

A Sermon Delivered by
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The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; ... believe in the good news. (Mark 1:14-20)

We are at the dawn of a new era. January 2009. It is an exciting time to be alive; and while we do not know precisely what the future holds, we have been encouraged to hold on to the “audacity of hope.” That phrase of course is the essence of our new president’s agenda for government, but it is more than simply campaign rhetoric or the catchy title of a book. The audacity of hope contains a deep religious sentiment, and we would be well advised to explore even more comprehensively what it entails.

First, a distinction needs to be made very clearly between hope and optimism. Both are critical ingredients in a healthy and mature attitude toward life. But of the two, optimism tends to affect our personality while hope, at its best, can touch our soul. To be optimistic about life is a good thing. It sees the glass as half full, not half empty. Optimism perceives a happy outcome in terms of the nature of things being in harmony with one another. Optimism can bring smiles to our faces, it can lighten our mood, and it has the capacity to gladden our hearts. Why everyone isn’t optimistic, given the positive outcomes envisioned, is a mystery.

But in truth, human beings are a bit more complicated than that, and are not made or created quite that way. Twenty-four/seven optimism may be unrealistic, and there is always the need to reflect seriously on the human condition at hand. It is important to assess things honestly and accurately in terms of what is in fact actually happening or going on. Virtually every situation in life may call for something more than simple optimism or happy thoughts alone.

This opens the door for optimism’s derivative – hope. Or perhaps it’s the other way around, given the calculus of life. Hope is the parent of the child, optimism. Hope is the more serious and persevering entity, and in contrast to

optimism, it may well be grounded in deeper roots and cultural, if not explicitly religious, traditions. Admitting my bias, I would prefer the hopeful view to the merely optimistic view, despite the fact that hope may call for painful sacrifices. Too frequently, optimism seems to let us off the hook with cheery slogans and popular sayings. Hope on the other hand, grounds us in reality, yet has the potential to inspire us to new heights.

The more I have thought about the phrase the “audacity of hope,” and the more I have tried to understand what hope is all about, the more I am beginning to lean toward the word “audacity” as the operative term in the phrase. Audacity by definition means bold and daring, which in turn suggests some degree of power and energy. It also has distinct religious connotations that resonate with the basic and fundamental ingredients of faith. Well, what does that mean?

Let me try to frame it in terms of thinking and living, and how the audacity of one approach can override the other. The late Henri Nouwen had a brilliant, yet easily understood insight, when he said:

“We don’t think our way into a new kind of living, we live our way into a new kind of thinking.”

I would contend that this is an audacious statement because it has the power and energy to transform, and that is what’s going on in life all the time. The old order is giving way to the new. A “paradigm” that worked for centuries, gives way to new configurations. Change is inevitable, and cannot be resisted; yet those of us who believe sincerely and deeply, see the power of God at work in the changes occurring all around us. In fact, as people of faith, we make the audacious claim that God is transforming the world through love, and we are the agents that make it happen. The hope is that maybe, just maybe, we can bring about a religious transformation in our own lifetime. Audacity means to believe that what was initially thought to be unbelievable, is now possible. It is a bold and daring vision.

The way into this mystery is to think the unthinkable and consider the unimaginable. Broadway for decades has already captured this insight. In the *Man of La Mancha*, for example, we recall the lyrics of Don Quixote telling us...

To dream the impossible dream

*To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go
To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star*

*This is my quest
To follow that star
No matter how hopeless
No matter how far....*

Or as the Reverend Mother sang to Maria in the Sound of Music –

*Climb ev'ry mountain, search high and low
Follow ev'ry byway, every path you know
Climb ev'ry mountain, ford every stream
Follow every rainbow, till you find your dream*

Impossible dreams, unassailable mountaintops, glass ceilings, unbroken world records. Can they ever be overcome, or achieved, or reached, or realized? Yes, they can. Or as millions chanted at the Mall on Inauguration Day:

yes, WE can.
yes, WE can
yes, WE can

In fact, it's already happening in our nation. It is happening in our communities, it is happening in our own families, and even in our personal lives. We see change happening. We have the audacity to hope. We are no longer singing, "We shall overcome," we are tearfully and joyfully praising God by singing, without boasting - We Have Overcome. Things Have Changed. It is a jubilant time because hope has been unleashed, and hope is of God. So follow your bliss.

As Nouwen suggests, it's time to stop thinking about ways that we might live better, as though our standard of living should rise simply because we are entitled to it, and instead start living in loving ways that will allow us to think more clearly, more sensibly, more justly, and most important, more responsibly. Change is going to happen, but we need to be effective and ethical in the way we help to bring it about.

That's what our baptismal vows have commissioned us to do as ambassadors for Christ, and witnesses for the Christian way of life. Change is going to happen: in some cases radically, swiftly and quickly; but in all cases hopefully. And as change inevitably happens our longing is that it will occur grace-fully, especially as we anticipate its transforming power to touch lives.

Let me close by saying that I both hope and believe, in the deepest religious sense of those words, that change is going to happen by means of volition and intentional responsibility. That is the new catchword of our times, I realize. In fact, responsibility may well be not only the lasting phrase the historians will cite from President Obama's inaugural speech – a call for a “new era of responsibility,” but it could well be the summation of his administration's effectiveness during his term of office. Responsibility is a good word, but it is also a demanding word, calling for our highest effort. Our hope as people of faith is that it will become the new American refrain. The audacity of responsibility!

Perhaps we really are entering a new era of cooperation, both politically and religiously, whereby we base our bold, daring and audacious hopes on the centrality of God's love. And in that regard, following the words of Issac Watts' familiar hymn, we lyrically petition in song the highest realms of authority ... divinity itself:

*O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come
Be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

Hymnal 1982

Henri Nouwen; later writings