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SERMON TITLE	<i>The Audacity of Hope</i>
TIME/PROPER	Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
PREACHER	The Rev. Will Ingram
LOCATION	St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Toronto, Ontario
DATE PREACHED	Sunday, September 30, 2007
SCRIPTURES	Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15, Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31
NOTES	<a href="#">Hear the sermon</a>

### *The Audacity of Hope*

One of the bestselling books from the past year was a book by Barack Obama. The book is an interesting read, as it outlines Obama's philosophies and hopes for his country. But regardless of whether or not one agrees with Barack Obama's politics, I think that the title of the book conveys a truly remarkable sentiment.

The book is called "The Audacity of Hope". What a wonderful phrase—the audacity of hope. In fact, I liked the title so much that I borrowed it for this sermon!

So often, we view hope as a naive, perhaps utopian outlook on the future. We view hopeful people as those who always see the silver lining in every cloud, who are always convinced that the glass is half full, and who are always convinced that everything is always going to work out just fine. Even though we might admire their optimistic spirit, we smile at their naiveté, and hope that they will be able to deal with life when reality sets in.

But in our sometimes smug cynicism, we often overlook the fact that hope is one of the three cardinal virtues of the Christian faith. Faith, hope and love abide, these three, wrote the apostle Paul. The greatest of these might be love, according to 1 Corinthians 13, but that should not mean that we overlook the importance of hope.

We do overlook it, however. In the church, we speak far more about faith and about love than we do about hope. We speak about what our faith should mean to us; and we speak about the call to love God, and our neighbours, and even our enemies. But how often do we talk about hope—and the struggle that we must, at times, embrace to remain hopeful in a world sometimes filled with despair?

Our neglect of hope is, in its own way, quite strange. After all, the greatest biblical definition of what faith is defines faith in terms of hope—"faith is the evidence of things *hoped* for, and the conviction of things not seen", according to Hebrews.

And a life without hope is, indeed, a terrible reality. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante quite wisely suggested that the words above the gates of hell were these—“abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” And Dante was right. A life bereft of hope is, in fact, quite hellish.

To speak, then, of the audacity of hope seems to suggest that hope is not simply the naive speculations of the overly optimistic—but that true Christian hope invites us to adopt a courageous perspective on life.

The prophet Jeremiah could teach us something about the audacity of hope. Today’s reading tells the story of Jeremiah’s prophetic act of buying a field in Anathoth. It seems, at first reading, like a rather meaningless real estate transaction. And yet, that simple act of buying the field in Anathoth was, in its own way, an irrationally hope-filled act.

To fully appreciate just how audacious Jeremiah’s action of buying the field in Anathoth truly was, it is necessary to be aware of the context for this passage.

In verse 2, we read, “the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem.” The city of Jerusalem was under siege, and things did not look good.

Jeremiah himself was confined in the court of the king. He had been confined there because the king did not appreciate the messages that Jeremiah was offering in that time of crisis. Rather than reassuring everyone that things were going to work out well, Jeremiah had delivered a far less hopeful message. The king, Jeremiah had declared, was going to be carried into captivity; the Israelite army was going to be defeated; and exile was soon going to be their new reality. It is not hard to realize why such predictions do not exactly build up a people’s morale. And, as a result, King Zedekiah chose to respond to Jeremiah’s gloomy predictions by imprisoning him.

While confined in the king’s court, one of Jeremiah’s relatives approached him, and offered to sell him a piece of land in Anathoth. As real estate scams go, this one was pretty bold. The village of Anathoth was likely located about three miles north of Jerusalem. And, in all likelihood, the Babylonian army that was besieging Jerusalem was either encamped on the very field that Jeremiah was being offered to purchase; or, at the very least, was in control of access to the area in which the field lay. A modern analogy would be an Iraqi citizen trying to sell the land that the American military forces presently control just outside of Baghdad.

But Jeremiah bought the field.

Jeremiah bought the field, and in so doing offered an incredible demonstration of the audacity of hope. Even though Jeremiah had been the lone voice predicting that the Babylonian was about to prevail, and even though the Babylonian army was controlling the field that he was purchasing, he bought the field anyways.

Why? Because Jeremiah believed that God’s purposes would prevail, and that the present turmoil and inevitable exile that confronted his people would not last forever. “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land”.

Jeremiah was not overcome by the seemingly overwhelming situation that confronted him. In spite of his circumstances, he still lived with hope in the promises of God. He knew that the future of his people was not entirely bright, and that there would be difficulties that lay ahead. But he bought the field anyways. He demonstrated the audacity of hope.

The American author Jim Wallis, in his book Faith Works, offers a rather wonderful definition of such hope. “Hope,” he wrote, “is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.”

Let me repeat that—it is almost good enough to commit to memory. “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.” To put it in terms of our reading from Jeremiah, hope is buying the field when the Babylonians occupy it, and then watching God’s promises come true.

But, one might ask, does this mean that we, as people of faith, simply get whatever we hope for, as long as we hope hard enough? Does this mean that the Christian faith can be reduced to some power-of-positive-thinking system for confronting difficulties? Is there some slick Christian version of ‘The Secret’ that we need to learn in order to make all of our Christian hopes come true? Or, by contrast, are the cynics right when they suggest that Christian hope really, at its very heart, is just a reassuring way to confront death by encouraging people to hope for heaven?

Certainly not.

Rather, as Christians, we are called to allow our minds to be shaped by the mind of Christ. And when that happens, our hopes begin to be reshaped. Our hopes begin to align themselves with Christ’s visions for this world, and his dream of the coming of a different kind of kingdom to this earth. We no longer find satisfaction in allowing our hopes to be limited to the petty longings for status and prestige that beset the modern mind; nor are our hopes primarily oriented to guaranteeing our own personal entry into some heavenly realm in the hereafter.

Instead, we begin to hope for what Christ himself prayed for—that heaven and earth will be made one—right here and right now. We begin to hope that God’s kingdom will come, and God’s will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. The longing at the heart of Christian hope is not simply that we might make it to heaven; our great hope is that heaven will make it to us, here on earth.

But, in the meantime, we know that things on earth are not as they are in heaven. We know that terrible things happen in this world—loved ones die, the innocent suffer, nations destroy each other in war, we abuse the earth. To speak of living in the hope that heaven and earth will be made one demands a hope that sometimes feels difficult to muster.

And in those moments, the example of Jeremiah rises up to challenge us. Would we have bought that field? Do we have the audacity to live with that great a hope? Do we have the audacity to allow our lives to be shaped by the promises of God and the priorities of God’s kingdom? And do we have the courage to stand against any injustice, any prejudice, any sin, any violence, any hatred that would stand in the way of the coming of Christ’s kingdom?

Last year, I was at some meetings of the World Council of Churches, which took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil. One of the highlights of those meetings was the presence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Rarely, in my life, have I ever encountered a person so filled with joy, so brimming with good humour, so radiant with hope. Which is remarkable when one considers the experiences that Tutu has had—living under that demonic system called apartheid, often viewed as a second-class human being because of the colour of his skin; and then standing for Truth and Reconciliation at a time when vengeance seemed both understandable and inevitable, and declaring with powerful eloquence that there could be no future for his country without

forgiveness. It would certainly be understandable if he had been overcome by cynicism, by doubt, or by despair. And yet, he is a Christian. He is a man of hope.

One of my favourite stories about that little giant of a man, that titan of hope, is a story that, in its own way, bears certain resemblances to our reading from Jeremiah. That is, Archbishop Desmond Tutu bought a field called racial equality when everyone else thought that apartheid would last forever. The incident took place in South Africa during the apartheid regime, at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town. An observer wrote about the experience—"A political rally had just been canceled by the white government, so Bishop Tutu called for a worship service instead, inside the beautiful cathedral. The power of apartheid was frighteningly evident in the numbers of riot police and armed soldiers massing outside the church. Inside, all along the cathedral walls, stood more police openly taping and writing down every comment made from the pulpit. When Tutu rose to speak, the atmosphere was tense indeed. He confidently proclaimed that the 'evil' and 'oppression' of the system of apartheid 'cannot prevail'. At that moment, the South African archbishop was probably one of the few people on the planet who actually believed that."

But then, the observer wrote, "I sat in the cathedral congregation and watched Archbishop Tutu point his finger right at the police who were recording his words. "You may be powerful indeed very powerful, but you are not God!" And the God whom we serve, said Tutu, "cannot be mocked!" "You have already lost!" the diminutive preacher thundered. Then he came out from behind the pulpit and seemed to soften, flashing that signature Desmond Tutu smile. So—since they had already lost, as had just been made clear—South Africa's spiritual leader shouted with glee, "We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!"

Of course, it is lamentable that Tutu was so naïve as to live with the hope that apartheid in South Africa might end. What an unrealistic hope. Everyone knew that apartheid would go on for a long time to come. Only a naïve fool would buy that great field called racial equality. But hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.

And now—in the space of a few short years—apartheid is mocked; our children will wonder how it ever could have been taken seriously; truth and reconciliation have been demonstrably proven to be more powerful than violent shock and awe campaigns. A number of Central American countries formerly ruled by despots and dictators are beginning to look at the model of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions as the pathway towards justice and peace in their societies. And that supposedly naïve little archbishop from South Africa now stands as one of the spiritual icons of our age—simply because he had the audacity to hope that God's power and God's promises would, in fact, prevail over sin and injustice.

Tutu is not, of course, alone. He is a Christian; he is a man who has, like all of us, been captured by the audacity of those who, three days after a man was crucified, dared to proclaim that the tomb was empty. God's love had not died; human hope had not been quenched; a new reality had broken into human history; and nothing would ever be the same again. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ground of our hope for this world.

And, just as Christ's death gave way to a new life, so too the claim of the resurrection is that every power that attempts to destroy the power of love, of life and of hope will be overcome. God will not allow love and hope to die; even when they seem to be overwhelmed. And because we believe in the resurrection, we are a people who believe that injustice will come to an end;

that violence and hatred will not have the final word; that death itself is not the end; that love is eternal. As one commentator has written, “Hope is not a virtue practiced only by the naïve and simpleminded who do not realize how desperate things really are. To be a Christian is to hope—to believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus point beyond themselves to the completion of what has only been begun....[and that T]he future lies securely in the hands of a gracious God.”

And so, even in our most difficult moments, when the powers of this world seem to be laying siege to our lives; when death and injustice are threatening to destroy us, we join Jeremiah; we join Jesus; we join the saints of all the ages. We buy a field called hope. We look at this world, and measure it against our vision of God’s kingdom. And when those two visions do not line up, in those moments when the principalities and powers of injustice, hatred, sin and death seem to be all powerful, we humbly say,

You may be powerful indeed very powerful, but you are not God!...And the God whom we serve cannot be mocked! You seemingly triumphant powers of hatred and death have already lost! So we are inviting you to come and join the winning side!

The tomb was empty—and in that simple fact is found the reason for the audacity of our hope.