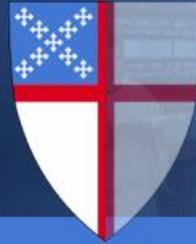


St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Advent & Christmas 2010

A Message from the Rector:

“How’s that hopey-changey thing workin’ out for ya?”

Sarah Palin to the National Tea Party Convention in Nashville, Tennessee in February 2010

Dear Friends, OK! So I never thought I’d be quoting Sarah Palin either. She is, however, the current queen of the one line zinger, and this one did everything it was expected to do. It got the whole hall full of conventioners whooping and yelping! It heaped scorn upon President Obama. And best of all, it got quoted in the newspapers, which is where I found it. A win-win-win situation if ever there was one. The problem with sound bites, though, is that they are meant to get the adrenalin pumping and the emotions engaged, but they ignore thought. I wonder if after all the hullaballo calmed down in that Nashville convention hall anyone stopped to think what was actually being said?

“Hopey” and “changey” are obvious sneering references to the “hope and change” which were the mantra of President Obama’s election campaign. For reasons that are visceral as well as ideological the people attracted to the Tea Party thing are anti-Obama to the core. Fair enough! It’s a free country! It is also legitimate to oppose the president’s vision - to not hope for what he hopes for or want to see the changes he would like. In that case someone would have to put forward serious, workable alternatives. I have some questions about holding “hope” and “change” up to ridicule, however. What are the alternatives? I suppose it would be something like “fear” and “stagnation”.

Hope and change are deeply embedded in our hearts and minds and human experience. When a new life begins in the womb, most parents have hopes for what that child will be. I vividly remember being badgered as an expectant father, “Do you want a girl or a boy?” For the most part, I steadfastly resisted, and answered that I just wanted a healthy child. All through childhood parents have hopes for their children, and children develop their own hopes as well. And all through childhood there is change - physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Not uncommonly the hopes of the growing children diverge from the hopes of their parents. There are good, healthy things to hope for, and there are silly things too. Every parent should want their child to do well, but to pin all hope on a five year old being the top of his/her class at Harvard or taking over the family business is just a bit over the edge. The child will need some space for his/her hopes to take shape, to change and mature. The parent who leaves some space for that to happen will be less likely to be disappointed.

Adults, too, live in hope. From youth to old age there are always things for which we yearn and work. Starting a new job, moving to a new home, making new friends - all of these things are filled with hopefulness. As we hold them dear and work to bring them about we experience changes in ourselves, our relationships and our surroundings. Hope and change remain with us all through our days. I remember my father in the days after his retirement from his factory job. I think that the change of not having to respond to factory whistles and time cards frightened or confused him at first. My mother got fed up with his moping around aimlessly and said, "You are on your own time. You can do what ever you want. Go out and do it!" The truth is that he probably built more houses in his retirement than he did during his working days. He re-invented himself. When my mother died, he re-invented himself again. The point is that he always had things out there to hope for and changes that he wanted to see - right to his ninety-eighth year!

If hope and change are embedded in individual human life they are also embedded in our community life. I can not imagine anyone walking - or driving - through the city of Camden thinking to himself, "This should always stay the same. " Such a person would either be counted heartless and cruel or insane. The physical dereliction that still remains can't disappear fast enough for most of us. The human dereliction and crime, suffering and poverty weigh us down. The potential for new and better things like the cleared lot where the state prison once stood cry out for some positive and beautiful redevelopment, but it is so slow in the coming. The substance of our hopes for change might vary, of course. A north Jersey politician came to the city and said they ought to bulldoze it! I suspect that others share his opinion, which is not shared by those of us who live here. Though our hopes may vary and the changes we envision may not be the same, no one wants it to stay the same forever.

Even where things are good, we know that they could be better. For us who are part of the congregation and for many, many people in this parish community, St Paul's Church is a beacon of light and joy. It is a place for gathering with others to share joy, sorrow, and food. It is a place where generosity is experienced and the word "God is love" feels real. As a result, St. Paul's has attracted a wide circle of friends and supporters. It is possible to raise money and enlist aid to feed the hungry and cloth the naked and to provide for the children. That still does not leave us in a state of perfection. Our chimney is crumbling, endangering a portion of the newly restored wall. Some roofs developed leaks. The heating requires some new and expensive parts.. And there are those other unexciting expenses - salaries and insurances. Our congregation is small. The overhead is costly. My old rector used to say, "We have no problem here that twenty new families would not solve." Sometimes I think our church life is built on nothing more than hope that longs for change!

Looking beyond our city to the rest of the planet, the question begs. "Is anybody really happy with the world as it is?" Who but an arms merchant or an employer of near-slave labor would be? There is war and oppression, terrorism and prejudice, and in some places suffering and poverty worse than in Camden. With the talk of climate change and global warming our survival appears threatened. Under such a cloud and in the midst of human suffering we continue to hope for justice and peace. The poets of our Faith often describe the human plight as creation groaning in hopeful anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth.

The Scripture readings, prayers and hymns of Advent call our attention to this old world, drawing on toward night. If we listen to God speaking we know that he is with us in the darkness, and he understands our fears. Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." (Luke 21:6) He reveals to his people that there will be disaster and suffering as the old passes to the new. He warns us not to grasp at straws in our fear of what is coming. By now we ought to know better than to put our trust in

rulers. Does not the psalmist say, "Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth,* for there is no help in them." (Pslm 146:2) Jesus speaks to disciples openly about the frightening human condition, but then he says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:8) His word to us is to hope.

Our hope as Christians, while not unrelated to all our various hopes for our children, our homes, our communities, our church and all of the world, is in the end a hope for a New Creation - a new and restored world. Our hope is centered in no one other than the Lord Jesus Christ. The real celebration of Christmas is that the Word of God so long hoped for has finally come. He did not come with wealth or power or even with the special effects of a Hollywood movie, but in the bosom of a homeless couple sheltering in a barn. Beginning in misery and injustice, having only the love and faithfulness of parents, he reveals the true source of strength and power which made and sustains the world. As usual, most of the human race is looking elsewhere for the fulfillment of its hopes. Our hopes rest upon him - true God and true Man.

To know Jesus and acknowledge him as Lord and Savior is the call of Christians. Once accepting Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises and the fulfillment of our hopes, we need to get ready for the change that will follow. Ultimately, the whole world will change, but we will change first. Having met Jesus we can not remain the same, for in him we see God most clearly, and we see ourselves too. Jesus, the Son of God invites us to take our place as sons and daughters of the Father by adoption and grace - our rightful relationship with God.

This Christmas let your hopes soar as high as heaven, and may you be changed more and more into the likeness of him through whom all things were made. It'll work for you!

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