

Against All Odds: Hope In Dark Times

Stanley Weinberg, LCSW, BCD

Feature Articles

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If you stroll or bike south in Hudson River Park, you can find, at the entrance to Rockefeller Park and opposite Stuyvesant High School, a plaque, on the railing overlooking the river, commemorating the spot where it is believed that Frederick Douglass landed in New York in 1845, having just escaped from slavery. Though he was now free, he was not out of danger, due to the cruel and unjust Fugitive Slave Act, and to the widespread support of slavery and hostility to formerly enslaved people in New York at that time. Yet on his arrival in New York, Frederick Douglass wrote the following, which can be read on the above-mentioned plaque:

A new world had opened upon me. Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be depicted; but gladness and joy, like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.

Despite all the danger and obstacles he faced, Frederick Douglass experienced and expressed his gratitude and joy to be, as he said, on free soil. In those dark times, his survival for a day without being caught and returned to slavery and certain death was to beat the odds. Could he possibly have imagined then that he would live to become one of the most famous of abolitionists, a women's rights advocate, orator, author, and the first African-American US ambassador (to Haiti)?

"Against all odds" could also be a title for the story of our faith. Jesus brought light and hope into a dark and dangerous world; and the events of his life, death, and resurrection take beating the odds to the level of the miraculous. Against all odds, a small group of persecuted followers of "The Way" ventured out into a dangerous world to upend the prevailing worldview by spreading the Gospel with teachings such as:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

The Way began to lose its way when it became a state religion and began to serve the interests of emperors, czars, kings, and queens. The cross, merged with the sword and whip, succumbed to the temptations of greed and power, and the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable.

Hierarchical systems of domination marked by religious legitimation of political oppression and economic exploitation have brought us to our present perilous times. Never has life as we know it been in graver danger. In the United States, our very democracy is threatened as it hasn't been since the Civil War. Throughout the world we see the rise of authoritarian leaders, with an accompanying increase in xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism.

Our country and the world will need a sea-change to survive. And that sea-change is possible; but it will require a radical re-ordering of social systems that even now continue to be modeled on the very system of domination that Jesus countered.

Our diocese knows that we must make radical changes. In recent years, our churches have been addressing our participation in the evil institution of slavery and its legacy of racism. But we must go further and address the hierarchical systems, and our participation in them, that have brought us to these perilous times. If we are to go forward, we must first go back to our origins: to "The Way." If we are to heal and save a *sick, sick* world, we must denounce evil not only in word, but in deed.

Bibliography:

"The Last Week", by Marcus J. Bork & John Dominic Crossan
"Caste" by Isabel Wilkerson