

New Things and Old Habits: Rediscovering Hope in a Cynical Age

Old Habits and New Beginnings

Have you ever tried teaching an old dog new tricks? Or, for that matter, tried teaching a teenager to clean their room? Let's face it—when God cleans house, He doesn't just dust the furniture; He builds a new mansion. And that's what He is proclaiming to us today through the Prophet Isaiah: "*Behold, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*" (Isaiah 43:19).

But here's the problem: we often fail to perceive the new thing because we're stuck in our old habits. Worse still, we cling to our despair like it's a treasured family heirloom. Despair has become fashionable. Faith? Commitment? Hope? Well, those are seen as relics of a less enlightened past.

The Fathers of the Church, however, were never ashamed of hope. They preached it boldly, especially in times far darker than our own. St. Augustine understood this well when he said, "*God has promised forgiveness to your repentance, but He has not promised tomorrow to your procrastination.*" And if we're honest, many of us procrastinate not just with repentance, but with hope itself.

I. God's Newness vs. Our Old Miseries

Isaiah speaks of a God who "*opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters.*" (Isaiah 43:16). Our God is the God of surprises, the God who delights in newness. But what do we do? We hold on to the familiar even when it's terrible. The Israelites, freed from Egypt, complained in the desert saying, "*We were better off as slaves!*" Humanity has a strange habit of romanticizing the past, especially when the present requires effort.

St. John Chrysostom noted, "*Even if we are in a desert, God will turn it into a garden if we turn to Him.*" Yet, too often, we prefer our deserts because they are known, comfortable, predictable.

The Psalm today (*Psalms 126:1-6*) paints a picture of joyful return: "*The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.*" And yet, even here, the psalmist acknowledges that tears precede joy. The hope of return is planted with tears but harvested in joy.

II. The Strange Addiction to Despair

Isn't it curious that we often resist joy more than we resist suffering? St. Jerome once remarked, "*Face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are.*" And the truth is, many of us don't want to change because we've grown attached to our excuses. We cling to the narrative that the world is falling apart and that God is distant.

This addiction to despair is nothing new. The desert fathers often warned against *acedia*—spiritual sloth or despondency—which is really a refusal to hope. It's easier to dismiss

God's promises than to risk hoping in them. After all, if we expect nothing, we will never be disappointed.

St. Teresa of Avila put it bluntly: *"Despair is the greatest betrayal of God's mercy."* It's not humility to expect so little of God; it's a kind of spiritual arrogance.

III. The Moral Principle Under Attack: Hope

If there is a moral principle denied today, it is *hope*. The culture around us thrives on cynicism. To hope is seen as foolish, naïve, or worse—dangerous. Yet, the Christian message is fundamentally one of hope. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us, *"The one who has hope lives differently."*

Hope is not mere optimism. It's not about pretending things are fine when they aren't. It is the confident expectation that God is still at work, even in the darkest moments. It's the belief that the desert can bloom, that the sinner can become a saint, that the Church, despite all her flaws, remains the Bride of Christ.

St. Augustine would say to us today, *"Our hearts are restless until they rest in You."* That restlessness is a sign that God is making something new. But are we willing to perceive it? Or are we too busy lamenting our own failures, and the supposed failures of everyone else?

IV. The Call to Let Go of the Old

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but Lazarus still had to *let go* of his burial cloths. Too many of us want resurrection without transformation. We want renewal, but we don't want to let go of our comfortable old habits.

God is making rivers in the desert—why are we still clutching at the dust? The Church Fathers constantly remind us that conversion is not a one-time event but a continuous renewal. As St. Basil the Great said, *"Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart."*

Living Hope in a Cynical World

Today's readings remind us that the desert doesn't have the last word. God is always doing something new. The challenge is whether we are willing to perceive it.

We must live like people who believe in the Resurrection, who believe that grace is stronger than sin, who believe that God's mercy is always greater than our failures. As St. Paul said, *"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal"* (Philippians 3:13-14).

So, let's press on with hope. Because in the end, despair may be fashionable, but it is *hope* that transforms the world.