

Now Is the Time

by Rev. Durrell Watkins, MA, MDiv
Sunshine Cathedral, Lent 5 (10:30 AM Service)
John 12.31-32

You may not know much about Emma Curtis Hopkins, but in the late 19th century, Emma Curtis Hopkins was a powerful figure in American spirituality. She died in 1925, living most of her life before the global conflict of World War 1, and she died before the devastating Great Depression, before the horrifying Holocaust, the nuclear demonstration of World War 2, and long before the viral menace AIDS would terrorize our planet.

These events of the 20th century have taught us that our choices impact others and that the choices of others impact us, that we are part of a universal web of existence that includes all life and that in reality we are an interdependent collective rather than just a bunch of individuals sharing the same space.

So Emma Curtis Hopkins wasn't a product of our time; she wasn't shaped by the realities that we have known. She was influenced by a science that viewed the universe as a mechanism and by a philosophy that stressed rugged individualism. She was also influenced by a new religious movement called Christian Science.

Christian Science founder, Mary Baker Eddy believed that the healing miracles of the bible actually occurred...liberal Protestants would suggest that the miracles were allegorical, but Mary Baker Eddy thought they occurred in history and that they could be repeated if we could understand the formula that made them possible. She thought she had come to understand the method and she called the healing method Christian Science.

Eddy believed, as did Emma after her, that the discovery of the method that could make healing miracles possible in our own day was in fact the parousia, or, Second Coming. Christ had returned in the replication of Jesus' healing miracles. So, in their thinking, Christian Science was a philosophy that when effectively applied amounted to the return of Christ on earth.

Emma Curtis Hopkins would eventually part company with institutional Christian Science and her thinking would go on to include the insights of Eastern religions.

In a time when many diseases didn't have medical cures, when women couldn't vote, when travel was difficult and higher education was considered a privilege for the elite, Emma Curtis Hopkins offered people the power of hope. She taught people that they could choose their thoughts and their attitudes and by learning spiritual principles they could empower themselves and lift themselves above their circumstances, their pasts, or their station in life.

To be such an independent and influential woman in her time seemed to offer some credibility to her message. And, of course, there were the people she taught who claimed to experience benefits in their lives from her teachings.

In fact, just as Mary Baker Eddy influenced Emma Hopkins, Hopkins influenced the founders of the Unity School of Christianity, the founder of Religious Science, and the founders of Divine Science.

Later, a Divine Science minister, Emmet Fox, would influence Methodist turned Dutch Reformed minister Norman Vincent Peale who is of course famous for his Power of Positive Thinking. And Peale's positive thinking has had an impact on people within and beyond Christianity.

Because of her profound influence on so many schools of thought and on the people who would become the leaders of positive thinking and personal empowerment movements, Emma Curtis Hopkins has been called the teacher of teachers.

And though most of her writings predate women's suffrage, World Wars, and AIDS, many of her ideas, even if filtered through Twelve Step Programs, Word of Faith churches, or Positive Thinking writers like Peale and Louise Hay, have proven helpful and comforting to people facing challenges in their lives.

She tells us that it is possible for us to see everything as pointing to the divine presence in which we live. And if we live within a divine presence, then comfort is always possible. Hope is always possible. Courage is always possible. Even in the midst of apparent chaos, there are blessings, opportunities, there is a divine presence to hold us when we are weak, to affirm us when we doubt ourselves, to share our tears, and to remind us that our sacred value cannot be dimmed nor denied by the troubles at hand.

And just maybe, there is a way out of the chaos; but come what may, we are not now nor will we ever be separated from the love of God.

Well, almost two thousand years before Emma Curtis Hopkins became the teacher of teachers, there was another great teacher who lived in Palestine . Of course, I'm referring to Jesus.

Jesus seemed to know that he lived within a divine presence, and that the presence also lived within him. He seemed so aware of his comm-union with the divine, that people believed they encountered the divine by being near him.

Jesus somehow pointed people to the divine spark within them. The light of God shining through him touched and uplifted people in such a way they felt joy even while their land was occupied; they felt hope, even while oppression seemed to flourish. They felt empowered even though the systems of power had intentionally excluded them. And when someone like that touches your life in such a dramatic way, you feel the need to talk about it.

So, Jesus' friends and followers, and those who learned of Jesus from his friends and followers did talk about the difference he made in their lives, the hope he added to their lives, the dignity he restored to them even when the storms of life raged against them. They told stories not only to honor him, but to let others know that the light within him continues to shine, and it still helps us find the light within us that will always shine.

St. Paul told stories in his way, using the idioms and metaphors that he preferred. The writers of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke told stories in their way, using the idioms and metaphors and symbols that they each preferred. Likewise, the writer of John's gospel tells stories in his own way for the benefit of his own audience, using the literary tools he preferred.

These writers don't agree in their details; they don't see Jesus in the same way. Our churches have often tried to synchronize the biblical narratives as if they were written at one time by a single author with a narrow point of view, but a careful reading of the scriptures will not allow that. The writers were diverse in their experiences and in their opinions and in their writing styles. And those who have read these sacred texts have been diverse in their interpretations of those texts from the very beginning.

But what they agree on is that there was life that lived among us that was so full of the presence and the love that we call God that it called us to be more than we realized we were; it called us to hope when hope seemed ridiculous.

It called us to not give up even after our defeat seemed certain.
The writers agreed that in Jesus they discovered a way of being in communion with God, a way of being so authentically human that it felt divine!
And they wanted to share that experience with as many people as possible.

Our theologies differ; they always have. They always will. Catholics differ from Eastern Orthodox. Eastern Orthodox differ from Anglicans. High Church Anglicans differ from Low Church Anglicans. Anglicans differ from Methodists. Methodists differ from Presbyterians. Presbyterians differ from Lutherans. Lutherans differ from Baptists. And people within each of these traditions differ from one another.

And in MCC, we come from many of those traditions. We differ from all of them; and we differ from one another in the ways that we differ from our former churches. That's the way it's always been.

Still, for all the differences...we all seek meaning.
We all deserve hope.
We all want to live with dignity.
We all need compassion.
And somehow, in some way, we find those needs being met as we look to Jesus.

I don't see Jesus the way the writer of John's gospel did; but that's OK...neither did Mark. Neither did Matthew.

But like all of them, I do find in Jesus a model that reminds me of my sacred value, and that calls me to want to live into that revelation.

And as I do, I'll help others do the same...and so will you. That's what we mean when we say we are sharing the light with the world. And it may be what John means when he has Jesus say, "Now is the time."

Now is the time for the prince of this world...greed, violence, colonization, war, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia...the ills that so often seem in control...now is the time for all that to be cast out...at least out of us.

And if we will be intentionally progressive, positive, and practical, following Jesus' example, we will be lifted up and we will lift up others as well.

Whether we hear it from Emma Curtis Hopkins or from the writer of the Gospel of John, there is a message of universal hope and empowerment for us; it is needed, and now is the time to embrace it.

This is the good news. Amen.

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***Now is the time for hope.
Now is the time for courage.
Now is the time for love.
Now is the time for forgiveness.
Now is the time for healing.
Now is the time to embrace my Good.
And so I will.
And so I do.
And so it is!***