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A HOPE THAT DOESN'T WAIT; A HOPE THAT WAITS

Paul F. Bosch

One of the enduring contributions to pop culture, in my view, has been the TV show, *All in the Family*. In one memorable episode, Archie Bunker and his son-in-law, Mike, are in a furious argument. When Archie leaves, his wife Edith tells Mike why Archie gets mad. Archie gets mad at Mike, says Edith, because Mike represents everything Archie never had; Education, and the opening of options. Edith reminds Mike that his own life is just beginning: it's filled with possibility. But Archie knows that *his* life is pretty well settled. His *own* options are not open, but closed; the possibilities are not there. The studio audience gave Edith an extended ovation at that speech. It seemed to me — and apparently to the studio audience as well — to be an especially sensitive and loving statement.

That brings me to this occasion: Baccalaureate. For the sake of this sermon, let's suppose you're like Mike in the TV show. And let's suppose I'm more like Archie. Those of us who are adults have pretty much made our commitments, for good or bad. We've committed ourselves to one spouse; one job; one faith. And for the most part, we're engaged now in living out those commitments. But by and large you haven't made those commitments yet. Your options are still relatively open.

For the sake of this sermon, then, let's say I represent the Archie Bunker generation, with some significant qualifications. And let's say that you represent, also with some significant qualifications, the Mike generation.

Let me confess to you, then, my own single most troubling fear about you and your future. My single most troubling fear about you, the one thing I would hate to

see happen, over almost anything else, would be for you to leave here, having lost, somewhere along the way, your idealism; your sense of vision for the future; your sense of enthusiasm for the splendid possibility.

That's a terrible prospect, living as we all have through these recent years together — to see the mess our world is in: our institutions of law and government; our institutions of education, of science and medicine; our institutions of family and of religion — as I say, to go through what all these institutions have gone through in recent years, and to give up on them; to become cynical and soured on life; to lose a sense of resilience and hope and enthusiasm for what the future might hold.

I think this is at least part of John's motive in the Gospel today, when he puts these words into Jesus' mouth: "I am the way, the truth, the life." He's saying something here about hope, about the future; your individual future and the future of the cosmos. If the forgiveness of sins means anything, for instance, it means at least a new chance, a new beginning. And that's perhaps the finest gift that faith can give: a vision of things that is not closed; not final; but full of direction and movement and meaning, sometimes in spite of the evidence.

There's that marvelous hymn to Love in *I Corinthians* which we read today, in which the Apostle Paul cites a kind of hierarchy of values. He says, "Faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

I like that, because it's a reminder to me of love's absolute priority. But Paul had some great things to say about faith too, remember; and some incredibly valuable advice about hope.

And it's my prayer for you that you retain all three: faith, and hope, and love, in equal measure. Direction; movement; meaning; purpose; a sense that it's all been worth it: that's the Christian hope. That's the substance of my prayer for you today: that you do not lose hope.

I don't see you losing love, quite frankly. You impress me as loving people, as people who perhaps know more about love than my own generation.

I don't see you as losing faith necessarily; although that too, is always a human possibility.

But I do fear your losing hope, in a crazy, disappointing world. And I don't want you to; I don't want you to lose your zest for life in all its fullness, even against the evidence.

A couple of years ago, some public-spirited private company sponsored an international conference on religion and the world of the future.

They called together church people, pastors, bishops, theologians, lay leaders, along with eminent scholars and thinkers from a wide variety of backgrounds — anthropology, technology, medicine, the human potential movement — and they set about the task of trying to second-guess what the future would hold for the churches, for the religious enterprise.

One of the most stirring presentations at that conference was apparently a speech by a German theologian who contrasted two different ways of viewing the future. He used the Latin-German designations, *Futurum* and *Adventus*, to describe these two different views.

He said it's possible, for example, to think of the years to come in terms of what he called *Futurum*. That is to say, you project what the future will be like by ex-

trapolating from the present. You gather data in the present, and you say, if present trends continue, then the future will be like this.

Now that's a legitimate enough way to look at things.

But he said there's a second way to imagine the future, and that's the way of *Adventus*, what he called the biblical way. And according to this view, you begin with the future, not the present. You say, this is what I want the future to look like; and then you work backwards, and say, if this is what we want the future to be, then this is what we have to do today, to make it happen tomorrow.

You may not be aware, for example, that one of the sources of scandal in Jesus' teaching for the religious leaders of his day was Jesus' boldness, his authoritative creativity, in dealing with the future.

Jesus came among the people of his day and simply announced that he was not going to wait for the Kingdom of God to be established in its fullness: He announced the reign of God beginning now, beginning here, beginning with him. For instance, it was a commonplace assumption, in Jesus' day, that only God could forgive sins; and further, that that forgiveness would have to wait for heaven. And Jesus challenges both these assumptions.

Only God can forgive sins? Well, *I'm* forgiving sins, here and now, in God's name. We have to wait for heaven? For the fullness of the kingdom, before people of differing backgrounds can be reconciled? Well, no. *I'm* announcing that reconciliation now, here, today, and acting on it. And Jesus eats with outcasts and prostitutes.

Most of us, with Jesus, have a vision of what heaven will be like; of what the world would be like, at its best. Okay, says Jesus, act on it. Do it now. Don't wait. Anticipate the coming of the Kingdom of God.

So Christian people, following Jesus down through the years, have done just that, and they've turned the world upside down. And you could interpret everything from the invention of hospitals and universities; to the rise of technology; to the abolition of slavery; to the various contemporary movements for human liberation; all as aspects of that same impulse: Christian people, following Jesus in not waiting; following Jesus in acting now to anticipate the Kingdom of God; improvising and shaping the future; literally shaping what the future will be, by daring to make a difference today.

I have a preacher friend named Harold Jansen, and he says he was praying one day, asking God what he should do with his life. And, he says, God answered him "Oh, I don't know, Harold; surprise me!"

I love that way of looking at life: Being able, and willing, to surprise God by my own improvisations today, which by God's grace can give shape to tomorrow.

So my prayer for you, today, is that you may not lose hope; and further, that the hope you have may be, so to speak, an impatient hope, impatient like Jesus' impatience, not waiting for heaven, not waiting for the Kingdom of God in its fullness, but instead daring to shape the future by what you do today.

Let me urge on you the kind of hope we celebrate every Sunday in our Eucharist, our Holy Communion, a hope that anticipates the Kingdom's rule, when peace and justice and intimacy are not just a sneer on the lips of a cynic, but a human reality. I pray for you a hope not paralyzed by cynicism: a hope that's properly impatient: a hope that doesn't wait for Messiah's second coming, but gets in on Messiah's action even now.

But I pray for you, also, a hope with a long view of things. That's, paradoxically enough, a hope that *is* willing to wait. The Kingdom of God has been set in motion by Jesus Christ — that's the Good News of our Gospel. Jesus invites us in on the action. He invites you to begin today to improvise a better future. But that vision, that dream, grows little by little, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes against the evidence. So paradoxically, the hope that doesn't wait is also the hope that waits, patiently doing its thing, until the harvest.

Have you seen that Public Service Announcement on TV, produced by the Franciscans? The scene opens on a room in a nursing home, where an old woman sits at the phone across the room begins to ring. The camera follows her as she stands up painfully, and then moves across the room with her walker — closeups of her feet shuffling across the floor — until you begin to ache for her; will she answer the phone in time, before the caller hangs up? She finally reaches for the phone, puts it to her ear; and the voice on the other end says: "Hello, Grandma?" Her face lights up in a smile, and there's a freeze frame with the words: HOPE IS WHEN LOVE WAITS.



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