

## **“COVID, Climate Change, the Cycle of the Seasons”**

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online for First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Greek poet Hesiod, who lived sometime in the 800s BCE, wrote an epic poem we now call *Works and Days*. In that work is an early telling of the story of Pandora and the Jar.

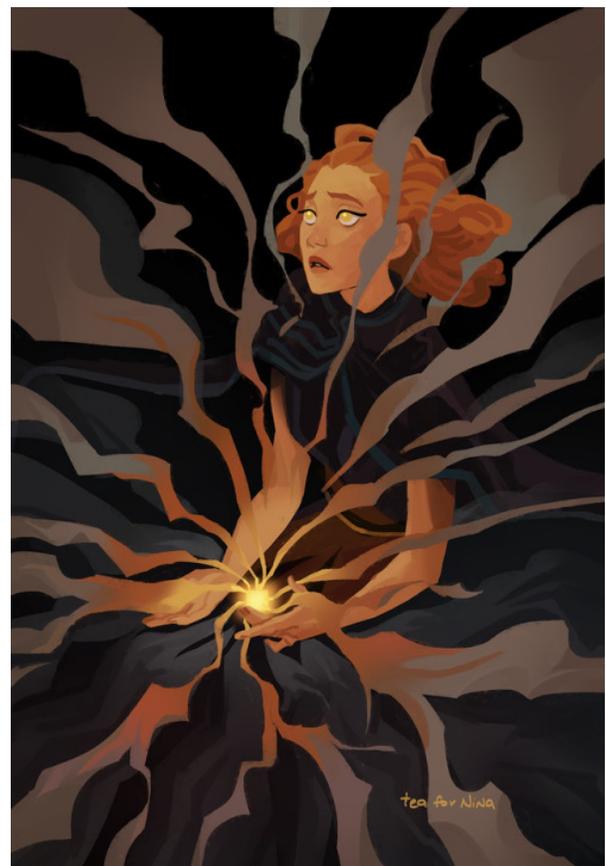
It goes like this: Once there were a pair of gods, twins—Prometheus (“forethought”) and Epimetheus (“afterthought”—or “hindsight”) and these two gods were the helpers of humankind.

As a matter of fact, Prometheus created humanity out of clay, and then, seeing that humanity needed culture in order to thrive, Prometheus brought the secret of fire to humanity . . . which very much perturbed the chief god, Zeus.

And the other twin, Epimetheus . . . well . . . his hindsight was, as we say, 20/20.

Being very put out that Prometheus had given the secret of fire to human beings, Zeus decided to punish Prometheus eternally. Prometheus was chained to a rock. And each day an eagle—symbol of Zeus—would sweep down and eat Prometheus’ liver, and each night Prometheus’ liver would grow back again, only to be eaten the next day. Forever.

So you can see how put out Zeus was.



But this revenge wasn't enough for Zeus. He wanted to punish humankind as well. You see, at that time, it was a Golden Age. The people of the earth all lived in harmony with one another. No one ever did a day's work. Everything they wanted came to humanity without even trying.

Zeus did not like it that Prometheus' creations were living almost as well as the gods. That's when Zeus hatched a plan involving Prometheus' twin brother Epimetheus.

Now, it's one of those mysteries of the gods just why Zeus couldn't have just done all this himself, but Zeus went to Hephaestus, the great craftsman of the gods, and asked him to make another sort of human out of clay. A human like the female gods. And so Hephaestus did. And they called her Pandora.

Now, Zeus went around Mt. Olympus, dwelling place the gods, carrying a jar.

Zeus asked each god to throw into the jar the absolute, most horrible thing the god could think of: poverty; plague; starvation; aging; jealousy; greed; murder; war; death.

Zeus took all these things, put them in the jar, and sealed it up with a tight lid.

Then Zeus handed Pandora the jar (not a box, as appears in later stories). "Go down to Epimetheus who dwells on the earth," Zeus said, "and hand him this jar."

And so she did, and when the two met, Pandora handed Epimetheus her jar and said, "Here, a gift. Open it!"

Now, someone like Prometheus, with forethought, might have suspected a trick, but someone with hindsight, like Epimetheus, just said "thanks" and opened the jar . . .

And out poured all the evils that human beings suffer from: poverty; plague; starvation; aging; jealousy; greed; murder; war; death.

But one thing did not fall out of the jar. It rolled around and stuck to the lip of the jar and didn't fall out. In Greek it's called *elpis*. The English word is "hope." Hope did not fall out of the jar . . .

Elpis (Ἔλπις) is the personification and spirit of hope. Now think about that for a moment: poverty; plague; starvation; aging; jealousy; greed; murder; war; death . . . what was Elpis, Hope, doing hanging out with that lot?

Could it be that “hope” is an evil to human beings?

## **1. Welcome Equinox! (And the bad news)**

I’ll get back to that jar, but first I want to say “welcome, Autumnal Equinox!” We celebrate the seasons here at First Unitarian Society. We mark out the ancient seasonal points and we take stock and reflect.

And we’ve got a lot to reflect on just now. It’s election season in the US, in case you haven’t noticed.

And it sure feels as if Pandora’s jar has been dumped over our heads like the good ol’ “Gatorade shower” that sports coaches get.

We’re nearing 200,000 Americans dead due to COVID.

The Western fires were so intense, the smoke even darkened the skies here in Minnesota. We could at times smell the smoke. Whole towns have been turned to ash and precious forests are gone for a generation.

And how about that hurricane season? Rain like that is devastating. I remember being in a hurricane on the Gulf coast. The rain was so heavy, water began pouring out of those little cracks that you don’t even notice between the curb sections. In that one, the ground was so saturated that coffins began to pop up out of the ground and float down the streets.

Then there’s drought. And we recently saw the hottest temperature ever recorded on the planet—130 degrees

Soon, half of Americans will be facing the facts of climate change—an alteration in their quality of life—less water, more heat.

The city of New York is on the hook for 100 billion dollars worth of walls to keep the water out.

By 2060, 13 million Americans will likely have fled coastal regions.

One in three Republicans now see climate change as a threat to national security.

We have an upcoming election that is clearly going to hinge on that three percent of Americans who are euphemistically called "low information voters."

Welcome to 2020 where we still have profoundly stupid leaders who can say, "I don't think science knows..." .

That's why dentists across the US are reporting an epidemic of broken teeth . . . due to grindings.

Where's the hope? Is it stuck on the lip of Pandora's jar?

## **TWO: Shaking Elpis out of the jar**

If we've learned one thing in this past year, it is that the unthinkable can become thinkable real quick . . .

As those leaves turn, it's time that we take time to reflect as the ancient festivals taught us to reflect on the simple fact that we reap what we sow.

The cold and quiet winter is coming, which here in Minnesota is not a threat . . . it's a promise.

What have recent events taught us? What are the opportunities in the chaos?

First, let's look again at what the ancients were saying about hope. Poets and philosophers have wrangled through the millennia about why Elpis remains in Pandora's jar. Remember: that jar was filled with bad things, not good things.

It could be that Hesiod and the ancient Greeks saw hope as the ultimate evil. Much in line with Karl Marx's insistence that religion is the "opiate of the people." Marx thought

that religion keeps the oppressed stunned and complacent. Unable to grasp their human agency and right the wrongs of society.

The poet Hesiod perhaps saw hope in the same way. Hope as the key to human agency. Or at least keyed to human agency.

That Elpis stayed in that jar is all that is saving humanity.

Let's think about hope.



Hope is not a calculation of probability. That's what we call optimism: "I hope it won't rain tomorrow." Well, have you checked out weather.com? Are the chances 50/50? 80/20?

"I'm optimistic that it won't rain tomorrow. Though the chance of rain is 60%." You see the difference . . .

Here's something that is NOT a probability calculation: "I live in hope that the United States will become a just nation."

The opposite of hope is not despair. It is fear.

We fear that soon 13 million Americans will have will become climate refugees as they flee coastal regions. We fear that 1.5 billion people on our planet will be climate refugees in the next thirty years.

The Roman Stoic Seneca argued that both fear and hope are pointless predictions of the future. Both hope and fear pull us out of the present moment—now: the only time we can actually chose action.

### **Three: Hope is Commitment**

Here's the thing that fools us about hope: it can be an emotion, can't it?

Hope can be a little welling up of some warm feeling. But that makes hope much like a pain in a big toe, doesn't it? It just happens . . . . Sure, we can call that warm little emotion hope. But when we think of hope in this way, we abandon responsibility for being hopeful.

Where's the human agency in that? Where's the plan of action that will result from that?

Where is the path to fixing the issue?

The pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty said that hope is not a prediction but a way to engage in discussing the future.

Hope expresses a commitment to a future.

Who are we responsible to and what are we called to do?

Humanism is life living life. Life living into liberation. Into understanding. Into freedom. Into responsibility.

Those are our commitments. "Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead."

Hope is not a feeling. It is a commitment to act.

We've got to take Elpis out of Pandora's jar and take it by its ears and say, "let's go get this done."

The apostle Paul was trained in Stoic thought. He knew what hope meant. In 1 Corinthians 13:13 he wrote his most enduring lines:

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Now this has been repeated so many times it sounds like treacle. But Paul saw those three things as hard: faith without doubt isn't faith; love according to Paul isn't something you "fall into." We're talking about loving your neighbor who listens to Nine Inch Nails day and night.

We're talking about loving your enemies. And we're talking about hope in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

But Paul was talking a kind of hope that assumed that Jesus would come back to earth and fix things . . . any day now.

Unlike Paul, what we humanists are talking about is that none of this is going to drop from the sky. It's up to us. Only human beings can fix human problems.

Hope only works if you work it.

## **Conclusion**

Hesiod was making that stuff up, you know. There never was a Golden Age when money grew on trees and the chickens wandered around plucked and ready for the oven. Never was. Never will be. And there aren't any gods dumping either the terrors of life or the joys of life over our heads like ice and Gatorade.

All that is interesting and fun, but it's myth.

Hope is a responsibility. Hope is a commitment.

It means the mundane things: planning out how you're going to get your vote in. It means looking at the damage we are doing to the planet today. It means writing letters and marching in the street and doing a little financial calculation so that we can support those things that we consider important.

Hope is not a warm feeling inside. That's the bad news.

The good news is that hope is a choice. A choice that we can make on this Equinox. Yes, the light in this hemisphere is about to ebb. That's the Autumnal Equinox. There will be a Winter Solstice. There will be a Spring Equinox. And on . . .

And folks at First Unitarian Society will be celebrating and contemplating and . . . committing to hope.

## **SOURCES**

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Hesiod text: <https://www.theoi.com/Text/HesiodWorksDays.html>

More bad news:

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[www.FirstUnitarian.org](http://www.FirstUnitarian.org)