



LESSONS for LIFE

February 08, 2009 7:00 p.m

YES WE CAN

Deacon Randi Williams

Last month Brent used the theme *Taking Flight* and referred to four differing examples: the butterfly, the skier, those promoting flight and the eagle. Last Sunday as we began celebrations of black history and some people refer to it as *Black Heritage Month* he spoke about prophets and this time in our economy and as a Beat contribution sister Sandra Fontenelle. Is it okay for me tonight to use some "churchy" family vernacular. Is it okay? Can I call her sister? We're all brothers and sisters in faith you know. She performed a moving, heart-rending rendition of a renowned African-American poet Maya Angelou *And still I rise, And still I rise*. I'm going to ask her to come up right now and just give us that first verse:

Deacon Sandra Fontenelle:

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies.
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise....*

What Maya Angelou wrote and what Sandra said, it doesn't matter what comes up in front of me I'm going to rise. It doesn't matter what comes up in front of me I'm going to rise up over this. It doesn't matter what confronts me – somehow I'm going to get through this. Let me tell you a little bit about this poem. When I asked Sandra if she would do it she looked at me and smiled and said, "I can't believe this." You know, two years ago I looked at this same poem and I wasn't ready to do it, and this year, at the right time, at the right moment Sandra said yes, and what a blessing she was to others.

But let's get back to the butterfly. I remember that picture shown up here – at the end of its metamorphosis we saw it coming out of its cocoon – struggling to break free from its previous obstruction, its home which helped allow for its transformation and I can imagine in its own little insecty way (and I know 'insecty' isn't a proper word) squirming and repeating, saying "Yes I can, yes I can." When I looked and I saw it just bit by bit, hanging there, almost ready to come out and something else was holding it back I imagined it saying, "yes I can, yes I can."

And then I considered the skier and how I ski, or rather how I fall down and how other people experience breakages, and I knew that skier couldn't have reached that place unless he or she said, "Yes I can. Yes I can." I thought about the guys with the attempts with an airplane – running and crashing; the disappointments; and how they probably wanted to make history with these bright progressive ideas. I imagined them saying, "Yes I can. Yes I can," until success and now we can wing our way around the globe.

And then I imagined the eagle, that majestic fierce looking predatory bird that starts out small and ugly in a nasty nest of left over twigs, discarded paper, cloth and other stuff; and how the parent kicks it out and forces it to become a king or queen of the air. I could hear that little eagle saying, "I don't want to, but yes I can." Did you know that the eagle's beak is as long as its head and that the wing span can be seven and a half feet? That little bird that was so fearful of being kicked out: "Yes I can."



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You see this is not as new a phrase as many believe. It's been around in various formats for thousands of years, and as I use the collective 'we' remembering that no one person can force, promote or encourage change by himself or herself. Oh he may be the leader but there have to be followers. She may be a planner or organizer but someone has to execute those plans. She may be the conceptualizer but others have to execute the ideas. He may be the perpetrator while others help carry out his wishes.

Over the past two and a half years during the Democratic Primary and then the U.S. Presidential race this saying 'Yes we can' held a consistently pivotal position in the campaign of President Obama. It was consistent and neither he nor his supporters wavered from it. At a time of gloom on the horizon hope peeped through with the chant of thousands: Yes we can. When there was initial opposition to his candidacy "Yes we can" was whispered. When certain sectors repeatedly said that he was inexperienced, "Yes we can," was echoed. When some tried to link him to racism or those who broke the law the mantra still rose, "Yes we can." When tens of thousands of his ground troops – volunteers – that's what they were and Brent spoke about volunteers this morning, fanned out across the globe wherever Americans could vote the chant again rose above the din of destruction and yes we can was proclaimed everywhere. Now hold your breath while I say this: And when he chose Pastor Rick Warren to give the inaugural prayer that caused such angst and distress amongst LGBT communities yes we can was still shouted as the President sought to build bridges with the conservative community that he didn't know very much about perhaps, but in the back of that was this: You see, most people don't know is that evangelicalism, Pentecostalism is being changed by young people around the world. There is no longer black and white. There are now several grey areas and evangelical churches that now gladly embrace issues of social justice, etc. There are now a growing number of young people in evangelical and Pentecostal and Baptist churches that are now thinking is there anything really wrong in being gay or lesbian? And they are challenging those persons and rather than distance them we too must take them in. For many it was no longer just the catchy emotional empty phrase; yes we can took on new meaning and it empowered them.

Tonight's scripture is taken from Exodus – about the exodus. We know the story well and I may be dating myself here, but those of you who remember Sophia from *The Golden Girls* I want you to picture it: The showdown between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses, commissioned at the burning bush. At first he appears totally inept and incapable of delivering God's message of freedom; and then he gets some help from Aaron and others. Then after the rod turns into a serpent and the alarming ten plagues or – as somebody said – 'situations', water turned into blood, frogs, lice, flies, boils, death of cattle, hail, locusts, darkness and the slaying of the firstborn males of Egypt. Can you imagine the Israelites in the background seeing all of this, previously feeling disempowered and suddenly feeling empowered? They must have been singing something that went like this, although it was probably in Hebrew: Yes we can. Go Moses. Yes we can. Okay, they probably said something like, Yaweh, yes we can, but they saw Moses as being in sinc with God and he being an extension of them and a definite connection. In the end, at Exodus 12, verses 31 to 36 say, *Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron during the night. "Get out!" he ordered, "Leave my people – and take the rest of the Israelites with you! Go and worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your herds and flocks, as you said, and be gone. Go, but bless me as you leave. All the Egyptians urged the people of Israel to get out of their land as quickly as possible, for they thought, "We will all die!" The Israelites took their bread dough before yeast was added. They wrapped their kneading boards in their cloaks and carried them on their shoulders. And the people of Israel did as Moses had instructed; they asked the Egyptians for clothing and articles of silver and gold.*



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And the Lord caused the Egyptians to look favourably on the Israelites, and they gave the Israelites whatever they asked for. So they stripped the Egyptians of their wealth! That night the people of Israel left Rameses and started for Succoth. There were about 600,000 men, plus all the women and children. A rabble of non-Israelites went with them along with great herds of livestock.

The people were finally free and there must have been some who could not believe the reality of this; and I can imagine them shouting in jubilation, although later on many changed their minds. You see I've chosen this text because there's an inextricable connection between the history of black slavery and the slavery of the Israelites. Many of those spirituals, *Go Down Moses* and *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* are based on Old Testament stories and the symbolism is amazing and powerful and so tonight I pay homage to some of the other Moses, male and female, who have assumed the leadership mantle and helped to lead folks out of various types of bondage and encouraged them to say, yes we can. In the U.S. rebellious men like Nat Turner who promoted his slave rebellion, the obvious Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, poet Langston Hughes, novelist James Baldwin the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People), Rosa Parks, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and his wife and family and many others who would take far too long to list. In Canada, British and American abolitionists, black loyalists in the Maritimes, Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people who guided runaway slaves to freedom via the underground railroad. Josiah Henson and the establishment of the colony down near Chatham. I recall John Weir of Alberta and his connection to the starting of the Calgary Stampede; Elijah McCoy, prompting the saying "The Real McCoy". Africville in Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People; and the women who are too numerous to name: Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the first woman newspaper editor; Viola Desmond of Nova Scotia for not moving out of her seat in the white section of a movie theatre; and Rosemary Brown the first black female to be elected to a Provincial Parliament in Canada – they all immediately spring to mind. Next week your Sunday News will have an article featuring Miss Brown who is about to have a commemorative stamp in her memory and I quote her now: "... to be Black and female in a society which is both racist and sexist is to be in the unique position of having nowhere to go but up!" I believe in the back of her mind was this unequivocal concept of 'Yes we can.'

These people, just like us, all looked at their circumstances and had a choice: whether to accept life as it was or encourage a positive progressive change. Fortunately they chose the latter. As members of the LGBT communities and other minorities groups we have looked at numerous situations and deemed them unacceptable. We have challenged them, we've sought justice; we've sought fairness and we proclaimed – first of all in small steps and then in sprints of victory *Yes we can!* Later on in the story the 600,000 Israelites are confronted with the Red Sea (Reed Sea) in front of them and Pharaoh's crazed horsemen behind them. Let me tell you – when we forget to say *Yes we can* God will still bring us through. Let me repeat that: When we fail to say *Yes we can* God will still bring us through. You see, tonight there may be someone here who is going through something that no one else is going through. Tonight you may be having just some concern that is pulling you right down and you don't know what to do. Tonight a situation may be in front of you and I want to encourage you to say, *Yes you can. Yes we can.* Tonight your heart may be ripped out of you by something someone said or did and you can't forgive them because you feel within your heart of hearts *I can't do it!* Well, you've got to tell yourself yes you can, because when you tell yourself yes you can wholeness will come. When you tell yourself yes we can then God can move through you in a new way. When you tell yourself yes you can then you can leave this place empowered in a new way. When you tell yourself YES WE CAN then you will go out and be an instrument and promote change in this world as never before! The song *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* says:



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Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Comin' for to carry me home
A band of angels comin' after me
Comin' for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home

Tonight – what is your Jordan? What's your Red Sea? Do you need some angels to help you cross over? Know that in your 'downest' moment – and yes, I know that that is not a proper word, but you get what I mean – there is that yearning for the better and how you can be an active participant for a better world. It's in your core; it's in your essence. Just join in and say YES WE CAN with millions around the world.

Amen.