary, enchanted universe. Dogs talk and children befriend exotic birds and an old man pulls his past behind him in the form of a floating house. Yet J.R.R. Tolkien insisted that fantasy stories must tell the truth.² Because fantasy stories take place in a universe where latent human anxieties are given concrete shapes, they can be symbolically confronted and conquered. We do children no favors, child therapist Bruno Bettelheim famously argued, by domesticating the evil characters in fairy tales, since confronting and vanquishing evil is necessary to a child’s sense of mastery in the world.³

The Gospel as a True Story

Tolkien maintained that “myths were the best way of conveying truths which would otherwise be inexpressible.”⁴ Picking up on this theme, Frederick Buechner insists that fairy tales teach us to enter this strange, alternate universe of the gospel on its own terms, so that the death-confounding truth of Christ can reach through the story into our anxious world.⁵ Like fairy tales, the gospel communicates truth-beyond-words. The gospel is so universal, so profound, so vital for addressing the deep-seated anxieties of being human that it defies easy explanation. Yet this does not make it untrue; on the contrary, the deepest truths we know—love, grace, forgiveness, redemption—do not “make sense” by human standards. Love goes beyond all reason, grace goes further than justice, forgiveness willingly suffers for another, resurrection turns death into life. Taken together, these mysteries ground Christian hope. They are signs of the future God has created us for; they point to the world that the Kingdom of God is like—which means if we preachers tell God’s story without its counterintuitive, eschatological promises, we do not tell the truth.

And therein lies the problem. In a church increasingly concerned with self-preservation, telling the truth gets harder and harder to do. Eschatology—the study of God’s ultimate purposes for humankind—functions as the church’s doctrine of hope, but it gets less attention in most churches than Flag Day, save for obligatory references to heaven at funerals.⁶ The link between Christian eschatology and hope is all but forgotten, mostly because we avoid the subject altogether, or because we have dehydrated eschatology to mean God’s judgment on the last days (which inevitably winds up looking hopeful for some, and decidedly unhelpful for others) or we converted Christian hope into optimism or cheap cheeriness (making the church look preposterously far removed from real human pain). No one is more likely to “call us out” on these exclusionary, cheesy interpretations of the gospel than the teenagers, who are the first to accuse Christians of being out of touch with the real world because our heads are in the clouds.

The Problem with Looking Up: Ascension Deficit Disorder⁷

Anxious people, uncertain about their futures, have always scanned the skies for hope, expecting to find answers in the heavens. Sailors navigated by the stars; wise men interpreted the alignment of the planets; ancient people worshipped the sun. Even among contemporary Christians, the answer always seems to be “up”:

“Lord, I lift your name on high...”

“God will raise you up on eagle’s wings...”

“When I fall down, he lifts me up...”

“We will meet him in the air, and then we will be like him...”

“Everybody’s gonna have a wonderful time up there, glory hallelujah...”

We are not the first anxious culture in history, of course. In the days and weeks following the resurrection, Jesus taught the disciples about the Kingdom of God,⁸ promised them the power of the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. All the disciples can say in response is, *Are we there yet?* “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6). Lord, does the Kingdom of God mean you are finally going to give us what we’ve been waiting for? Is this the time when all our faithfulness and hard work finally pays off? Is this the time we finally get the church we want? Lord, are we there yet?”

Jesus parries: “No, and yes.” The future belongs to God. In the meantime, there is work to be done. God’s good news is for all people, but not everyone knows that God’s reign has begun to unfold—that “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” This is where the church comes in:

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7–9).

And with that, Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” as the disciples stood there gaping, gazing up at the heavens, watching him go. Suddenly two men in white robes appeared, and reminded them to stop gawking and trust the future Christ had promised them: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:8–11). In other words, the future is already set. You are free to concentrate on the here and now.

File this under troublesome texts for contemporary Christians. To the ancient Greeks, Jesus’ ascent into the clouds would have confirmed his Lordship over creation—but to us, it reads more like the floaty exit of Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Throughout the centuries, artists have playfully depicted Acts 1:1–11 by portraying the disciples watching Jesus’s feet disappear into a cloud. No wonder twenty-first-century churches suffer from what we might call

ascension deficit disorder (A.D.D.), a tendency to act as though the future God has promised in Jesus Christ is a fairy tale, which shrivels our ability to practice hope. When we don't believe that Christ's promise to secure the future is true, we live as people fearful for our own prospects, protecting ourselves instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to use us as Christ's witnesses. A.D.D. is the reason churches get distracted so easily from the work Jesus commissioned us for: to be his witnesses throughout the earth. Instead, we are stymied and stressed, straining to make sense of the future's cloudy uncertainty. Like Karl (and like the disciples in Acts) we feel lost and alone, missing the implications of the angels' words: Christ is separated from us, but he is not finished here.

If ascension deficit disorder stunts the church's ability to practice hope, maybe the cure lies in developing an *eschatological imagination*, the ability to envision the counterintuitive world God intends, and to live into the fact that this world has already started to unfold. Commenting on the dystopia—the sense that things are not as they should be—of global culture, British theologian Ann Morisy says pointedly: “Christians confronted by dystopian perspectives can no longer just proclaim or assert the persistence of hope; rather, if confidence in hope is to grow, then hope has to be *demonstrated*.”⁹ Churches with eschatological imaginations do not merely cling to hope; they enact it, because the Kingdom of God is not just up ahead. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Eschatology: The Church's Answer to Anxiety

Nothing rattles a bunch of postmodern, educated, rational Christians quite like talking about the ascension of Jesus. A good deal of our dazed posture toward the ascension story comes from our mainstream allergy to eschatology; surely this isn't a story we are meant to take seriously? Yet eschatology is the church's answer to anxiety, and it is one of Christianity's most practical doctrines. Our vision for the future affects our present choices far more directly than, say, asking “What would Jesus do?” Witness the Celts, whose vivid sense of God's presence in everyday life gave Christianity “a less imperial feel” than many of its counterparts, which partly accounts for its appeal to postmodern young people.¹⁰ Celtic Christianity constantly celebrated the interwoven relationship between heaven and earth. Believing that the world is perforated by “thin places”—sites where heaven and earth co-mingle—Celts viewed their future with God as woven into their daily life on earth.¹¹

Safe to say, most American youths lack the Celts' pragmatic eschatology. Mention “future with God” to most of them, and the afterlife pops up—a subject youth find too distant to be relevant, and the rest of us would just rather avoid. Gallup shows that belief in heaven is growing (up almost 10% from a decade ago, to 81%), while the number of hell-believers has remained fairly steady (around 70%).¹² Interestingly, more Americans think they'll go to heaven than believe in heaven (89%).¹³ And while the majority of young people believe in an afterlife, few consider it “a life-driver,” according to sociologist Christian Smith. In general, young people's religious beliefs amount to abstract agreements, not priorities they organize their lives around, or that guide them as they set their life's goals.¹⁴

Our reluctance to claim a significant role for eschatology in mainstream Christianity is partly due to persistent misunderstandings about what it is. Christian eschatology is neither a way to predict the future, nor a doctrine about heaven and hell. Eschatology simply means that we know how the story ends: God wins. And because God has bound God's self to humanity in Jesus Christ, if God wins, we win too. Knowing the “end of the story” funds Christian hope, and it profoundly affects the way we live *now*. If we no longer need to worry about the future, we can let go of our survival anxiety, which allows us to live life as it unfolds, one play at a time, since we do not need to worry about the score, or running out of time.

Let's try this analogy. Remember the last time you TiVoed a football game, and accidentally found out the final score before you had a chance to watch the game? Knowing the final score (for better or worse) drains the suspense from the game, suspense that makes gladiator sports entertaining. But if knowing the score in advance makes for boring viewing, it also makes for lower blood pressure and better human relations. When we know how the game ends, we don't sweat the individual plays, even the ones we lose. We can approach our teammates *and* our opponents as who they really are, and not

just as the positions they play. We can relax a little, since we know a fumble will not cost us our futures. A sturdy eschatology makes the Christian community an “unanxious presence” in the world because we are not obsessed with life’s final score. Instead of functioning as a spiritual weathervane, eschatology enables us to read the “signs of our times” in light of an ending God has already written.

Anxiety in American Teenagers: A Barrier to Christian Maturity

Unfortunately, young people absorb most of their anxiety from us—and in an era of economic recession, things are likely to get worse before they get better. Youth tend to deal with anxiety the way they deal with many traits they get from their parents: through denial. Yet denying anxiety in the surrounding culture may not prepare them to function in it.¹⁵ With marriage and parenthood receding farther into the future, the first few years after college are often given to “funemployment”—voluntary, transitional jobs that one can easily quit in favor of something else that is more entertaining.¹⁶ With unprecedented high expectations for both salary and fulfillment, disdain for work that does not suit their personal needs or lifestyle, and a looming, extended period of national joblessness, America’s emerging adults (eighteen to twenty-somethings) need to brace themselves for what economist Heidi Shierholz calls “a big national experiment on stress.”¹⁷

Hope offers an important cushion in stressful circumstances, and its prevalence in religious teenagers is one reason the National Study of Youth and Religion concluded that highly devoted young people are “doing much better” in life, on any number of variables, than their peers.¹⁸ Research consistently finds dramatic differences in the levels of hope expressed by highly devoted teenagers compared to their peers.¹⁹ But even Christian teenagers often have a very simplistic grasp of what hope means, and few relate it to Christian teaching. Take, for example, these hopeful statements gleaned from Christian teenagers in the National Study of Youth and Religion (2004):

“The future’s gonna be great; I know it!”

“I just know God won’t let me down.”

“I hope that there’s something after [death]... That’s pretty much all. I just hope it’s okay, that I don’t have to go to hell.”

It is unlikely that such simplistic views of hope can be sustained until graduation, much less through a lifetime.

What makes Christian hope different from facile optimism and cheerful determination is its ability to stare down anxiety, the sublimated fear of our own demise. If Christ has secured our future, then this anxiety is superfluous—but in an eschatologically challenged church, anxiety often gets the upper hand. In 1586, the Carmelite priest John of the Cross penned the church’s most famous manual on spiritual anxiety, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. But the roots of Christian anxiety reach back for centuries; even in Acts, the disciples fretted over Israel’s survival: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) We hear ourselves in their concern: Lord, is this the time you’re going to fix the church, and make it powerful again, the way it was back when the old pastor was here? Back when 150 teenagers showed up for youth group every week? Back when people cared about church? Back when the people who came to church were like me?

One of the most frequent themes in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is the anxiety of the people of God, and God’s repeated efforts to quell this anxiety. Angels appear, and their first words are, “Fear not.” Jesus urges his followers not to worry, taking their cues from the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28). Again and again Israel is encouraged to step back and wait upon the Lord. In the ascension text, two men (we assume them to be angels) admonish the disciples to stop looking for Jesus in the clouds, and assure them of his return.

Today, we know that anxiety works against hope for social and biological reasons as well. *New York Times* columnist Kate Zernike dubbed the young people coming of age during “the Great Recession” as Generation OMG (or “Omigod!” for the uninitiated). Zernike cites sociologist Glen Elder’s 1974 study, “Children of the Great Depression,” that compared American youth coming of age in the Great Recession with those growing up between 1929–1931. In Elder’s study, both older (ten and older) and younger (ages two–nine) children internalized adults’ anxiety, but the effects of this anxiety differed. Older youth, who had developed a capacity for formal reasoning but were not yet saddled with adult responsibilities, translated their anxiety into resourcefulness. They learned how to survive, make do, and solve problems; they grew into resilient adults who were extremely family-centered. However, younger children did not fare as well. Their need for parental care and attention coincided with the worst years of the Depression. They remember feeling bewildered and alone as children, and lacked confidence and direction through high school and beyond.²⁰

The verdict is out on whether the “Great Recession” will last long enough to evoke similar responses among today’s adolescents (my money is on “no”). But what we do know is that, at any level, the brain’s wiring makes us more self-centered when we feel threatened. As Ann Morisy writes, “In the anxious atmosphere of dismal times, generosity of spirit shrinks and the primitive inclination to pursue self-interest increasingly dominates.”²¹ During the Great Depression, adversity caused people to pamper teenagers less and depend on them more, which gave youth confidence in their ability to overcome hardship. Today’s teenagers, however (with the exception of the very poor) have been protected from real responsibility, and are the products of highly structured childhoods. As a cohort, they act more like the young children in Elder’s studies of the Great Depression, being dependent on external structures to the point that they grow anxious without them.

In fact, despite their reputation as a generation quick to volunteer and support community causes, research shows that millennial youth actually seldom do either.²² Are they an insensitive generation, or has the survival switch been activated in their brains? When we are concerned about survival, we do not think about our neighbors, our communities, or important issues in the world. We do not think about Christ, or why he matters. In anxious times, the caretaking hormone, oxytocin, kicks in, motivating us to circle the wagons to protect our own. Our sense of entitlement (or selfishness, if you prefer) goes into overdrive, not because we are greedy but because we are *scared*. This winds up influencing our spirituality as well as our savings accounts. In anxious times we cannot take risks, so we cannot grow, which makes spiritual maturity—in fact, any form of maturity—difficult to come by. We cling to what we know, because our entire organism is focused on self-preservation.

Anxiety in American Churches: A Barrier to Christian Hope

Here is the interesting part: systems, also, grow anxious—which means churches can show the same symptoms as individuals. Most American churches are trapped in a rhetoric of decline, and each loss seems to threaten our existence. This is the kind of scenario that sends our brains into survival mode. The creative, problem-solving parts of our brains step aside and our reflexes take over. Take, for instance, churches’ responses to the growing research that identifies emerging adults—young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty—as the least religious cohort in America, strikingly absent from congregations. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that churches (and American institutions in general) have abandoned this age group, who must consequently make the most important decisions of their lives—decisions with long-lasting consequences about love, work, and ideology—without the benefit of traditions or elders to guide them.²³ Living apart from their families, schools, churches, and other established structures for community, emerging adults are left to guide one another as best they can.

When institutions are preoccupied with survival, they can scarcely think about nurturing the next generation.

Ephiphobia—the fear of teenagers—sets in. Rhonda van Dyke Colby, dean of religious life at Shenandoah University, has employed Murray Bowen’s classic theory of anxiety to analyze millennial young people, but she might as well be

talking about churches.²⁴ In a state of heightened anxiety, Bowen says, we can't access our entire brains. Our reptilian, survival brain takes over, and instinctively we choose to fight, flee, freeze, or protect. The good thing about the reptilian brain is that it is quick—but this speed comes at the expense of the thinking brain's accuracy and compassion.²⁵ When survival is at stake, there is no time for deliberation or empathy.

Carry this logic over to anxious churches. In anxious churches, our survival skills are on high alert. If your congregation is in survival mode, people are thinking of ways to fight, flee, freeze, or protect. They have difficulty reflecting and thinking critically. They lose the ability to perceive humor or paradox. With the exception of protecting their own children, they can't think creatively about young people or newcomers, or anyone else who is not currently part of the congregational system. These people are intruders, and they need to conserve their energy to survive.

Yet young people are notoriously slow to abandon hope. In fact, the age group least likely to develop generalized anxiety disorder is between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.²⁶ Young people tend to view hope as an ethic, an action as well as an attitude, which serves as a powerful antidote to dystopia. In 2007, Jonathan Reed, a twenty-year-old film studies major at Georgia State University, won second place (and a place in YouTube history) in the American Association of Retired People's "U@50" video competition, in which filmmakers under thirty were invited to describe their lives at age fifty. His video is a manifesto of youthful hope and is simply a pallendromic poem (can be read backward or forward) scrolled on a screen. To date it has received nearly fourteen million hits on YouTube and has inspired dozens of imitations. For the full effect, watch the film version,²⁷ but here are the words.

The Lost Generation

by Jonathan Reed

Forward reading:

I am part of a lost generation.
And I refuse to believe that
I can change the world
I realize this may be a shock but
“Happiness comes from within.”
Is a lie, and
“Money will make me happy.”
So in 30 years I will tell my children
They are not the most important thing in my life
My employers will know that
I have my priorities straight because
Work
Is more important than
Family
I tell you this
Once upon a time
Families stayed together
but this will not be true in my era
This is a quick fix society
Experts tell me
30 years from now, I will be celebrating
the 10th anniversary of my divorce
I do not concede that
I will live in a country of my own making
In the future
Environmental destruction will be the norm
No longer can it be said that
My peers and I care about this earth
It will be evident that
My generation is apathetic and lethargic
It is foolish to presume that
There is hope.
And all of this will be true,
Unless we choose to reverse it....

Reverse reading:

There is hope.
It is foolish to presume that
My generation is apathetic and lethargic.
It will be evident that
My peers and I care about this earth
No longer can it be said that
Environmental destruction will be the norm
In the future
I will live in a country of my own making
I do not concede that
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the
10th anniversary of my divorce
Experts tell me
This is a quick fix society
But this will not be true in my era
Families stayed together
Once upon a time
I tell you this
Family
Is more important than
Work
I have my priorities straight because
My employers will know that they
Are not the most important thing in my life
So in 30 years I will tell my children
“Money will make me happy”
Is a lie, and
Happiness comes from within
I realize this may be a shock but
I can change the world,
And I refuse to believe that
I am part of a lost generation.

Homestead Acres: An Eschatological Neighborhood

This is the kind of eschatological imagination that enabled saints like St. Francis and Clare, and leaders like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. to learn to imagine the world as God intended it, and to lean into this vision as it began to unfold. But it's an imagination anyone can develop, even if we are not saints or reformers. I grew up in an intentional community—but the surprising thing is that I was forty years old before I knew that. (In Ohio, if you are up to any good, the worst thing you can do is to tell people about it. That might look like bragging, and in the Midwest, bragging comes pretty close to being a mortal sin.) As a result, I had no idea that my neighborhood was any different than any other neighborhood in town. I obviously knew that the Mitchells next door were African American, and that two doors down lived the Lees, and that there were some mixed race families on the block. It was a fact of life in our neighborhood that people were forever borrowing tools from one another, plowing each other's driveways, and mowing each other's lawns. I thought this was how neighborhoods worked.

What my parents never told my sister or me was that Homestead Acres was established in the 1960s by a handful of people who had committed to living together as an interracial community. It wasn't until my dad died—and my mom moved because she remarried a guy down the street—that I learned that all of the tools in our garage did not belong to us. Most of the tools and the tractors in Homestead Acres were communally owned. When I read an article in the paper, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Homestead Acres “experiment,” I suddenly realized why so many people in our neighborhood had built their own homes, and why we had a community pond for fishing and swimming. I had assumed that my neighbors built their homes because they were thrifty, and because they were gifted craftsmen and women. I thought we fished and swam in a pond because it was wholesome entertainment. The reality was that, in the 1960s, many contractors wouldn't build in Homestead Acres because of its interracial stance, and in some parts of the country, pools remained closed to blacks.

In retrospect, I wish my parents had mentioned some of this along the way. On the other hand, if they had, would growing up in Homestead Acres have seemed as natural, as non-anxious? The people of Homestead Acres (many of whom were church-going Christians) simply lived as though the Reign of God were already unfolding on earth—and if not everywhere on earth, then at least in one tiny corner of Delaware, Ohio.

Becoming a Youthful Church

Without attention to the ascension, our imagination as a church grows small and hard. The Kingdom of God becomes a platitude, instead of a concrete hope we are called to enact. Yet Christians “are called not just to have hope but to perform or enact hope, here and now.”²⁸ Men and women of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? The Kingdom of God is not up there! The Kingdom of God is at hand, precisely because Christ has removed our human time limits by binding our future to his. Because the future belongs to Christ, we can worry less and laugh more. We are free to stop looking up, and to start looking around. As Studs Terkel, the American oral historian, put it: “Hope has never trickled down. It has always sprung up.”²⁹

This is where youth itself becomes instructive. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann points out that what makes us “young” is not our age. What makes youth *youth* is its wide-open sense of possibility, the confidence that death is not on the horizon, and the exhilarating assumption that the future is wide-open, and filled with limitless potential. For Christians, this sense of wide-open possibility, this confidence that death poses no threat, and that the future is a gift—this is Christ's promise to *all* Christians, not just the young ones. In other words, everyone whose future is bound to Jesus Christ is a youth. In Jesus Christ, the church is inherently youthful—because in Jesus Christ, we are unfettered by death. We are apostles of possibility, with a wide-open future in God. We are participants in the Kingdom of God, a world without end, not just someday, but now. In Moltmann's words, “It is not that the future belongs to the young...the future *makes* us young.”³⁰

Moltmann describes how, in August 2002, Pope John Paul II—eighty-two years old, ill and in great pain—visited his hometown of Cracow. He was greeted by cheers of “You are young! You are young!” The pope smiled and denied it, but the crowd was right. For Christians, what makes us young is not age, but hope:

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted,
But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30–31)³¹

Looking up: Ministry’s Occupational Hazard

The eschatological message of Pixar is that things are looking *Up*. It is true that the image of “looking up” is a powerful one in scripture as well, as the psalmist sings, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1). But straining to see God’s future can never be a permanent posture for Christians. Before long, we begin to feel a crick in the neck. It is easy to convince ourselves that, if we just look hard enough, pray hard enough, stay true enough, some answer from heaven will appear—maybe in the form of a new volunteer, maybe in the form of a pastor, maybe in the form of a youth minister—but if we just persevere *long enough*, God will send somebody from on high to fix things down here.

But if that were all there were to the gospel, we would be a stiff-necked people. The ascension separates us from the incarnation as Christ disappears from the human plane. Anxiety is an understandable reaction when we cannot see God’s direct involvement in our world, and when all we can see of the future is fog. Yet the ascension story reminds us to stop fretting about what lies ahead, and to live as though God’s reign has already been inaugurated. Eschatology does not predict the future. It frees us from anxiety about the future—because in Christ, the future is secure.

Advent: Living Like Pregnant People

We serve an anxious church, in an anxious culture that cultivates anxious teenagers. If we marinate in this anxiety long enough, we become anxious church leaders too. But what if we stopped feeding the beast? What if we began to live as people who believe what we preach—that Jesus is Lord, that his life, death and resurrection changed the rules of the game of life, and that the Kingdom of God is at hand? What if our job is not to convince young people that Jesus wins, but to live as though he already has? What if the church were less of an ad agency for Jesus than a community that embodies the world as God intends it to be? What if youth ministry were a laboratory for developing eschatological imaginations—a place for imagining and embodying God’s intentions for the world?

The Christian community has a model for developing such an imagination in an unlikely place: Advent. Some theologians are disillusioned with Advent, put off by the season’s cheesy optimism marketed by advertisers through outlets like Hallmark and Hasbro. Yet Advent is a season of hope, and is well-suited for nurturing Christian eschatology. In fact, a case can be made that twenty-first-century Christians are living in one prolonged season of Advent. Advent is the season the contemporary church is in.

Why? Because Advent is a season of pregnancy—a season of enormous hope and expectation, of course, but also a season of waiting, and anxiety, and pain, and risk. New life is coming, but it’s not here yet, and our job is to get ready. There is no cheap hope in pregnancy. You can’t pass it off as though it doesn’t change you, or as if suffering isn’t involved. With great hope comes the risk of great disappointment, for new life is fragile. It often struggles, and sometimes it emerges in ways we don’t expect, or wouldn’t wish for. But in new life there is also joy, and, as Paul reminded the Thessalonians, joy in the

church is a sign of the Lord's coming: "For who is our hope, or joy, or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you?" (I Thess. 2:19)

Advent helps us reframe the anxiety facing the contemporary American church. Yes, our numbers are declining. Yes, our forms are shifting. Yes, Christian communities continue to hemorrhage their youth. Yes, our leadership is in crisis. All of this is true. But what if decline is not a bad thing? What if decline may *save* the church? If, as a church, we have veered into anxious self-centeredness or therapeutic individualism, maybe what we're seeing in our current ecclesial condition is a market correction. Contractions may not be bad; in fact, contractions are *necessary* to new birth. What's more, when we feel these contractions, we know that new life is on the way.³²

Youth ministers can be midwives for such a time as this. Our ministries serve as a sign of God's wide-open future, enacted by young people simply because they are young. Advent provides child-nurturers with another metaphor as well: pregnancy. If the church has involuntarily entered a new season of Advent, then evoking an eschatological imagination in the faith community means that we need to learn how to live like pregnant people. That means several things:

1. *Wait.*

The most obvious thing you do when you're pregnant is wait. As Advent people, we wait. While we wait, we nourish the vision for the Kingdom of God that Christ has planted in us.

Waiting is not doing nothing. During this period of waiting, we are bathing this embryo of new life, this church about to be reborn, in prenatal care. We must tend our own souls, so, the Word of God has good soil to grow in. Prenatal care doesn't always feel holy or beautiful; sometimes the vitamins are hard to swallow, and the ultrasound gel is squishy and gross. But just because we cannot see Jesus at work during this incubation period does not mean that he is not multiplying life within us. So we keep hope alive, even when God is invisible to us. We remember the rabbi in Auschwitz who, day in and day out, wailed at God's absence in the death camps. Yet every Friday at sundown, the wailing stopped. The rabbi would say: "Now we must light the candles. Now is the time to pray."

2. *Name our anxieties.*

New life is scary. There be dragons here—dragons of doubt, disillusionment, uncertainty. So it is even more important that we tell the story of Christ during Advent, mostly because we are telling it to ourselves as well as to the young people in our care. As Jacques Ellul put it, we do not need a theology of hope. We need *hope*.³³

Naming our ecclesial anxieties also means telling the Christian story without rationalizing it or apologizing for it, and certainly without shying away from the parts that bother us. Christian history is filled with advice for addressing the dragons of spiritual anxiety, but none of it advises avoiding them. In 1738, a young John Wesley, already an Anglican priest but in the throes of spiritual doubt, asked his friend, Moravian leader Peter Bohler, whether he should cease preaching, given the depth of his anxiety. "By no means," Bohler said. "But what can I preach?" agonized Wesley—to which Bohler famously replied: "Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith."³⁴

3. *Paint the nursery.*

Eventually, pregnant people must make room for new life to impinge upon our existing reality. We must lean into the fact that new life is on the way. In other words, we have to paint the nursery. At some point, new life must stop being an intellectual possibility and start being an actualized one. We must start enacting God's hope in the world, coloring human encounters with the Spirit of Life—even if there are times, maybe most of the time, when we will be disappointed, and when we will disappoint ourselves.

A lot of people go into youth ministry—and I count myself among them—partly because we love teenagers, and partly because youth ministry is one of the few places we see real hope for ecclesial change. People who work with teenagers are an irrationally hopeful breed, and because youth ministry serves as the “research and development” arm of the church, it is a place that both generates and test-drives new forms of church life in today’s culture.

The questions youth ministers wrestle with today are mere years away from seizing the entire church. Questions like:

- *What does relational ministry look like in a world of ubiquitous connection?*
- *What is the difference between “pastoring” someone and “friending” them?*
- *What makes small face-to-face Christian communities matter, when teenagers are already networked online with thousands of friends who already share their most intimate hopes, dreams, and fears?*
- *Can the church offer a richer slice of reality than a virtual one, a taste of communion beyond community?*³⁵

These are the kinds of questions youth ministries must answer every day, and very soon they will be questions that the *entire* church must answer. When that happens, the go-to people in the Christian community will be those who work with teenagers.

Imagineering the Kingdom of God: Lessons from Improv Everywhere

There are many metaphors that describe the role of the youth minister in a pregnant church. We are ecclesial lab technicians, vocational “test rats,” and maybe even pastoral “crash dummies”—pick your image—as we learn, by trial-and-error, to represent Christ in a Web 2.0 world that young people will not let us avoid. Perhaps a more apt description comes from Disney: youth ministers serve as the Christian community’s “imagineers.” It is our job, to the best of our ability, to imagine the world the way God imagines it. It is our job, to the best of our ability, to treat young people as God made them to be, instead of as the people they have become. It is our job, to the best of our ability, to live alongside young people as though we believe what we preach—as though the Kingdom of God, strange as it sounds, really is at hand.

This is why it is not enough for Christians to have hope; we must enact hope, in every corner of the earth, in every crevice of human life. Pope Benedict XIV makes the case eloquently:

The Christian message was not only “informative” but “performative.” That means: The Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.³⁶

In fact, what drove this point home for me was not a church, but a group of young adults whose sole purpose is to have fun by inserting a new variable into a situation that catalyzes a transformation. Improv Everywhere is a New York-based improvisation troupe that invites ordinary people into “missions” that enact a reality that does not yet exist—until the actors insert a small but noticeable change into a present situation.³⁷ One of the most famous stunts involved 200 “agents” (volunteers) who entered Grand Central Station and simultaneously “froze” on cue. For schedule-crazed New Yorkers, the stunt was a humorous, disorienting masterpiece. After a few moments, the agents “unfroze” and everyone went about business as usual.

I became acquainted with Improv Everywhere by accident. I caught a video of a free wedding reception, thrown for a random couple as they exited a courthouse in New York City.³⁸ “Do you want a free wedding reception?” a man, dressed for church, asked the couple. And the bride said, “Sure.” The man escorted the couple to a park across the street where a tent was waiting with bridesmaids and groomsmen, in full regalia, along with a wedding cake, a dance floor, a band, guests, and

even presents. As the bride and groom laughed, danced, and cut the cake, the change in their expressions—from skeptical curiosity to unbridled joy and appreciation—was unmistakable. “What church does this?” I wondered, anxious to discover the community that had come up with such an incredible ministry.

Then I learned that the wedding reception was not the ministry of a church, but a stunt sponsored by Improv Everywhere. I was crestfallen...and a little angry. Why *hadn't* a church thought of doing that? Why were we Christians leaving transformation to young people who just want “to see what would happen” if they introduce extravagant hope into ordinary human situations? These young people, of course, gave no thought to participating in God's reign; they would not recognize the parallels between my job and theirs. And yet they were on a mission of hope. And it occurred to me that they might be better at fulfilling their mission than I was at fulfilling mine.

The Best Game Ever

Fun, of course, goes a long way toward dissipating anxiety. And working with teenagers offers ample opportunities for playfulness. Yet without the gospel to inform such play, Christian hope goes unproclaimed, and, in some cases, it is clearly absent (Improv Everywhere's “pantless subway ride” comes to mind). Yet Improv Everywhere has captured something that churches have forgotten: the ability to enter a situation, assuming that there is a different game to be played in human time than the one that is scripted. My favorite Improv Everywhere mission is called “The Best Game Ever,” in which several dozen agents infiltrate a Little League game, unannounced, and treat it like the World Series. The “fans” cheer for each player by name, make team posters, dress like mascots, and broadcast plays on a Jumbo-tron. Even the Goodyear blimp (“Go Mudcats!”) makes an appearance, coming out of the clouds over the game. At first, players and parents greet the hoopla with disbelief, but soon the boys are thinking of themselves as champions. I am willing to wager that the Kingdom of God is like that: every player feels like a champion, because this is how God views each and every one of us.

Jesus calls us to be a youthful church, not because we are young, but because we are his. Nothing is more important for a youthful church than developing an eschatological imagination, which allows us to wait with confidence, to name our anxieties without fear, and to make room for new life and new possibilities as Christ works, unseen, to usher us into an unknown future. Young people's sense of open-ended possibility, their candid rejection of the fear of death, remind us that youthfulness is built into Christian eschatology. It is not age that makes us young. The future makes us young, and the future belongs to Christ. Fear not.

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. E.C. Hoskyns; London: Oxford University Press, 6th ed., 1933), 314.
2. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, expanded edition, V. Flieger and D. A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins), 2008.
3. Bettelheim maintained that fairy tales help us overcome the “existential predicament” that unites us as a species—i.e., formless, nameless anxieties about death, abandonment, and meaninglessness—by giving those fears concrete form, allowing children to master them symbolically before they have to confront them personally. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage), 1989. Other developmental theorists have developed similar theses; developmental theorist Martin Lubetsky notes that telling fairy tales “is one way to elicit a child’s inner thoughts and frustrations, reduce anxiety, and gain mastery over developmental tasks” (“The Magic of Fairy Tales: Psychodynamic and Developmental Perspectives,” *Child Psychiatry and Human Development* [June 1989] 19, 245). Bettelheim’s scholarly reputation has been called into question since his suicide in 1990, though most critics agree that *The Uses of Enchantment* remains a useful example of psychoanalytic insight. Still, as Australian educator James Parson points out, parents should be judicious about taking Bettelheim’s verdict on fairy tales to heart: “Presumably, Bettelheim himself was told such tales as a child. It did not stop him from suffering acute depression all his life or from committing suicide.” (“Fairy Tales and the Existential Predicament,” http://parentingmethods.suite101.com/article.cfm/fairy_tales_and_the_existential_predicament [accessed June 29, 2010]).
4. Joseph Pearce, “The Catholicism of *The Lord of the Rings*,” in John G. West, *Celebrating Middle Earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilization* (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2002), 88; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 147.
5. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: HarperOne), 1977.
6. This is in spite of a renaissance of academic interest in the subject, starting in the 1960s with Jurgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* and continuing today.
7. I am borrowing this phrase, with permission, from youth pastor and cartoonist Cuyler Black; see www.inheritthemirth.com.
8. I am retaining the term “Kingdom of God” for historic and literary reasons, though I admit it can invite problems in a gender-sensitive culture. The gender-neutral phrase “reign of God” could be substituted for the “Kingdom of God” throughout this essay.
9. Ann Morisy, *Bothered and Bewildered: Enacting Hope in Troubled Times* (New York: Continuum, 2009). I read Morisy’s book after delivering this lecture, but the parallels are striking.
10. Cf. the excellent British Christian spirituality site, “Re:jesus,” www.rejesus.co.uk/spirituality/celtic_spirituality/index.html (accessed July 5, 2010).
11. See Morisy, 21.
12. 2004 “Beliefs and Values Survey,” cited by Albert Winseman, “Eternal Destinations: Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell” Gallup Commentary (May 25, 2004), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11770/eternal-destinations-americans-believe-heaven-hell.aspx> (accessed July 5, 2010).
13. Results from an ABC News Poll, reported by Dalia Sussman, “Poll: Elbow Room No Problem in Heaven,” ABC News (December 20, 2005), <http://abcnews.go.com/US/Beliefs/story?id=1422658> (accessed July 5, 2010).
14. Christian Smith with Patricia Snelling, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154.
15. Don Peck, “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America,” *The Atlantic* (March 2010), 9, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2010/03/how-a-new-jobless-era-will-transform-america/7919/ (accessed May 24, 2010).
16. Peck, 5.
17. Heidi Shierholz, cited by Peck, 5.
18. Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263.
19. Byron R. Johnson, “Religion and Delinquency: A Systematic Review of the Literature,” presentation for the Coordinating Council for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Washington, DC (December 5, 2008).
20. Kate Zernike, “Generation OMG,” *Week in Review, The New York Times* (March 7, 2009); also see Glen Elder, *Children of the Depression*, anniv. edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 1998.
21. Morisy, 13.
22. Smith with Snelling, *Souls in Transition*, 67.
23. See Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2007.
24. Rhonda van Dyke Colby, unpublished D.Min. thesis, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC (2000).
25. Peter L. Steinke, “Changing Emotional Systems,” *Congregations* (Spring 2004), cited by Morisy, 75.
26. William Meek, “Generalized Anxiety Disorder Prevalence Rates Based on Age,” About.com Guide, <http://gad.about.com/od/prevalencerates/a/prevage.htm> (accessed July 6, 2010). Information cited from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association), 2000; also D.H. Barlow, ed. *Clinical Handbook of Psychological Disorders, 3rd ed.* (New York: Guilford Press), 2001.

27. Jonathan Reed, "The Lost Generation," www.youtube.com/watch?v=42E2fAWM6rA (accessed July 5, 2010).
28. Morisy, 18.
29. Studs Terkel, *Hope Dies Last* (New York: The New Press, 2003).
30. Jurgen Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 27.
31. Moltmann, 28.
32. Morisy refers to a similar phenomenon in her J-curve analysis, in which decline must be anticipated and prepared for as an antecedent to growth. Morisy, 41, 60.
33. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkins (New York: Seabury, 1973), 89.
34. John Wesley, *The Heart of John Wesley's Journal*, eds. P.L. Parker and A. Birrell (New York: Fleming H. Revell), n.d., 35-36.
35. These questions were posed by K.C. Dean and Ron Foster in *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul-Tending for Youth Ministry, revised ed.* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2009), 17.
36. "Spe Salvi," Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XIV, Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2007, par. 4. Cited by Ann Morisy, 18.
37. Wikipedia describes Improv Everywhere as a "comedic performance group" based in New York City; the Improv Everywhere web site (<http://improveverywhere.com>) describes the group as a long-form improvisation troupe whose mission is to "cause scenes of chaos and joy in public places." Created in August of 2001 by Charlie Todd, Improv Everywhere has executed over 100 "missions" involving tens of thousands of "undercover agents," usually random citizens pulled together for the sake of executing a short stunt. They have been featured on numerous media outlets and recently completed a public service stunt for the New York Public Library based on *Ghostbusters*.
38. Thanks to the Rev. Stephen Cady, who sent me the link. All Improv Everywhere "missions" are captured on YouTube (www.youtube.com/user/ImprovEverywhere).