

FACING THE FUTURE

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Hebrews 11:1-16

Early in the 20th century, a man named Mallory led an expedition of climbers attempting to conquer Mt. Everest. The expedition failed. Mallory tried again with a second group. Again the expedition failed. Mallory then assembled a third expedition made up of the most experienced and able climbers he could find. But in spite of careful planning, the third expedition ended in disaster when an avalanche struck, killing Mallory and most of the party. Later, when the few survivors returned home to England, they were invited to attend a banquet given as a tribute to both the deceased and the surviving members of Mallory's party. When the leader of the survivors was introduced, he rose from his chair and looked around the room at the pictures of Mallory and his other dead comrades which had been hung on the walls. Then he turned his back to the audience to face a huge picture of Mt. Everest hanging behind the banquet tables. Tears filled his eyes as he addressed the mountain in behalf of Mallory and the others. He said, "I speak to you, Mount Everest, in the name of all brave men, living and yet unborn. You defeated us once; you defeated us twice; you defeated us three times. But, Mount Everest, we shall someday defeat you, because you can't get any bigger, and we can."

As this happened long before Everest was finally conquered by Sir Edmund Hillary and the Sherpa guide Tenzing Norgay, it is probably hard for us to imagine the obsession by which adventurous people regarded what was then the unclimbable Mt. Everest. For a hundred years since Westerners discovered the great Himalayan mountain, expedition after expedition challenged the peak only to fail just like the party of Mallory.

When asked why they risked life and limb to try to scale Everest, the characteristic answer was, "Because it is there." It is a statement that has been echoed not only by mountain climbers but by all who would seek to do what has never been done before, to triumph where others have lost.

Our Scripture reading today from Hebrews is a treatise on facing the future. It is about having the courage to take the risk set out in faith despite all the uncertainties that one might encounter. It is about overcoming adversity in order to triumph in the end.

How do people face the future? They have two choices. The first choice is fear. There are people who are afraid of the future; that is why so many people who are still living in the 20th century even though we crossed the threshold from one century to the next seven ago. In my career as a minister, I always had to be fully aware of fear of the future whenever I started a new congregation because half the time, as it happens quite a bit with free churches such as those in the United Church of Christ, my new congregation was recently traumatized over a recent congregational conflict often involving their relationship with their previous minister. The symptoms are fairly common. They usually are fixated in the past. They are so afraid of the future that they build all kinds of

obstacles to make sure that things don't happen again the way they did. I remember when I became minister of one church following an unfortunate conflict between the congregation and the minister whom I succeeded. By the time I got there, they had revised their bylaws and a large section was devoted to a huge bureaucratic layer, a very complicated process of how to select a new minister. As a result, not even St. Paul, never mind Jesus, could have satisfied their criteria for a new minister. And there were all kinds of hoops that a new minister had to go through. The new bylaws were clearly driven by fear.

The Luddites were a band of workers in England from 1811 to 1816 who feared the future. Specifically, they feared change and how it would affect their jobs. Their leader was Jed Ludd, and these followers (Luddites) went on rampages destroying machinery. For example, the transition from plow to punch-press filled them with consternation. They believed their future was at risk from the new technology of the day. Machine power would replace manpower. They believed they could stop change and that they could fight the future. Hence, the name Luddite has come to mean anyone who tries to perpetuate the status quo by any means.

When we're fearful -- or at least uncomfortable -- of the future, the tendency is to look longingly to the past. It's called "nostalgia." This desire for the past easily beckons to us, so that we frequently long for things as they used to be. Yet, our memories are selective. Our nostalgia is for only a portion of the past. Some of us may fondly remember the good old days when we could buy hamburger at two pounds for a dollar. Or a gallon of gasoline for 50 cents. But when we recall how long it took us to earn the money to pay for a tank of gasoline, we doubt if we want to go back after all.

And to what era would we return? Of course, nobody in their right mind would go back to a time earlier than July 23, 1904, because that's when the ice-cream cone was invented. I bet very few would want to go back to the 70's when we started to have ATM machines. It is said that hundreds of thousands of bank jobs will be lost in the near future because banks are finding it much more profitable to convince everyone to do their banking online. In some places now, you get charged extra for doing your banking at the bank lobby. For some people, that sounds scary. But for a few others, it is liberating. I am one of those people. Because online banking is like child's play to me, I love to receive bills. So as soon as a bill arrives in the mail, I practically run to the computer to pay it.

But fear is not the only choice in facing the future. The other option, which is what the Bible espouses, is faith. Faith is the predominant theme of the book of Hebrews. Simply put, faith, to the writer of Hebrews, means trusting in God, come what may. It maintains that only faith enables one to believe that the universe is of God and is controlled by God. In a catalogue of Old Testament heroes, the writer shows that it was faith in the unseen purpose of God, despite all evidence to the contrary, that enabled Abraham, Moses and other great souls of old Israel to earn the right to be called God's people. It was a future-oriented faith -- an assurance of things hoped for.

Religion has always been populated by timid folks. Jesus was surrounded by people who were fixated in the past. They justified themselves with phrases like "Abraham said" or "Moses said" or somebody out of the immediate past said. Jesus countered, "But I say unto you," and pointed them in the direction of the future.

The writer of Hebrews, likewise, took the forward view. He acknowledged the contribution of Abraham, Moses, and other Old Testament heroes, but instead of treating them as relics of a forgotten age, he held them out as examples of the people of God who "went ahead," rather than retreat into the past.

How one looks at the future determines whether life is to be lived in drudgery or joyful anticipation. Studies of different groups bear this out. For example, an efficiency study was made several years back on a group of New York office workers. The study revealed that workers who had no home or social life to look forward to at the end of the day grew weary and inefficient well ahead of quitting time. On the other hand, those employees who looked forward to home and family or to some meaningful activity each evening worked with but limited fatigue and remained efficient to the closing hour. Another study is based on the observation of happily married couples. Happily married couples are those who are sure of their future. The fact that they have a certain joint future radically changes their behavior. They make amazing demands on each other, demands that are cheerfully met. Often, the needs of one spouse are identified and met before they are even expressed. In part, this generous spirit must flow out of the security of knowing that they will be together, happily. In the same way, Christians would be so much more joyful as citizens of the kingdom of God if they made a clear commitment to their certain future and invested themselves generously in that future.

In Western Massachusetts where I preached for 30 years I set a pattern of staying with a congregation no more than seven years. The scuttlebutt among ministerial circles is that the number seven is just the right tenure for a minister; less than that, you would not be able to make your mark and more than that, you are in danger of overstaying. So with the exception of my very last church in which I stayed nine years, I resigned after seven years with those churches that I call my reconciliation projects in reference to the fact that when I took them over, they were traumatized and were at the verge of dying. Invariably, the leaders of the churches were reluctant to let me go and some even half-threateningly said that if I leave them they would die. To which I responded, "If you think you are paying me a compliment, you are very wrong. In fact the exact opposite is true. If after seven years I have not strengthened you and your faith to the point that you can face the future without me, then I have failed in my mission." That usually silenced them. Parenthetically, I am delighted that all those churches that I left behind are now alive and thriving.

For some reason that number seven appears to hound me throughout my professional life and even my retirement activities. I look back at the day when I first decided to take an active hand in uniting Silliman's North American alumni into one organization and guess what. It was seven years ago when in January 2000 I traveled to Silliman to get President Pulido's blessings and his presence at a U.S. based Silliman

Centennial celebration that would at the same time lay the groundwork for a national organization. He said Yes on condition that we would hold it before classes started in Silliman because the community would not look kindly at his being absent at the beginning of the Centennial school year. That's how we wound up having the first Tipon in Chicago in the month of May. His support was a real boost but even then launching SUACONA was not a piece of cake because as expected, there were the usual psychological and political obstacles to be overcome put up by well-meaning people. But again it all boiled down to the fear of the unknown and untried. And as I retire from active duties as a national officer of SUACONA, I hear some voices of fear and doubt as in the past like a broken record. And to those voices I say, SUACONA will live on and prosper thanks to the army of faithful, hardworking and committed leaders, old and new, that will be undaunted by fear and uncertainty and will push on with confidence toward the future.

In a well-known and oft-quoted speech, the late Robert Kennedy put the question on the choice each one of us has in facing the future in these words: "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?"

We at SUACONA have dedicated ourselves to providing a lifelong community for students and alumni of Silliman University, to being an effective partner in supporting Silliman's academic and artistic excellence, to enhancing commitment to Silliman's historic values and community service, and to commit ourselves to creating a community of caring and developing a vibrant quilt of cultures where the future will work for all. To paraphrase Bobby Kennedy, some may look at these ambitious goals and ask why. But we at SUACONA must dare to dream big and rather ask, "Why not?"

Prayer: O God, O God, thou who art the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, teach us to always put our faith on thee. Bless our coming and going and may we always trust that for every step of the way, you are ever present and always ahead of us, bringing in the new, breaking ground and leading us in paths of righteousness. May we look at the challenges of the future not as a burden but as an opportunity to increase our faithfulness and fulfill our charge as stewards of your kingdom. Amen.