



192: Hold On To Hope

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 192. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. Listen in.

A couple of episodes ago, I decided that I had nothing to say and all I wanted to do was just to read a Psalm for you and for me. And while I figured that that would be a welcome episode, what I didn't count on was that I would hear from so many of you. By the way, many of you asking me to read the entire Bible, I don't see that happening, but never say never. We'll see. But I guess what was surprising was, like I said, just the sheer number of people that I heard from that this was exactly what you needed at exactly this time, and who's to say that if I did that at a different week or three weeks earlier or three months from now that I would get the exact same response? But it is just to say that at that time, at this particular moment in history, it really is a relief sometime just to hear the words of scripture read by someone over us.

And by the way, I listened to that episode several times myself. It was helpful. It was needed and it was timely. And yes, I would love to do that again. But this podcast, I don't think is just going to become an Emily reads scripture podcast, although really that's probably what we need. But I have been thinking about how, not just the last few weeks and few months and few years, but really our lifetime is really filled with bad news reports, terror and racial tension, and coups and shootings and confusion and questions, threats and scares, and all of the things, two phrases run on a loop in my mind and in my heart, phrases I'm sure that you're caring as well have mercy Lord Jesus, what can we do? And as I think about that, as I think about my own role, in my own place, not only in my family and in my city, but in history, it's really a short trip from feeling helpless to feeling hopeless, just shuffle a few letters around and you're already there.

I have felt sometimes, especially over the last couple of years that helplessness creep in and when that starts, hopelessness is somehow sometimes not very far behind. Maybe you can relate. We all have our own ways of processing what's happening around us and what's happening within us. For me, my way is often writing my way through it. But when my schedule or my lack of focus keeps me from being able to do that, sometimes I really have to work to forge a quiet path through foggy confusion back to the road of hope. And so today I'd like to take you with me if you're willing. We'll make a stop in Italy, if you don't

mind, because that's where I'm discovering a little bit of hope from the past to inform the present. I wrote about this a few years ago on my blog back when I wrote regularly on the blog and in my estimation, really a blog is just a collection of middle narratives, reflections that happen between beginnings and endings. And so this is a story about love, about hometown heroism, about war and mostly about hope. I hope.

In the summer of 2016, John and I traveled to Italy with a group of writers. We spent most of those days in the quiet countryside of Tuscany where we learned the story of Iris and Antonio Origo. She was born Iris Cutting in England in 1902 to her wealthy American father and her English mother. Her father died when she was only seven and her mother brought her to live in Italy after her father's death bed request, that she grew up quote, "somewhere where she does not belong" so that she would be cosmopolitan from deep down. Well, this is where she spent the next years of her young life, living in the Villa Medici built by the most celebrated family in Florentine history. Needless to say her life was one of privilege, comfort and wealth. She eventually married Italian, Antonio Origo and they bought a large estate in Tuscany about 100 miles north of Rome and this move was really confusing to their social circles at the time.

There's a quote in The Guardian about Iris and Antonio and someone observed no one moved to the countryside like that, particularly not to such a ramshackle estate on a wind swept hill with no running water and worst of all, no polite company. But the Origos didn't simply happen upon this place in the Tuscan Hills, but they chose it. They chose this barren desolate region on purpose. The couple had a plan for this land. And after 15 years of their care, 15 years of attention and hard work, they established 50 farms, a health center and a school for 90 children. And really that would have been it. If that was their legacy, that would have been a thing, a real thing. 15 years worth of a thing. I've only begun to learn about Iris, but one thing that rings true in everything I read about her, yes, she was wealthy, but she was also deeply compassionate toward the people who lived in the Val d'Orcia, which was the poverty stricken area surrounding the estate.

She and Antonio dedicated themselves to help people. They used their wealth and position to turn the barren chalky landscape into thriving farmable land. They rejected the ease and comfort of an aristocratic life in favor of long hours working fields, caring for the sick, providing a refuge for children and escaped prisoners during the second world war. She was a woman divided on many levels once the war started. Her country of birth was at war with the country she called home. And at the risk of taking her individual very personal, very specific situation, sometimes I feel like my country of birth is at war with the place I call home. In the midst of impossible times where she did not have the luxury of knowing how the war would turn out, she seemed to remain fiercely loyal, not merely to home or to country, but to humanity, to health and to care.

She served the people in front of her, from the children given to her care, as well as the escaped prisoners seeking refuge. Now, there's a ton to their story and I'm leaving out a lot. But what really buried itself into me as I learned about this couple is that they chose this life out of 1,000 choices otherwise to build the valley where they lived, to invest in the people around them, to cultivate hope from the ground. And now in the summer of 2016, I got to see that with my very own two eyes. Because that large crumbling estate that they brought back in 1924, the one overlooking the desolate Val d'Orcia, well, this is where we stayed all week in Italy. It's called La Foce. It's the home of Iris and Antonio, shelter to orphans, refuge for prisoners, school for the learning, symbol of hope.

Well, now it's neither crumbling and it's certainly not desolate. And I still can't get over it when I think about it. The walls of that house hold secrets they'll never tell. Lucky for us, Iris tells some of them herself, because Iris Origo was a writer. There's a book called *War in Val d'Orcia*. It's an Italian war diary and it chronicles 1943 to 1944. And this is Iris's diary. These are her words. She writes, "We live in a large farm in Southern Tuscany 12 miles from the station and five from the nearest village. The country is wild and lonely, the climate harsh. Our house stands on a hillside looking down over a wide and beautiful valley wooded with chestnuts and beaches. Nearby on the side of the valley, lie slopes of cultivated land, wheat, olives, and vines. But among them still stand some ridges of dust colored clay hillocks - as bare and colorless as elephants' backs, as mountains of the moon."

Well, that week while we were in Italy, John and I stayed in what I think might have been her bedroom. And I got ready every day in her dressing room and listen, I know that the house has changed since she lived there and I read that the Germans destroyed all the furniture when they took over the estate for a time during the war. But the truth is, it's not so different in the end because these are the walls, this is the land, here was her view. The house still reflects her heartbeat. Early one morning, I made my way to a little spot beyond the house overlooking the valley. And I thought about how often God will give us a hopeful vision of something that's to come long before any of it makes sense. I thought about what happened after John quit his job years ago. I thought about Iris and Antonio, how they had a vision for this wild and lonely farm in Southern Tuscany and about her care for the people and how they took time to see that vision come to be, they respected their place.

Their service was specific, committed, and local, and it took time. Still after all that, after years of care, they could not stop the war from coming to their doorstep in the spring of 1944. They may have chosen this life. They may have chosen this particular place, but they could not choose their circumstances and neither can we. In her diary, she writes, "Awakened at 6:30 by planes circling low above the house. We wonder if there is a column on the road and if so, whether it and we will be bombed together." Eventually they had to evacuate. And she writes that she took a tiny case, which they had in the cellar and all it had was a change of underclothes for Antonio and for her. She packed a pair of shoes, some soap, some face powder, her clock, some photographs. And then she writes, "That is all we now possess. Each of the children carried his own coat and jersey. The grownups each carried a baby or a sack of bread. And so in a long straggling line with the children clutching at our skirts," she writes, "Half walking, half running, we started down the road."

And so as I sat there, sitting in this calm and peaceful estate grounds overlooking this beautiful valley, I reflected on her writing on her life in this very place where they lived and really built their legacy. And then I looked down at the bench next to me where I sat and there on top of my journal was the pin that I was using. And all week I'd been using this cheap pen from our bank back in Greensboro. I brought it on purpose because the ink flow is consistent without being so thick that it shows through the paper on the other side. But that cheap pen with the name of our bank stamped on the side was a reminder to me in that moment of my own place, my own home and my own assignment. Iris had her place and I have mine. She did not allow her helplessness to harden into hopelessness. And so for those seven to 10 days that I had there in Italy, stepping briefly into another woman's story that helped me to see my own life more clearly and from a little different perspective, she carried a hopeful vision to restore the land outside her window, to serve the people who were there and to stand up for the rights of humanity, no matter which side of the

war they were on.

When I got back home and sat inside my own sunroom in North Carolina, the phrases remained the ones that I shared at the beginning of the episode, as I considered the state of the world, the heartbreak of humanity. Have mercy, Lord Jesus, what can we do? And sometimes I feel like I have answers to this and most times I don't. But I have half thoughts and some of those come to mind now. What can we do when faced with the heartbreak of humanity, when faced with the brokenness, not only around me, but within me, what can we do? What will we do? Well, we listen. And when we feel ready to say words, we pause and listen some more. It might seem passive and maybe counterproductive, but I really don't think it is. In fact, I know it isn't and the more I practice it, the more I see that this is true. We listen and we stay and we look around at who's with us and remain open to how their experience differs from ours.

We refuse to say we know what it's like to be them when we cannot possibly know what it's like to be them. We refuse to say yes, but we release the right to be understood. We seek instead to understand. We remain small as children of God, knowing our identity and affirmation always comes from God. And we affirm the dignity and humanity of others. No matter what, we forgive. We receive the compassion of Christ so that we can hand it out in abundance. And maybe we look for the barren ground and make plans for cultivation, both the kind outside our doors and the kind within our hearts. These conclusions don't come simply and they don't come fast, but I do well to remember to let slow do what slow does best, which is nourish, strengthen and hold. Another thing that slow does so very well is grow. When tragedy strikes, when heartbreak overcomes, when the questions so far outweigh the answers, things we know to be true don't stop being true, even if the shock of it shakes the truth right out of our hands. Truth might be misplaced for a while.

We might learn to see it from a different perspective. We might find new language for things that are true, but God is still good and people always matter. Listening is active. Kindness makes a difference. Change sometimes takes time. Seeds grow in the dark. Circumstance may be out of our control, but our response isn't. And so, as I think about this and reflect on my role in the world and the heartbreak and the questions and the wondering, before helpless turns to hopeless, may we together be willing to listen before we speak and then do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 192 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of holding onto hope can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The deeper truth is our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com where we always include a transcript of every episode. Well, in closing, a word from Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*, he writes, "It is ingrained in us that we have to do exceptional things for God, but we do not. We have to be exceptional in the ordinary things of life and wholly on the ordinary streets among ordinary people. And this is not learned in five minutes." Thanks for listening. And I'll see you next time.