

Hope and Virtue

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Romans 4:13-25

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On a cold January day last Tuesday, the 44th President of the United States was inaugurated into office – President Barack Obama. Maybe that needs to be said again: President Obama. Before a crowd too large to see the ceremony, but who could not imagine being anywhere else that day, a public ritual of hope conferred the highest office in the land upon a candidate of hope. And when it came time for him to speak, President Obama gave a message somber in its appraisal of the current crisis facing our nation. He spoke of it being a time of gathering clouds and raging storms. He quoted scripture from First Corinthians 13 to remind us that, although we have thought like children, spoken like children, acted and reasoned like children, the time has come to set aside childish things. And at the end of his remarks he told a story from our own nation's history.

On December 1, 1776, George Washington's ragtag army crossed the Delaware from Trenton into Pennsylvania. The 6,000 men were dying of cold, short of blankets and ill supplied with provisions. Come January 1st, most of the enlistments would expire, potentially leaving Washington with fewer than 2,000 soldiers. Meanwhile, across the river, 1500 Hessians had just set up camp. It looked hopeless. Morale was crumbling. But a fiery American named Thomas Paine, who was traveling with Washington's army, refused to despair. He wrote an essay called "The Crisis." At the same time, Washington set forth an audacious plan – to cross the river again, this time nine miles upstream of the German encampment, and to do so on Christmas Day, hoping to catch the other army unprepared and in a boozy slumber early the next morning. Before his army made that historic crossing, Washington had his men gather in groups and listen to Paine's essay – a sentence from which was quoted in Obama's address.¹

Paine wrote: "These are the times that try men's souls... But let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, the city and the country, alarmed at a common danger, came forth to meet and repulse it!"² Obama used those words as a rallying cry, reminding us that in this winter of our hardships, when it seems nothing but hope and virtue could survive, we can brave the icy currents, outlast the storms that may come, and carry forth the great gift of freedom so it may be delivered safely to future generations.

The rhetoric of Paine's essay and Obama's inaugural address sounds quite religious. Words of hope and virtue belong inside church walls as much as they do echoing from PA systems along the Washington mall. What does this call for hope say to us, to this congregation, on this cold January Sunday in Pittsburgh, PA?

I just finished teaching a Doctor of Ministry course at the seminary, in which a group of pastors and I spent two weeks talking about the church today. The pastors in the class came from different denominations and serve in settings ranging from a large church in Seattle to a retirement village in Virginia, a small Episcopalian congregation out in Murrysville to a historic Presbyterian church in Galveston, Texas that is rebuilding after being flooded during a hurricane last September. We talked about how the church is called “the body of Christ”, such as when Paul says “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (I Cor 12:27). But after sharing some of our stories, we began to worry about just how healthy this body actually was.

Churches by definition are complex organisms. Depending on whom you ask, things are going well or going astray; the ministry is on target or off the mark. When things seem to be going badly, churches invariably change one of three things – their programs, their policies, or their pastors. They hope that by doing so, things will magically revert back to how things were during their congregation’s heyday (as if there really were such idyllic good ol’ days) – or perhaps they will finally fill the pews (although they haven’t related to their changing neighborhood over the years) – or overflow the offering plates (despite people being in debt or living from paycheck to paycheck). If you sit in on one of our church’s Inquirers’ Classes, you hear stories about other congregations that became too small to be vital, too dogmatic to welcome the gifts of women or young people or gay and lesbian members, or too provincial to think of mission programs when there were battles to be fought over the music used in worship or the carpet color in the sanctuary. Now if all these church bodies are truly the “body of Christ,” it seems unlikely many of them would pass a yearly physical.

Kathleen Norris, in her book Amazing Grace, spoke about how we gather in churches because true religion can never be practiced alone. And we shouldn’t be surprised that there is a divergence of opinion inside our church walls. As Norris says, the church is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like you and me who say and do cruel, stupid things; saints like you and me who strive to show compassion and love justice and walk humbly with God and everyone else who crosses our path. Here in this particular field of God’s realm, the wheat and the tares grow together and are destined to do so this side of the coming kingdom of God.³

Norris insists that the church, like the incarnation itself, is a shaky proposition. God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, emptying and squeezing into our human condition in what must have been an uncomfortable fit. And then Christ becoming incarnate now in us, the church, the body of Christ, in our fragmented and fragile congregations spread over the face of the earth, spread over the theological spectrum, finding lots of ways to deserve a good ol’ lightning bolt from on high and yet still finding opportunities to offer a prayer from the heart and occasional good deed for someone in pain or in grief. It’s a crazy thing, an unbelievable thing – the church as the body of Christ.

But it’s always been unbelievable, irrational, unreasonable. That’s the heart of Paul’s argument in Romans 4. If being a good person in God’s eyes depended on following the law, then after giving us the law, God would have left the scene and simply waited until

Report Card Day arrived and sadly noted our universally failing grades. But God has never worked that way. That's why God whispered into Abraham's ear that despite his advanced age, he would be the father of many descendants. God surprised Sarah with the news that her aged womb would produce an heir, an idea that made her burst out laughing. Paul says that both of them, hoping against hope, believed that God would honor God's promises.

Hoping against hope. Being captive to a hope that is counter-intuitive and yet more real than anything right before our eyes. Or in that wonderful language of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, we are "prisoners of hope", trusting in God's mercy no matter what. That's the common theme of our faith that empowers the church, the living body of Christ. That's the ideal of faith that Thomas Paine quoted and that George Washington read out loud to shivering soldiers on Christmas Eve long ago. And that's the steely backbone of faith that President Obama has called us to trust as we move forward into the future together.

For far too long critics of the church contend that we profess a "soft faith," a mushy religion of comforting words and saccharin sentiments that glosses over the grit of daily life with words about future kingdoms in the sky. Skeptics deride Christians as people unwilling to face facts, intellectually-deficient folks with our quaint rhetoric about healing and hope and eternal life. But sit for a while inside any church's walls. Look beyond the fragile proponents of the faith who fuss over carpet colors and listen instead as they describe what it means to be prisoners of hope. Sit beside us as we get ready to go under anesthesia prior to an operation, or when we walk out of a doctor's office having been told cancer is in our bones. Listen when we pray at night over a child that is addicted to drugs or take a seat in a 12-step group to keep the sleeping dragon of addiction in our own life under control. Walk beside us as we process out of a church sanctuary following the casket carrying the body of a loved one. Take note as we march in the streets and work with others to protect what is just in our community. Watch as broken people find healing and acceptance and new beginning in the messy, imperfect, grace-drenched Sunday gatherings centered around the story of a cross and a crucified Savior.

This stuff is not soft; it's some of the toughest stuff you'll ever hear. It has sustained folks literally for generations – during the Middle Passage and slavery years thereafter, during wars and depressions, during times of promise and moments like today when we will do whatever it takes to give our kids and grandkids a chance for a brighter tomorrow. Nothing but faith and hope and virtue. Nothing but this shaky proposition called the church of Jesus Christ. It's what we believe in and what gets us up in the morning and helps us keep on keeping on. You ain't seen tough until you see this thing called real hope – Easter morning hope – Jesus Christ, the rock rejected by the builders that has become the cornerstone of hope.

To those who think the church, the body is not relevant, I proclaim that the church has never been more relevant than today. Are you wounded and unsure about tomorrow? Come in and stay a while with us. Have you been cast out, distrusted and dismissed?

Find a home here. Have you been misled and felt misbegotten, abused and made anxious? Rest with us. We're around after the service. Talk with any of us. What do we offer? Not ourselves, but we know someone else you should get to know. Someone we trust; someone in whom we hope. Take in these words from Paul, who's said: *Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

¹ Jeff Jacoby, "A Revolutionary Christmas Tale," *Boston Globe*, December 25, 1997.

² Thomas Paine, "The Crisis", December 23, 1776.

³ Cf. Kathleen Norris, "Church," *Amazing Grace*, pp. 272-273.

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