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“When Hope and History Rhymes: Leadership in a Time of Adversity”

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Jeremiah 29:10-14; Romans 8:18-25

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In a few days, people around the world will literally stand still for a moment as the President of the United States takes the oath of office. This American ritual will be greeted with great excitement not just within our national borders, but within every culture and among every color on the globe. Some will celebrate the African American connection. Others will celebrate the dawning of a new era in our struggle to form a more perfect union. Still others will celebrate it as a reminder that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our system of government to critics abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

Those of us who worked in the civil rights movement and those who gather annually to celebrate the legacy and honor the memory of Martin Luther King may even shed a tear as we remember the hoses and cattle prods in Alabama, the killing fields in Mississippi and the resistance to change in places as distant and as different as Cicero, Illinois and Atlanta, Georgia. But let us also remember that in the midst of adversity we had some great victories; and as it was then, so must it be now that our euphoria is tempered by the realization that while our society has taken a giant leap forward, we have not yet formed the more perfect union of which our founders dreamed. Our message today, therefore, is about leadership in a time of adversity.

On the day after the election of the 44th president of the United States, some of my friends in South Africa called the election “A Mandela moment in the United States.” At first, I was rather dubious about the utility of that kind of comparison and saw it as a form of misplaced euphoria; but the more I thought about it the more it seemed to offer some profound insights as well as some very useful cautions. So I did what most academics do and subjected the idea to a more definitive analysis.

Of course, I am not just an academic. I am a practitioner and a preacher, so I searched the Scriptures to find a text that might help us think about leadership in a time of adversity; yet still a time when hope and history seem to rhyme. The Apostle Paul could have been speaking to this moment when he wrote his letter to the Romans in which he observed: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail, not only the creation, but we ourselves.” Yet, he said, “The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.... For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he already sees.” (Romans 8: 18 – 25). These words are a fitting backdrop for our own thoughts over the next week as we celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King and the inauguration of President-elect Barak Obama.

Paul said of his time that the whole of creation had been groaning in travail. The dominant mood of our time is what psychologists call a “free-floating anxiety.” The immediate aftermath of 9/11 was such a moment. The period following the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy was such a moment. Americans and, indeed, people around the world are feeling that sort of anxiety again. It is not the result of an event, but a confluence of events. Some feel a deep level of concern about what the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are doing to our soul as a people. For others, the anxiety may come from the near collapse of the economy, the increasing divide between work and reward, the almost daily announcements that medicines we thought were safe are not, the frequency of natural disasters that remind us of how what we once considered abnormal is now the new normal. We have reached the point where anxiety feeds on anxiety and we become anxious about the fact that we are anxious.

When Maya Angelou, the great poet, author, and playwright, reflected on the tragedies in her early life, she wrote that the spring of hope is often immersed in the winter of despair. She spoke as a kind of street theologian

when she said, “You see a young black boy, fourteen, fifteen years old, semiliterate, maybe the third generation on welfare. But he walks down the street as if he has oil wells in his backyard. If I had come from Mars or Pluto, I would look at people on the planet like him and say, ‘Who are these people? How dare they hope with their history?’ Maya is reminding us that there is something so unique and irresistible about the ability to transcend history, to see reality and yet be able to look beyond it and see something different and deeper.

Hope and Optimism

Americans, like South Africans in 1994, are desperately looking for some reason to be optimistic about the future. But the first message of our text is that hope and optimism are not the same. Paul wrote that “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” He was reminding the faithful in his letter to the Hebrews (Hebrew 11:1:1) that hope grows out of an openness to the unknown, the unexpected and the unexplored. It is a sense, sometimes with considerable certainty but often with lingering doubt, that we are not here alone, that each of us is a part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. Martin Luther King said to those of us who were about to launch a new movement in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1963 that while we must “accept finite disappointment, we must never lose infinite hope.” “Basic to our philosophy,” he said, “is a deep faith in the future. Ours is a movement based on hope because when you lose hope the movement dies.” That is why the movement song stated “We shall overcome, deep in my heart I do believe that we shall overcome.” When we faced hostile mobs, when we were thrown in jail and when our families faced the threat of physical death because of our involvement, there was something special about being able to sing; “We are not afraid. We shall overcome some day.”

We have not yet overcome, but it is great to be able to sing again with gusto, we are not afraid, we shall overcome some day. This is not the time, however, to give in to a kind of good morning in America sentimentalism. In his 1997 book *Restoring Hope*, Cornel West wrote that optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Hope, on the other hand, enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to make things better.

Hope is not optimism based on what you see. Hope allows us to see beyond what is and to imagine what can and what ought to be. It is not so much an act of memory as it is an act of imagination and faith. It is an acknowledgement that what you can imagine you can probably create.

Leadership and Hope

So the second message of our text is that hope is a way of being; that society is best served by leaders who in times of adversity can call us to our better selves and persuade us that an alternative future is indeed possible. And here is where the South African reference to a Mandela moment in the United States begins to make sense. This perception of the presidential election last November was not about just the long lines and the long wait at the voting places that reminded us of South Africa in 1994 when Nelson Mandela was elected. It was not just the magnitude of the moment that spoke so loudly about a leap forward in our efforts to form a more perfect union. It was not just the caution that what some proclaimed a miracle in South Africa when the new democracy was launched was in reality the beginning of a process that will continue long into the future.

The South Africans were saying something fundamental about the requirements of leadership in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. They were commenting on the qualities we were now highlighting, and to some degree validating, as critical to leadership at a complex, interdependent and almost apocalyptic global moment. They were saying that the leader who is likely to be effective must be both an agent of reconciliation and a purveyor of hope.

For a long time we in the United States were united in seeking to identify leaders who called us to a higher purpose, inspired us, informed us and elevated us. But we have been through a period in which many people seemed to be looking for the ordinary; someone in whose image they saw themselves, someone who looked like them, thought like them and acted like them. This romanticizing of ordinariness lost some of its hold on the American society on November 4th, but it has not been fully extinguished from the American mind.

Think again about why my friends in South Africa called this a Mandela moment in the United States. Mandela went from prison to president in a small country on the tip of the African continent. Yet, heads of

state and royalty from around the world beat a path to his door to seek his advice and counsel and, sometimes, for a photo op to prove that they had once been in the presence of this global icon. President Clinton said of him that when he enters a room, we all feel a little bigger and a little better because on our best days we all want to be like him.

It is remarkable to realize that Nelson Mandela was in prison while the internet was being developed. He was in prison while we were learning the many uses of the cell phone. He was in prison while we were becoming dependent on new technologies and the world economy was becoming more and more interdependent. But he came out of prison, took over the leadership of his party and his country without missing a beat because for him leadership was a way of being rather than simply a set of skills or a set of experiences. Both his attractiveness and his influence came from:

- the power of his personality,
- the elegance of his humanity,
- the loftiness of his ideals,
- the wisdom of his judgment,
- the calmness of his temperament and
- The power of his commitment to the well being of others.

Nelson Mandela emerged from prison at a time when effective leadership was portrayed by many as the ability to bluff, buy or bully one's way into influence. Even the projection of state power beyond national borders had come to be seen largely as the domain of what Arthur Schlesinger called the "warrior caste." Yet, Mandela's influence at home and his standing abroad went far beyond what might be suggested by the size of the military or the Gross Domestic Product of South Africa.

Even before the flood of recent writings in the United States about soft power, Mandela understood that seduction is likely to be more enduring than coercion. Earlier this week in Hillary Clinton's confirmation hearing before the United States Senate, she used Joseph Nye's notion of smart power to describe the Obama foreign policy. This is precisely what Mandela had in mind when he said upon his ascendancy to the presidency that if we do not resolve conflicts with our brains, we will eventually have to resolve them with our blood.

History and Hope

Let me end with a third message from our text. What the South Africans called a Mandela moment in the United States seemed to be a moment where hope and history came together in a very special way. Like the character in Sophocles play, we could almost hear in the distance these lines:

*“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 further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.*

*If there is fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky
That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.*

Next Tuesday, you and I will see hope and history rhyme. Yet, we are in danger of speaking double talk, of seeing new life at its term not as birth, but as fulfillment and finality. Like the South Africans in 1994, we will need to remember that the election of our 44th president was indeed an extraordinary leap forward in our effort to form a more perfect union, but it was simply a remarkable turning point in a process that will continue long into the future. In the 1970s, I use to joke that African Americans only got a chance to run predominantly white institutions like cities, nonprofit organizations and even business corporations when they were near collapse. It now seems that history has willed the same sort of fate for Barak Obama, but this time there are reasons to be more hopeful because it does seem that this is a moment

when the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme. This could indeed be a Mandela moment in the United States.

So as the euphoria of next Tuesday returns on Wednesday or at least by the weekend to the dominant mood of free anxiety, remember what Paul said to the Romans, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail, not only the creation, but we ourselves.” And then he added, “The sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us...For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he already sees.” When on Tuesday we bend history and say “Yes we can,” let us also say that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is yet to be revealed, for we serve a God whose got the whole world in his hands. We Christians can say yes to the moment because we know that after Good Friday comes Easter and that even in the midst of great adversity justice can rise up again and nations can beat their swords into plow shares and study war no more. We Christians can say yes to the moment because we believe that when there is fire on the mountain and our God speaks from the sky, this means that someone is hearing our cry. This may indeed be the moment when hope and history rhymes. AMEN.