

Respair: The Return of Hope After a Period of Despair<sup>1</sup> [OR Hope Tells the Truth]  
Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, and Mark 1:4-11 for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday  
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on January 10, 2021

A few months ago, I noticed a word popping up on social media. Might have been late September or so when I first saw it on Twitter. Giving a word of the day, word expert Susan Dent tweeted about “respair” which means “the return of hope after a period of despair or to have hope again.”<sup>2</sup> While I was isolating with Covid, I started searching the word respair on the interwebs and found five more citations that I started saving to a document. But the citations were still only social media sites and writer’s blogs and I couldn’t verify online that it wasn’t simply made up. It certainly wasn’t in my unabridged dictionary. What’s an enterprising lover of words to do? Why, give a shout out to my neighbor who is also an English professor. She texted me a photo of the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry for “respair.” Sure enough, it’s an obscure and rare word from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. A word that emerged following the 14<sup>th</sup> century Plague pandemic responsible for the death of over a hundred million people worldwide. A word that never quite caught on.

Why does any of this background matter? Because I know that I’m not the only one thinking about hope these days. Case-in-point is Pastor Ann’s sermon last Sunday that ended with a gorgeous statement about the convergence of hope. It’s clear that us pastor-types are giving hope some thought. Although, again, I know we’re not the only ones. In preparation for today’s sermon, I searched “respair” one more time and it has exploded. Twitter and the rest of the internet is full of references to respair at the turn of the calendar year to 2021.<sup>3</sup> People calling for it to be the word of the year and talking about why it resonates for them. Respair’s connection with an emergence from despair is an important distinction. It pushes against our instinct for the unhelpful optimism that calls for one more drink to numb reality and a pair of rose-colored glasses to blur it.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Dent, Tweet, June 14, 2017. “I’ve just discovered the beautiful word ‘respair’ (15th century), and it feels like we need it today: fresh hope; a recovery from despair.”

[https://twitter.com/susie\\_dent/status/874919621375275009](https://twitter.com/susie_dent/status/874919621375275009)

<sup>2</sup> Susan Dent is the author of a new book about words, *Word Perfect: Etymological Entertainment for Every Day of the Year* (John Murray (Publishers), UK, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Friedman. *Fritinancy: Word of the Week: Respair*. December 21, 2020.

[https://nancyfriedman.typepad.com/away\\_with\\_words/2020/12/word-of-the-week-respair.html](https://nancyfriedman.typepad.com/away_with_words/2020/12/word-of-the-week-respair.html)

Respair builds on the reality that exists without a need to negate it or erase it or distract us from it.

It might not surprise you to hear that our Bible readings today have parallels to building on realities that already exist. In Genesis, a wind from God moved in the darkness, across the formless void and over the untamed waters. With a word, God created light that was good and gave names to Night AND Day. Darkness remains and does not overcome the light. God does not toss darkness out. God moves in the darkness, names it, expands and builds on it.

In the reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is baptized by John in the river Jordan. Some scholars argue that one of the tasks of the Gospel writers was to explain the relationship between John and Jesus in a way that made common ground possible between their distinct groups of followers. After all, John's following was huge. Mark's gospel says that, "...people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." In Mark, as in the other gospels, we see John's ministry expand forward to include Jesus and Jesus' ministry loop backwards to include John. Jesus builds on John's ministry and would not have been the same without it.

And finally, in the reading from the book of Acts, Paul finds some disciples who were called believers but hadn't yet heard of the Holy Spirit. They'd been baptized by John the Baptist. Paul acknowledges John's baptism of repentance that expands forward by pointing believers towards Jesus. The disciples were then baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and received the Holy Spirit from Paul - another layer built by the Holy Spirit on what was already happening.

This isn't to say that everything happens for a reason – at least that's not something I say or believe. As the child of a father who lost a mental battle with schizophrenia and who became alcoholic, violent, and eventually homeless after my mother escaped him with the five of us kids, it's difficult for me to believe that the reason for Dad's break with reality is of God when what we really needed was our compassionate, brilliant, and loving Dad. What I've come to believe in these intervening years, is that God helps me tell the truth of what happened to Dad and what happened to us with as much truth and compassion as is possible without the painful layers of shame. Our family found respair, our hope renewed out of despair, out of the pain and truth of what happened to all of us. We don't

sugar coat it. We talk about it, get therapy for it, and find our paths to healing from it. Even writing that down feels like respair out of my experience.

As of early October, there were almost 300,000 excess deaths in the United States recorded by the CDC over similar periods in previous years.<sup>4</sup> According to the CDC, these deaths are directly and indirectly attributable to COVID-19. We've lost members of our congregation to COVID and to the challenges that COVID creates for receiving care in unrelated health crises. Some of us have lost coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family. If you are someone who believes that COVID deaths are inaccurately over-reported, then an argument still must be made as to why so many more people seem to be dying in 2020 over previous years. Our country has long loved conspiracy theories. It seems to be part our society's system DNA. But I generally agree with Occam's Razor which is the theory that the simplest explanation is often the correct one.<sup>5</sup> There's a worldwide pandemic and people we know and love along with far too many strangers are dying from it or reeling from its effects. While there is reason for hope as the vaccine is distributed, our losses and those of many others must be named and grieved for their painful reality or they simply fold into hiding places that require more alcohol, more relational numbness, and more political smokescreens to keep them hidden. These attempts to distract us and dull the pain are a recipe for despair.

God invites us as the church, as people of the Spirit to tell the truth about despair and shaken faith without shame. There are very few among us who haven't felt those things in our lifetimes much less in the last year. Yet resiliency, grit, joy, and laughter are also in evidence over the last year and as we enter 2021. God builds on the common ground of our real, diverse experiences to bring respair out of the waters of our baptism. We are promised radical grace and reckless compassion that free us to confess despair and it's causes, while our wounds receive the air and light they need to heal and to experience respair. Jesus offers us this renewed hope with every breath of our fragile, flawed bodies living the gift of life as people of the Spirit. Thanks be to God and amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Lauren M. Rossen, PhD; Amy M. Branum, PhD; Farida B. Ahmad, MPH; Paul Sutton, PhD; Robert N. Anderson, PhD. "Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19, by Age and Race and Ethnicity – United States, January 26–October 3, 2020." Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Weekly Morbidity and Mortality Report. October 23, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Josh Clark, "How Occam's Razor Works." <https://science.howstuffworks.com/innovation/scientific-experiments/occams-razor.htm>