

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Let us together find true hope in the New Year



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“Hope means believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change.”

This is how Christian leader and activist Jim Wallis paraphrases the passage from Scripture, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

The evidence is not obvious, with the seemingly unending wars in Syria and Afghanistan, political polarization, increasing deaths by opioids and guns, and racial and religious violence.

We continue to read the negative news of assaults on faith and on those identified with a faith. Recently, at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, we saw America’s most deadly anti-Semitic attack. Earlier, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in a speech to the British House of Lords pointed to the increasing threats faced by “people of all faiths, and of none.”

“Christians are being persecuted throughout the Middle East and elsewhere,” Sacks said. “Jews are facing a new and resurgent anti-Semitism. Muslims who stand on the wrong side of the Sunni-Shia divide are being killed in great numbers. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’is and others face persecution in some parts of the world. Religious freedom is about our common humanity, and we must fight for it if we are not to lose it.”

Writing in the *Christian Century*, publisher Peter Marty noted that hope is very different from optimism; it is not just wishing that things would be different or better.

“Wishing is a flat and powerless venture,” Marty goes on. “I may wish upon a shooting star, or wish for a brand new car. But so what? What does that wishing add up to? Hope goes so much deeper, requiring risk and assuming responsibility.”

The *Christian Century* also featured an article by theology professor Charles R. Pinches on “How to live in hope.” He writes, “When we speak of hope in connection with love and faith, we are placing it among the three theological virtues. ... The theological virtue called hope is linked to action or movement. Hope is a good habit by which we move forward toward a future good that is both possible and difficult to attain. ... Difficulty is a part of the definition of hope. This makes the phrase ‘difficult hope’ redundant.”

Pinches notes that the term used for life without hope is “despair,” and Aquinas calls despair the greatest sin. In St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he extols “faith, hope and love ... and the greatest of these is love.” (I Corinthians 13:13) Why then does Aquinas consider the opposite of hope more important than hate, the opposite of the greatest virtue of love? In the absence of faith

I can still act. In the absence of love, even in the midst of hate, I can act and reverse my thinking and restore love. But in the absence of hope, I am paralyzed and nothing can be accomplished — not even love or faith.

Could it be that the increasing use of alcohol, opioids and illegal drugs are signs of despair? Could it be that the government’s inability to respond to the needs of many of our citizens, or to act in light of the most pressing problems, is an indication of despair? Has the country lost hope in its leaders? Has Washington lost hope in its own ability to act for the common good? Are we in danger of slipping into an irreversible despair?

Let us regain hope! Let us hope that we can restore our commitment to virtues like justice and compassion. Let us hope that we can share our successes with those different from ourselves. Let us hope that all people of faith and goodwill can come together to strengthen each other and our mutual commitment to the common good.

Wallis writes “the most important thing the world needs from the faith community today is hope.” But hope isn’t just a feeling or having an optimistic outlook. He continues, “Rather, hope is a decision, a choice we make because of this thing we call faith.”

Wallis even finds hope in the story of Job. Wallis observes that in the Hebrew Scripture, Job, in spite of all his suffering, does not give up. He speaks of hope. “There is hope for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not fade away.” (Job 14:7)

During the Apartheid era in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, using a phrase from the prophet Zechariah, said, “I have never been an optimist. I am a prisoner of hope.”

Marty ends his comments by telling how in the later part of Nelson Mandela’s 27-year imprisonment, he was visited by his daughter and his new granddaughter who had still not been named. Mandela gave her the name Zaziwe, an African word for hope. Answering the question “Why?” he later wrote, “During all my years in prison, hope never left me.” Marty then concludes, “Hope is what sustains us when we’re not ready to give up on God beaming light into our darkness.”

As people of faith, as well as anyone seeking the common good, let us fight against despair, both personal and corporate. Even when the evidence is not clear, we make the decision to act and to live in hope. Let us renew our hope. Only in the difficult task of working together can we take the necessary action to restore our common sense of well-being and do what is right for all.

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