

Title: DRIVEN BY FEAR, THREATENED BY HOPE: ACTIVE FAITH IN A POLITICALLY TOXIC WORLD

Texts: Exodus 16:1-3, 11-17; Mark 6: 45-56

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We can be driven by fear and threatened by hope! How is that possible?

We can be driven by fear because of real or perceived threats to our narrow and ill-conceived notion of security, and we can be threatened by hope because the possibility of the coming of the new may subvert our desired security, which is seen through the framework of scarcity and fear of the other. This fear could easily lead to hatred and scapegoating, which could easily slide into the slippery slope of violent extremism...then, just a hairline away, to hate crime.

Just fresh from retirement as a seminary president in the Philippines for the last ten years, my attention was immediately drawn to the issue of human behavior vis-à-vis the dream of a better tomorrow as I read the Exodus lectionary passages these past few weeks.

It's true that the development of "non-performing assets" of an institution, such as land, is a challenge that must be addressed decisively and effectively. This, I'm happy to say, was achieved when, among others, the seminary declared full free tuition fee for students. This is the first time in the history of the seminary. The greatest challenge, however, is not "property development," but "human resource development." The greatest challenge, which is also the greatest asset, is people. It's not "software," to use the words of a seminary colleague, but "peopleware."

Certainly, we are facing many "technical challenges." A "technical challenge" may be complex, but it has a solution in the current know-how or in the years to come as we progress in knowledge and skills. The solution to a technical problem lies in the hands of experts.

This is not true, however, with "adaptive challenges." The solution does not lie simply in the authority and work of an expert, but in the active participation of the people. "Adaptive challenge" requires a change in people's worldview, self-understanding, beliefs, habits, values, priorities, loyalties, and imagination.

With a new set of eyes from my experience in institutional leadership, I can see that there comes a time when an institution or a people must make the decisive move to wake up from its slumber and unshackle itself from the chains of the past, including the chain of the "good old days," to move forward to a new and better tomorrow. In the case of the ancient Israelites, they made the resolve to leave Egypt for the "promised land."

Like the Israelites' Exodus narrative, which the United States of America has arrogated to itself, we all desire a better tomorrow not only for ourselves but also for the coming generation. Leaving any physical Egypt, such as the so-called Old World, was certainly full of challenges, but

that's not the most challenging and difficult part. The most difficult part is the formation of the nation of our dreams. This is the site of contestation!

Inspired by enlightenment ideas, in my younger years as a student of religion and society I thought that society would simply move in linear progression from the primitive to the more enlightened. To my realization, this is not true. History moves in twists and turns, forward and backward, even flow and convulsions. Change, especially when it threatens the imagined good no matter how ill-conceived, would surely generate strong, if not aggressive and violent reaction.

Driven by fear on one hand and threatened by unrealized hope on the other, what can we expect? All symptoms of deep sickness come out! "Diseases always attack [people] when they are exposed to change," says Herodotus, whether that change is good or bad. "The crisis," according to Antonio Gramsci, "consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

We are at this critical juncture as a nation. We are not just facing a technical challenge, but difficult, complex, and explosive adaptive challenge as a society. When historical convulsions are shaking the foundations of the old way of knowing and living, identity—which includes the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion—rather than good policies, gain traction as a driving force for social divisions. History becomes a frontline for culture wars, as the nation turns its attention to competing narratives regarding how we have come to this place called "America."

Compounding the contested identity issue, the promised new tomorrow has not arrived for many, and the feeling of being betrayed has come to new heights. This betrayal of the promised new and better tomorrow is, of course, nothing new for the racialized and minoritized others. We can cite the white settlers' betrayal of their treaties with the indigenous people who took position of their land, or carry out other treacherous acts like the one portrayed in the film, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which is now in theaters near you. Knowing how dependent we are on the labor of racialized minorities, such as the food industry, I can only imagine how poignant this betrayal is, which made Cesar Chavez decry, "I'm angry that I live in a world where a man who picks food for a living can't afford to feed his family."

But there's another group in our society that is acutely feeling the betrayal, and its resentment is mounting day-by-day. While racial minorities tend to compare themselves to parents whose life situation was worse off than they are, the economic setbacks of whites have been received to be particularly bad because they expected better. We are looking at those who were raised to believe in the American Dream, but now are coping horribly with its failure to come true.

This is a difficult and complex topic which can be addressed more substantively in a lecture or in a book, such as the one I edited and published in 2021, *Teaching in a World of Violent Extremism*. What I'm referring to is the rise of the fear-filled, hate and greed-driven toxicity of the Far-Right and the deep polarization of our society, and the seeming acquiescence

of the many, including the liberal and more affluent whites who don't have much to lose in the class and racial conflict, while those who are busy rowing daily to make a living in the ocean of poverty have no time for advocacy work. When you're busy rowing to make a living, while receiving death wages, what do we expect? As Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Only the guy who isn't rowing has time to rock the boat."

The Far-Right phenomenon, like other forms of extremism, is reactive in substance and spirit. But, unlike other extremists that would rather retreat in seclusion or escape from this world, the Far-Right is politically active in the public square, aggressively pushing its political agenda in the various spheres of our public life and seeking to capture not only the highest executive office of the land as well the judiciary, but also the educational institutions and district school boards. Part of its campaign to recover perceived lost ground includes the banning of books deemed inimical to its cherished and constructed socio-political and cultural imaginary.

Given its grievances and perceived threats—threats to wealth accumulation and control, the dominance of whiteness and Christianity, and traditional values founded on patriarchy and heteronormativity, it is not a surprise that ideologically it is white supremacist, Christian nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-feminist, anti-equitable health care, homophobic, Islamophobic, pro-corporate exploiter of the earth's resources and ecological climate change denier, liberal and scientific community conspiracy believer, and more. This phenomenon is a threat to our democratic aspirations.

Some time ago I thought that people would vote according to their interest, but it's not always true, especially in the age of social media when politicians are smart enough to play on the fears of the disenfranchised to promote their self-interest. I'm reminded of a Turkish proverb that expresses this complex idea in a simple but profound way: "The forest was shrinking, but the trees kept voting for the axe. For the axe was clever and convinced the trees that because his handle was made of wood, he was one of them." It's easy to be deceived because, to paraphrase an African proverb, while the "stomach alerts us when its empty," the brain does not do so.

As a reactive force, which is threatened by the coming of the new, Far-Right ideology is nostalgic. It wants us to turn the clock back or return to the "good old days." When the promised better tomorrow is not in the immediate horizon, what was bad before don't seem to be as bad now. Dying in the land of Egypt with fleshpots and having bread to the full looked much better now. Going back to Egypt has become an option.

What is good with the "good old days"? Return to the good old days is return to white and Christian supremacy, inequality, slavery, lynching, segregation, and hierarchical traditional values. Is this the "good old days" that the Far Right and Christian supremacist-nationalist would like us to go back to or is nostalgic about?

No, the solution is not going back to the "good old days." What is good with the good old days, as someone said with a sense of humor, is that "I wasn't old and I wasn't good." Nostalgia

is always sweeter than reality. Nostalgia seduces us to the glorious bygone days, which often is out of kilter with the present and which immobilizes us in the past.

Instead, we must learn from the past and move forward to our imagined new and better tomorrow with soaring hopes and hearts ablaze, because the God of new beginnings is “doing a new thing.” Are we not perceiving it? (Isaiah 43: 19). Reminiscent of the old manna narrative, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (2 Cor. 8:15). “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime” (Isaiah 65:20 NRSV). That’s the promise of a great health care system.

All of us, all stakeholders, are called to participate in the birthing of the new and better tomorrow. Giving birth to the new is not an easy project because it’s difficult for us to imagine what the new would look like without the features of the old. Challenging and difficult because it involves the very “same people who is part of the problem,” which must also “become part of the solution.” Not easy because, in our “liberal niceness” and “progressive political correctness,” we often project the problem “out there” being committed by the “problem people.” It’s high time to be reminded of the lines of the comic strip character, St. Pogo: “We have met the enemy, and that is us.” Difficult, indeed, because something inside us must die.

We are not simply facing a “Far-Right problem,” but our problem, our challenge. This is difficult for us to see because, whether we like it or not, Whites in general benefit from white supremacy, which is the idolatrous narrative that dominates the social imaginary of the “land of the free and home of the brave.” As the beneficiary, they often forget that there’s no exodus without “eisodos” or “entry” to another space, which was never “terra nullius” or “empty land.” This is the US meta narrative, which is patterned after the narrative undergirding the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land that many are reluctant to speak up for fear of being tagged anti-Semitic, while condoning another virulent “ism,” which is Zionism.

True, “we have met the enemy, and that is us,” but in God’s folly, which is wiser than the wisdom of the wisest, we are also “the ones God has been waiting for.” We, weak people that we are, are the ones that God depends on and summons to help usher in the new and better tomorrow for all. Being “visionary talkers” is not enough; we must become “visionary walkers.” If it’s true that our failure to pursue the “possible in the imperfect” breeds hopelessness, we must summon our best to give tangible expressions of this new tomorrow wherever we are, when we can, and while we can, if we are to rekindle hope in this challenging time of ours.

Let’s embrace this challenge with humility and courage. Let’s be the change that we seek. Who and what are we waiting for? Let’s go!

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