

## The Audacity of Hope Revisited.

I have chosen this title *The Audacity of Hope*, not only because the scripture we have before us today, in many ways relates to this virtue called HOPE, but also because living here on Gabriola, or anywhere in the world, we need to reclaim with audacity, our call as Christians to reach out and step out with one another in the hope that we can make a positive difference. I like the word audacity not only because it is great to say it but because it means that we are expressing a bold position in the eyes of the world. It might be even seen as daring or adventuresome.

Albert Camus, the French philosopher, writer, and poet, expresses it this way: *In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.*

Now Camus did not say, or perhaps he did not know, what that *something* was. But for me, it relates to hope, one of the three virtues that the Apostle Paul writes about in that famous passage that we often hear at weddings:

*.... now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greater of these is love.*  
(1Corinthians, Chapter 13)

It is a challenge to realize that these three are interconnected, like a three-legged stool—take away one and it collapses and you too! But knowing that, it is still helpful to give attention to each aspect and to find meaning that each has for us, always realizing that they are one. This is like the Trinity, God in three persons: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived and worked throughout the years of the terrible law of apartheid. He wrote that: *that Christian hope persists in the face of evidence to the contrary, undeterred by setbacks and disappointments.*

Reflect for a moment and think about people in the past, or even today, who seemed to have had such HOPE within them, such audacious HOPE that they stepped out. They acted even when it seemed too bizarre to believe anything would happen to change the dire situation confronting them and others.

Let us share some names and what they did:

—France found hope through a farm girl named Joan (of Arc)

—U.S. was confronted by a Baptist minister about racism (Martin Luther King)

—Societies all over the world were called out to address the value and centrality of vulnerable, disabled people (L'Arche Community, founder Jean Vanier)

—Cancer victims had a hero who himself disabled by Cancer, ran for others to raise fund to find a cure (Terry Fox)

All these and so many others named, had audacious hope for the future and with care and concern for others, with HOPE stepped out to make a difference.

Today we have the story of Esther, a very unlikely young woman who stepped out in HOPE and was audacious (bold and risky). The Psalmist today reminds the Israelites that they are not alone, but should act and be thankful to Yahweh; James who struggles with the early vulnerable Christian communities and tries to lay out guidelines—**hoping I am sure that these will help.** And finally, we have in Mark, Jesus facing again disciples who really don't seem to get from his words and deeds what he is trying to teach them. He must have had audacious hope in their potential!

**Esther**, one of two Biblical Books named after a woman (the other being Ruth. But if you count the Apocrypha, we also have Judith and Suzanne). She is the second wife of the King of Persia who had divorced his first wife for disobeying him. Now, when she was selected through a countrywide beauty contest, her uncle Mordecai counselled her not to let it be known that she is Jewish as they were considered aliens with a history of being a captive people taken away initially as slaves from their homeland. We soon learn through her uncle Mordecai that the King has been influenced by his evil advisor Haman to have the Jews slain on a certain date determined by lot (Purim meaning lot). Haman was insulted when Mordecai refuses to bow down to him. In his anger, Haman falsifies the claim that the Jews were a danger to the King.

Esther at first is hesitant to intervene, for she cannot approach King without his permission. If he refuses to “recognize” her waiting to approach him, legally she commits a crime, whose penalty is death. But Mordecai now tells her that her family will die and maybe she might as well if discovered. He posits a challenging question: *Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*

Esther decides to take the risk but requests that Mordecai ask the Jewish people to fast for three days to help her as she prepares to approach the king. Now, this is not a hopeful situation in the common sense of the word, but she becomes audacious and we can appreciate her fatalistic message to Mordecai: *I will go to the King though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.*

What about you and me?

We are not faced with the risks Esther is: our lives are not at stake I as such, but to step up and declare a position that seems hopeless—as many have done before us and some are doing today—might give us pause. Or, declaring or

contributing to those in need, no matter if it is against the wishes of friends or family ... risking embarrassment or rejection.

—have you ever wondered why you and I have been so fortunate and what might be being asked of us? Esther didn't have much time to decide...do you and I?

—what is it we have we been given that can be usefully today...doing more than voting or paying our taxes or showing up on Sunday... and I am not talking about doing **more** but **being** more Jesus-like in whatever we do.

For Esther, while the model of Jesus is not what she knows, she does know Israel's story and the challenges the Jews have faced over and over again. It is clear she is willing to share their fate. Maybe she feels a solidarity and love for her people. However, she does not seem to step out in fear, but rather with faith since her people are holding her up through their actions of intentional fasting and, I must assume, prayer. Her actions then are full of audacious hope — she is called to make a difference. In today's story, Esther is clever and she frames her plea in such a way as to flatter the king and show up Haman for the wicked man he is. The Jews are saved from yet another attempt at genocide and a new festival is created to celebrate their freedom!

Our Psalm today calls for recognition of the role that God plays in Israel's liberation. Certainly, the establishment of the Festival of Purim, while full of fun and frolicking, also has within it the sense that while never mentioned, God was on their side. God overturned the powerful and, like the song of Hannah and Mary, the weak and vulnerable are saved.

In the reading from James today there is a focus in part on the power of prayer. This calls us to take the time and energy to intercede in faith, hope and love for those who are in pain and are suffering. The source of their pain or illness is not

to be a judgement call on our part, the Divine has the responsibility, we don't. Rather, we are instruments of peace and reconciliation and above all listeners rather than prescribers.

Often illness separates us from our community and with our Pastoral Care group here in our church, I know we seek to stay connected to those who cannot come to us.

How do we reach out and be a hopeful presence? It may well be that by offering ourselves in prayer for another, trusting in God's gift, we have fulfilled what is needed. And even with audacious hope, we may never know the results of our intercessions nor what healing takes place in an unexpected way. That is where faith becomes an important part of our process.

As we move through Mark's gospel, it would be easy to conclude that Jesus had audacious hope in his chosen followers. Last week they were arguing about who among them was the greatest and never really seemed to embrace being a servant. Today we read about their concern about someone who is healing, using the name of Jesus and that person is not part of their group!! Setting the Christian communities boundaries seems to be a priority for them in these collective sayings of Jesus. Over time, Christ's church, or the body of Christ, has come apart many times and has caused its members great pain as individuals and groups. The reference to the body talks about the Body of the church. How do we confirm our similarities and embrace the differences as hopeful signs that we can grow together?

Over time we will hopefully come to know more and more how to work, pray and play together and to welcome all who would come with us—learning together. And let us claim that important aspect of our humanity—our hope! And continue

to do the work that Jesus did; praying for those in need, feeding those who are hungry, clothing those who are naked and taking every opportunity to heal the breach between friends, families and even the strangers we do not know.

Seamus Heaney wrote:

*History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
and hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.*

Amen

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