



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

## **What Is The Hope To Which You Have Been Called?**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

January 3, 2010

Happy New Year!

On this first Sunday of the New Year and the new decade, I want to reflect a few moments with you on the power of hope.

Hope saves lives – literally.

My favorite story about hope is about the school teacher who accepted the volunteer position of visiting and teaching children who were inpatients in a large city hospital.

She was retired and decided that this was what she could do in her retirement. One day the phone rang and she received her first assignment as a new volunteer. The teacher on the other end of the line was the classroom teacher of a young boy who had been hospitalized and needed tutoring during his stay in the hospital. The volunteer teacher took down the name of the boy and his hospital room number and was told by his classroom teacher that this boy had been studying nouns and adverbs in his class before he was hospitalized.

It was not until the visiting teacher got just outside the boy's hospital room that she realized he was a patient in the hospital's BURN UNIT. She was prepared to teach English Grammar, but she was not prepared to witness the horrible look and smell of badly burned human flesh. She was not prepared to see a young boy in great pain either. Everything around her made her want to hold her nose, to turn around and to leave faster than she came.

But something inside her kept her from walking away, so she clumsily stammered over to his bedside and said simply, "I'm the hospital teacher and your teacher sent me to help you with your nouns and adverbs," and she began to teach.

The next morning when she came to work a nurse from the burn unit rushed up to her and asked her, "What did you do to that boy?"

The teacher began to apologize profusely, but before she could finish, the nurse interrupted her. "You don't understand. We've been really worried about him and his condition has been deteriorating over the past few days, because he had completely given up hope. But ever since you were here with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed and he's fighting back, and responding to treatment—It's as though he decided to live! What did you do?"

When the nurse later questioned the little boy he said, “I figured I was doomed . . . that I was gonna die . . . until I saw that teacher . . .” And as a tear began to run down his little face, he finished: “But when I saw that teacher, I realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy . . . would they?”

Most commentators in the newspapers in the past few days have agreed that the past ten years were quite bleak. But in this sermon, rather than rehearse the burns of the last 10 years, I am drawn by two sentences in this morning's Epistle. The first sentence calling to me has to do with hope. St. Paul says “I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your heart (or mind or inner being), so that you may know what the hope is to which you have been called.” (Ephesians 1:18) What is the hope to which YOU have been called in this New Year and this new decade?

The great scientist, priest, and mystic, Teilhard de Chardin famously said and I agree, “The world of tomorrow belongs to those who give it the greatest hope.” We who worship here at All Saints Church, Pasadena – and I am collecting into that big “we” not only we who are gathered here in this room this morning or those of us who connect with All Saints through support of the All Saints' mission or connect through some form of technology who will hear this sermon later, but all of us – have a responsibility to give to the world the greatest hope. We have a responsibility, you and I, to know and embody the hope to which each of us has been called.

"It is not the way we deal with our human situation that is the basis for hope--hope is the basis for how we deal with our human situation." (Arden K. Barden in a paper, "Spiritual Aging")

In his last Christmas Eve sermon, Martin Luther King, Jr., preached about his dream having been turned into a nightmare in the church bombing in Birmingham, and the increase in poverty during his lifetime, and the war in Vietnam which was then escalating. Then he said, "Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close tonight by saying I still have a dream, because you know, you cannot give up on life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream." (Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," *The Trumpet of Conscience*, p.76)

There are no hopeless situations. There are only people who think hopelessly. (Windred Newman)

The reformer, Martin Luther, 500 years ago said, “Everything that is done in this world is done by hope.”

I try to read as much about hope as I can. As a spiritual person, as a religious person, I think it is my responsibility to learn as much about hope as I possibly can. I would recommend to each of you that if you want to be a healthy person spiritually and if you want to help give energy to those around you, to the future, and to this fragile earth, that you become a student of hope. I happen to believe that that was what Jesus was doing in the temple as a 12 year old when his parents were anxiously looking for him and thinking it was all about them. It's not all about them. I think he said, “I am learning about my God's business of hope-bringing.” As St. Paul

said in the passage read this morning, "With the eyes of your heart enlightened, know the hope to which you have been called." What is the hope to which you have been called?

Two things stand out in what I've learned so far about hope. The first is that from Martin King to James Baldwin to Nelson Mandela to Desmond Tutu, they all refer to themselves, using one image or another, as "prisoners of hope." Cornel West in his wonderful book on the moral obligations of living in a democratic society, wrote, "To be part of the democratic tradition is to be a prisoner of hope. And you cannot be a prisoner of hope without engaging in a form of struggle in the present moment that keeps the best of the past alive. [Whether that struggle is a personal struggle with yourself, an interpersonal struggle with your friends, colleagues, or family members, or a struggle at the office, or a struggle on the political level.] To engage in that struggle means that one is always willing to acknowledge that there is no triumph just around the corner, but that you persist because you believe it is right and just and moral to persist. As T.S. Eliot said, 'Ours is in the trying. The rest is not our business.'" (West, Cornel, "The Moral Obligations of Living in a Democratic Society," *The Good Citizen*, p. 12)

In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela wrote, "I never lost hope that this great transformation would occur. ... I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there was mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Human goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished." (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 615)

The second thing I have learned about people who give others hope is this: there is this sense in them that "the Good" will prevail in time, no matter what. Desmond Tutu calls it his belief that the universe is moral; he reminds us of all the bloody tyrants whose regimes inevitably bit the dust. Dr. King spoke about the arc of the universe bending toward justice. Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament professor, writes of the arc of scripture always bending toward inclusion. And these hope-givers have both patience and perseverance and confidence and energy born of this hope and speak of the victory already having been decided and all that we have to go through are the resulting struggles. I am old enough to have experienced that morality of the universe now in three great historic struggles – the civil rights movement, the struggle for women's ordination in the church and the call for women's equality in society, and the struggle for inclusion of lesbian and gay sisters and brothers into the church and the energized LGBT movement in this country. The Good will always win in time.

A friend of mine once told me of being in a liturgy in Soweto once when Desmond Tutu was preaching and this was when apartheid was still strong. Desmond Tutu asked for a 12-year-old girl to come stand next to him in the church house. He said, with his arm around her, that the apartheid officials had begun detaining 12-year-old girls like this one. It was a very down moment and announcement. But then, in Tutu like fashion, he said, "But the victory is ours. We have won. They do not know it yet, but we have won. The victory is ours in Christ Jesus." All of a sudden the spirits lifted and the house erupted in applause and hope.

Professor Walter Wink is a student of hope and wrote a classic called, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*.

“In the Prague demonstration in 1989 that sparked the Czech revolution on November 18, of that year students began chanting to the Communist party leadership, ‘You have lost already! You have lost already!’ – though victory was still far in the future. ‘We know that we can win,’ said Karel Srp; ‘this is unstoppable.’

“‘At the point that we committed ourselves to this struggle,’ says the nonviolent Brazilian peasant leader Ze Galego ‘we began to understand that victory was ours. At the moment of commitment we knew that the victory was ours. Each day we took another step forward. In the end, the outcome was not a surprise.’

“Faith does not wait for God’s sovereignty to be established on earth; faith behaves as if that sovereignty already holds sway. Like the psalmists, the early Christians declared as fact what existed only in their imagination. Like God in the creation, faith and hope call into being what does not yet exist, and races ahead to form something new that never was before.” Our very hope **“evokes a new reality just beginning to come into being, then it helps create that new reality,” in history.**

(Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, p. 323f)

Jim Wallis translating Hebrews 12 which is a great hope passage says, “Hope is believing despite the evidence and then watching the evidence change.”

Hope has eyes that see the invisible. That is why St. Paul said, “with the eyes of your heart enlightened.” Our souls have eyes that see the invisible. Professor Wink writes about South Africa, “With eyes seeing the invisible, Allan Boesak never tired of repeating to the gathered throngs of antiapartheid demonstrators that South Africa’s apartheid system has fallen, white racism had fallen, the powers of economic exploitation had fallen. ‘The battle is won, even though the struggle is not yet over.’ Now all that is left is to help everyone see and live in terms of these facts. ‘And besides, it drives the dragon crazy when you sing about his downfall even though you are bleeding.’”

(Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, p. 324)

Walter Brueggemann, who wrote a great book addressing hope, *The Prophetic Imagination*, notes that the prophets were people of hope. You cannot live in the prophetic tradition without being a force for hope. In the center of our Mission Statement at All Saints Church is that we are planted firmly in the prophetic tradition. That means that we are people of hope, “The hope that must be spoken is hope rooted in the assurance that God does not quit even when the evidence warrants God’s quitting.”

(Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 69)

Rabbi Heschel says, “And yet God does not need those who praise Him when in a state of euphoria.” (All of us have been to churches that majored in just nothing but euphoria.) “God needs those who are in love with Him when in distress. When God is in distress and when we are in distress God needs us to hope. This is the task: in the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into a song. To know the monster’s rage and, in spite of it,” (*nevertheless*, one of the greatest biblical words, *nevertheless*) “to proclaim to its face to go through Hell and to continue to trust in the goodness of God.”

Now here is the last thing I have time to say in this sermon about hope. It gets to the second sentence in this passage of Ephesians that called to me. That sentence reads, “Blessed be the God of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.” (Ephesians 1: 3)

A personal story. When I was a young priest I went to a clergy retreat and we were invited by the retreat preacher to sign up if we wanted a one-on-one conversation. I didn’t know why but I went and signed up. I don’t remember what I said nor what the topic of our conversation was but I do remember the most important thing that happened in that brief conversation. At the end of the conversation (about 15 minutes) I said, “You know what I need most is for you to pray for me.” He said, “Of course.” I knelt in front of him and he put his hands on my head and he prayed that I would know that I was filled with every spiritual blessing in the heavens. I said, “What?” I had been raised deeply etched with this notion of original sin that said that we could not be filled with every spiritual blessing because we human beings were so broken, flawed, and tainted by the Fall of Adam and Eve. He said, “Go read the scriptures. Paul says you are supposed to be filled and blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.”

My friends, when you personally know that God is blessing you right now, unconditionally no matter what you’ve done, who you are, what your past is, who your parents were, what class you come from, what race you are. When you know you are filled with God’s spiritual blessing then you can know and feel inside you this God who never quits and wants you to be an embodiment of never ever quitting and when you do that you become an instrument of hope that saves lives.

Can I have an Amen? Amen.

God’s blessings and God’s agenda do not “honor our despair or our complacency.” (Brueggemann, Walter, “I Will Do it...But *You* Go,” *The Threat of Life*, p. 19) When we are connected with God our lives will be about “God’s faithfulness that vetoes our faithlessness.” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 67)

Rebecca Solnit says that hope is not “like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky.... hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope shoves you out the door, ... action is impossible without hope.” (Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*)

What is the hope to which God has called you this New Year and this decade? Is it to teach a child in the hospital his or her nouns and adverbs, or is it to bring an end to the military industrial complex? Is it to bring peace to Gaza? Is it to make sure people have healthcare? Is it to stop this dehumanizing prison factory that we have in California? Is it to call someone this afternoon and tell them you love them and you believe in them? Whatever it is, be this year and this decade a bringer of hope.

Amen.

