

**TENTH ANNIVERSARY
PCBA NOTES**

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Toward a Just World

Apocalypse

Apocalypse. That's what some are calling the COVID 19 pandemic. They have in mind the images of catastrophic judgment popularly associated with that word. I find the word descriptive of our current situation, as well, but in the underlying meaning of the word, "unveiling." It's an unveiling that brings to light realities we've either not noticed or chosen to ignore. It forces me to grapple with three of them in particular: our misunderstanding of connectedness, economic inequity, and racism as our original sin.

First, our misunderstanding of connectedness. Few can argue today that we're not connected. The Internet, globalization, and the world-wide spread of a virus make this clear. Although we make various attempts to act as a connected world community, I'm concerned about how we understand our connectedness. Hebrew-Christian thought assumes a corporate humanity of persons-in-community, a body with many members. To declare oneself independent of others is to go counter to the Divine intention.

Against this understanding is the modern idea of the Social Contract. In it we view ourselves as inherently independent—individuals who, in our "wisdom," surrender some independence for the good of the whole. We create community, rather than affirm it as part of creation. In the midst of our intending good, this assumed independence leads us to competition, arrogance, and struggle for power.

Second, our economic inequity. This is clearly demonstrated in the stark disparity of medical resources available in the "developed" world and those available to people who live where they struggle to survive. In our own country, health outcome is determined by zip code. Inequity is not new, but it's increasing at an exponential rate.

Many people of conscience feel uncomfortable about this but don't seem to know how to address such a monumental issue. Amos and other prophets of the Eighth Century BCE railed against it: those with ivory couches and summer homes in a land of great poverty. Bernie Sanders may have been an "unlikely" leader, but he spoke uncomfortable truth to power. Maybe his story tell us there's a role for both prophet and one who governs. William Sloane Coffin described those roles succinctly. When addressing power he said, "It's our job is to say 'Let justice roll down like waters,' and it's yours to figure out the irrigation system!"

Finally, racism as our original sin. Racism pervades our societal actions and decisions. Disturbingly, racism emerges in our actions toward "others." We hear appalling reports of hostile acts toward people of Asian descent growing from the twisted fear of a connection between the virus and people's racial heritage. How sad to see this racism expressing itself in elementary school in the belittling of Chinese children as the "bringers of disease!"

COVID 19 impacts us in different ways. One of the ways for me has been as apocalypse, an unveiling. Not of "unknown" things, but of all-too-true realities, often ignored, which demand the response of people of conscience. Most certainly those who follow the way of Jesus.

To Amos of Tekoa

Dear Mr. Amos,

You've become quite well known in our time—at least one of your statements has: “Let justice roll down like waters/and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” A preacher named Dr. King liked to quote that. I understand you, however, are not a preacher but an agriculturalist out of Tekoa. Many like your quote because we all believe in justice, and we also like to create our own definition of it. Couldn't you have just left well enough alone when you said that? Apparently not. You felt it necessary to go ahead and suggest what justice involves! (We have a saying about preaching that goes, “Now you've quit preaching and gone to meddling.” That's what you've done here: gone to meddling!)

You criticize income inequality and the palatial residences of the top one-percent, both their summer houses and their winter houses, shouting, “You lie on beds inlaid with ivory/ and lounge on your couches. /You dine on choice lambs/ and fattened calves.” Didn't it occur to you that these folk may have achieved their position because of their ability, extraordinary hard work, and following the rules? What if, just for the sake of argument, there was something unjust about it and we agreed we should work for equality, wouldn't an incremental plan be more practical than the radical one you advocate? Further, if they were left alone, wouldn't their wealth trickle down to the others?

Labor transactions clearly upset you. However, hasn't your ardor surpassed your understanding of economics? You speak negatively of “buying the poor with silver/and the needy for a pair of sandals.” Don't you recognize the wealth of your society has been built on slave labor? What do you propose, reparations?

How out of touch you are is demonstrated by your attack on the religious establishment! Don't you understand that when

economic wealth and the religious order get connected, it's dangerous to mess with it? You argue that people like practices that help them feel comfortable without making demands of them. And you say this in an audacious way. You speak as if you were channeling God. You picture God as denouncing religion's practices! "I hate, I despise your religious feasts;/ I cannot stand your assemblies. . . Hate evil, love good;/ maintain justice in the courts."

A final comment: you suggest the existence of a nation is at stake and that a nation will be judged on how it treats its poorest and most vulnerable. If *that* notion ever gets abroad, it would change everything!

Observations from Normandy

Alice and I visited Normandy this past summer. It was the week of the 73rd anniversary of D-Day. It was sobering to look down at Omaha Beach from the once-fortified bunkers and reflect on the 150,000 young men, many of them frightened teen-agers, who had come ashore there (and on four other beaches), many of them seasick, some drowning or being machine-gunned before they could make it up the embankment.

It was sobering, too, to reflect on the 14,000-19,000 men, both Allied and Nazi, who had lost their lives by the end of the operation. We visited the American cemetery whose 172 acres of white marble crosses and stars of David hold the remains of more than 9,000 troops. All this, we knew, was only part of the carnage of a war claiming 24 million lives.

Some say history does not repeat itself. I'm not a historian enough to render judgment on this. But walking through Normandy's war memorial museum, I experienced a disconcerting feeling that I was looking "again" at some current happenings. It was while I was in the part of the museum dealing with events of the 1920s and 1930s leading to Second World War. I saw a campaign poster (in German, which I read) boasting of a strong Führer with the words, "Our only hope!" There were maps of an "Atlantic Wall" being built to protect the borders from forces threatening the Nazi Reich.

There were pictures of people of a certain background being rounded up and transported because they constituted a "threat" to national security, people for whom hatred was fanned by official statements. I saw pictures of mass rallies in Munich and elsewhere celebrating the promise of Germany being made great again. There were newspapers printing "news" which had little connection with facts (as the German "facts" about the Allied invasion); there were displays showing the priority given military expenditures; and—sadly—displays of church leaders blessing the Nazi experience.

Seeing this, I began to ask whether when we see signs that have an historic ring about them we would be wise to pay them special heed. It made me wonder whether, whatever else Jesus was pointing to, his warning that we fail to “discern the signs of the times” might be a call for thoughtful people to consider carefully what they observe.

The Examined Life

Living with No End in Sight

When will it end? Our planet has been visited with an affliction that affects all of us. We cover our faces with masks, isolate ourselves from those we love, abstain from communal celebrations, walk about protectively, worship electronically, send our children to virtual classrooms, adjust to unsought solitude, bid farewell to some who must leave before their time. We absent ourselves from much that makes us human. History has known many scourges through which people have persevered, believing the Persian aphorism, “This too will pass.” What’s unique about our circumstance is that there’s no end in sight! Indeed, many epidemiologists say the invading virus may join the pantheon of permanent world diseases. The psalmist cries on our behalf, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget [us] forever?” To live with no end in sight—what will it mean? Three things:

Live Grounded - Paul Tillich describes God as “the ground of being.” That connects with me! When the familiar has gone, when I can’t find a point of reference, when I am disconnected from life—when this describes me, I feel the need to be grounded. I want to be in touch with what is reliable and stable. This “ground” has been spoken of in different ways: an anchor that holds (the hymn writer), a North Star (the poet), being rooted (the writer to the Ephesians), seeking a rock to build on (Jesus in his great sermon). How can we find this orienting reality? As important as is good theology and the knowledge of religious history and actions undertaken for a just society, no more human and or radical action exists than prayer. It is not a practice reserved just for the contemplatives. Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the great Baptist advocates for justice and one who had profound influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks pointedly here. In his poem “The Little Gate to God,” Rauschenbusch has left us this counsel: “In the castle of my soul

is a little garden gate, / Whereat, when I enter, I am in the presence of God.”

Live “In-between” - That’s where we may be just now—”in-between.” Between what has been and what is to come. It’s a period of disorientation and uncertainty. When Fascism was gaining controlling influence in Germany, a publication was born which took as its title “Between the Times.” It became the main theological voice against Nazi ideology. One of the journal’s founders said at its start, “It is the destiny of our generation to stand between the times.” Isn’t this our situation? We must never let ourselves to be captive to what has been or fearful of what the future may bring. We must live “in-between.” What will that mean for us? When St. Francis was asked a question like this, he’s reported to have said, “I would tend my garden.” Might he have meant he would just “keep on” doing what is right and good?

Live Day-by-Day - It’s not new, the intention to “live one day at a time.” Two millennia ago, Horace counseled, “Carpe diem,” seize the day! People given to planning ahead and charting a life roadmap may challenge this philosophy. But aren’t there times when we can do no other? When the future is not clear and there’s no end in sight? The writers of the musical, *Godspell*, were so grasped by a prayer of Saint Richard of Chichester that they made it the theme of their show.

“Day by day,
Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.”

Could we do better than to make it our theme too?

Real versus Counterfeit Hope

What does it take to follow a star? The church's season of Epiphany reminds us of the story of the Magi and their search for the Christ Child. A daunting journey, fraught with many dangers and chances of failure—all of which they knew. What energized them to set out on such a venture? I suggest it can be capsulized in the one word, "Hope." Indeed, isn't hope the energizing reality behind all human endeavor? "Hope," Emil Brunner once said, "is the oxygen of the human spirit."

A new year brings "hopes" for what is to follow. Many are inclined to say, "I hope this will be a good year," even, "I hope it will be a better year." (In other words, "I hope things will work out," or, "Let's just hope for the best.") I argue such "hope" is counterfeit—a self-medicating way to numb our anxieties, however justified they may be. It's the denial of one of our uniquely human gifts, the gift of moral responsibility.

The current surge of hate-filled speech about people who hold different views than our own, an unleashing of lightly-suppressed racism, virulent animosity toward people from other traditions, a tolerance of denigrating words about women and the disabled, and a readiness to entertain authoritarianism for the sake of security—all these contribute to a unsettling sense about our present world. One can understand where "hoping things will work out" comes from. But it's counterfeit hope. Whether Edmund Burke said it or someone else, it's still true, that "the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." There are plans which must be opposed, expressions protested against, principles advocated, and freedoms protected!

President Kennedy's inaugural address is often remembered for his challenge to "ask what we can do for our country." But there's another sentence in his address which expresses a theology much-needed in our time. He said, "With a

good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking [God's] blessing and [God's] help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." Dr. King wasn't expressing belief in inevitable progress, or counterfeit hope, when he said, "The arc of history bends toward justice." His life makes this clear. His life involved seeking to join God in God's work.

When we pray, "thy Kingdom come on earth," we're not mumbling words about "hoping things turn out OK." We're not abandoning human effort to bring about justice. When we pray that prayer, we're committing ourselves to work actively, intelligently, knowledgeably toward a world in which God's blessed, inclusive community is brought nearer. Hope, real hope, is the oxygen of the human spirit.

Was it a Sardonic Question?

Pontius Pilate asked a question, now frequently-quoted: “What is truth?” Was this a sincere inquiry or a sardonic utterance, meaning, “How can anyone know what’s really true?”

What would lead one to such a nihilistic perspective? Is it the spawning of demonstrable falsehoods, contrived lies promulgated to shape public opinion for a certain cause? George Orwell had seen the results of propaganda created by a popular Führer in support of profound evil. In his novel, 1984, Orwell wrote about a government with a Ministry of Truth housed in a building displaying three slogans: “War is Peace,” “Freedom is Slavery,” and “Ignorance is Strength.” Part of the Ministry’s purpose was to rewrite history and to change the facts to fit the Administration’s doctrine.

How is one to navigate his or her life or how are life-sustaining institutions to be maintained in an environment where there are “alternative facts?” Where there is no trustworthy mooring? No dependable center? A new word has recently been added to the dictionaries of the Oxford University Press—i.e., the word, “Post-Truth.” It’s defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” What are responsible citizens to think when, for example, they hear a widely-circulated report that vaccinations cause autism, or that the Sandy Hook shooting was an elaborate hoax staged by the government to promote gun control, or that a former Secretary of State was involved in a child-trafficking scheme operating out of a Washington D.C. pizza restaurant? Disturbingly, research has shown we put up little resistance to deceptions that please and comfort us, and that when we are fed falsehoods by people of wealth and power they appear easier to accept.

Perhaps even more insidious than being confused by conflicting “facts” is the mentality one might find in Pilate—i.e., that there is really no way we can any longer know what is true. The musicologist, Leslie Spellman, once commented about the use of the symphonic cymbal. He said the cymbal is of “indefinite pitch,” and when used alone it can wipe out any sense of key. (You hear it and your ear no longer remembers the key you were in.) I am concerned we may now be subjected to such a cacophony of ideological cymbals, that even well-meaning people may say, “There’s no longer any way to know what to believe.” I’ve never been more thankful for the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, the *Wall Street Journal*, and—yes, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other responsible sources of news. They are guardians of our life and freedom—far from being “enemies of the people.”

Addressing a Put-Off Resolution

Most of us, I imagine, have a short-list of things we know we must address but keep putting off. Perhaps that's why New Year's Resolutions came into being. They supply an added incentive to do what we've known all along we ought to do.

I've long acknowledged I should put down on paper my desires concerning "end of life" decisions. One doesn't need to have taken even Psychology 101 to understand why I may have been postponing this endeavor. We aren't comfortable thinking about the end of life even though we know we all die. At the same time, we know of people who have had to agonize over whether to authorize certain life-support measures for loved ones—an agony which could have been lessened if they had known clearly what their loved one wished. Add to this the quandary many feel at having to make decisions under pressure about funerals, burials, etc. at a time they are least prepared emotionally to deal with them. And what if one nears death where loved ones are absent?

Out of consideration for others (and to get rid of that annoying inner voice which kept asking, "When are you going to get around to this?"), I decided I'd get a jump on New Years' resolutions by completing the "Advance Health Care Directive" which Kaiser Permanente had prepared. "I'll just fill out the few straight-forward questions it asks about medical care," I thought, and that will be that. What I found, however, was the necessity of reflecting on unanticipated questions—questions about who I am and what I value. (Certainly, I'd thought about these things, but here was a necessity to spell them out clearly for others.)

Questions, for example, concerning values: "If I were having a really good day, I would be doing the following . . ." or "Life would no longer be worth living if I was not able to . . ." and "Life would no longer be worth living if I had to . . ." Questions about hope and wishes—such as, "My thoughts and feelings about where I would prefer to die" (That demands a pretty specific answer, doesn't it?) and "I want my loved ones to know that if I am nearing my death, I would appreciate the following for comfort and support . . ." And what are my thoughts about a funeral or memorial service: what scriptures, hymns, and readings would I want which would be consistent with the way I had tried to live my life? Also,

importantly, do I want any of my bodily organs made available to others for the preservation of their lives?

This exercise, in short, proved to be a probing spiritual experience—one that gives me now an unsuspected freedom with which to welcome the new year.

Our (Living) Tradition

Being a Story-Formed Community

Who we are is shaped by the stories we live by. John Westerhoff III calls the Christian Church a “story-formed community.” He says our identity is dependent on having a story that tells us who we are and that our understanding of life’s meaning and purpose is dependent on having a story that tells us what the world is like and where we’re going.

The church is a community formed by the story of God’s presence and action in the world—one that finds its focus in the story of Jesus Christ. Our individual stories are important, too, and we bring them with us into that community. There we re-live and re-enact the community stories so that God’s stories and our stories become one.

A powerful way the church has done this is by celebrating the Christian Year. It’s a Year shaped by Jesus’ story moving through several “seasons.” Growing up, I had not heard of the Christian Year. (I knew of Christmas and Easter—but “Lent” was a “Catholic” thing requiring giving things up.) Only later did I learn that the church had developed the Christian Year over the centuries as a guide for its worship and life.

The Christian Year follows the story of Jesus: It begins with **Advent**, a season of Mary’s, and our anticipation, a pregnant time with the possibility of new life. At **Christmas**, God came to us and comes to us, entering our lives and our world. **Epiphany**, with a star that makes Christ’s coming known to the world, bids us join Jesus in baptism and his first followers in discipleship. **Lent** is a time for us to face up to the hard realities about ourselves and our world, a season that leads us through our own wilderness to Holy Week, Jesus’ last meal and his cross and the suffering in our own lives and world. **Easter** celebrates the reality in which our faith and that of the first disciples is based—that, despite death and hate and evil, our Lord lives and is with us, bringing victory out of defeat. **Pentecost** celebrates the coming

of God's Spirit and the empowering of the church to become a redemptive people. In **Ordinary Time** we acknowledge we do not live only in "high" moments, but that in ordinary, mundane life Jesus' teaching about his Realm and our calling can guide us. In time, however, we become empty and we're ready once again to enter a new year.

In the Christian Year, our worship re-lives God's story so that it touches and transforms our story and shapes our lives to serve God. Our life is a journey—a journey through time. How we use our time shows what we hold to be important.

Baptist worship, which some take pride in describing as "non-liturgical," could be enriched by letting our Lord's story guide it, season to season. It could protect the church from becoming "a Rotary Club with religious language." It could help us more and more live in God's story and serve God day by day.

People of the Book?

Baptists often define themselves as People of the Book. Indeed, some of their forebears called the Bible “the all-sufficient guide for faith and practice.” Baptists intend their message and mission, both in its call to faith and its work for justice in society, to be rooted in the thrust of scripture.

Yet (a question), how adequately is our commitment to scripture expressed in how we structure worship? I was taken aback by the question put to me by someone from a liturgical church after attending a Baptist service. “Where was the scripture?,” she asked. Quite a question to put to a “person of the book”!

There had been scripture in the service, of course—a few verses read before the pastor preached on them. But in my questioner’s tradition, scripture was given a more commanding place. Each Sunday a passage was read from the Hebrew scriptures, a psalm (sung or read responsively), a passage from an epistle, and then—with worshipers standing to honor Christ—a reading from the Gospels. No matter how good (or bad) the sermon, no matter how well (or poorly) the music was sung, words of scripture were heard in substantial portion, these tied to their place in a Christian Year by which the congregation followed the life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus and the formative life of the church.

Baptists, on the other hand, are “free church” people—free of obligation to order their worship in this way. But (another question): Has our “freedom” sometimes led us to jettison something for which we once contended—i.e., the central place of scripture in our communal life?

John Skoglund, preeminent authority on the history of free church worship, suggests acts by which scripture can be given greater importance, such as the entrance of scripture at the start

of worship, its reading from the lectern, and the reclaiming of the Christian Year.

A further question, if I may: Shouldn't people who once contended forcefully for putting the Bible in the hands of the laity ask that lay people be readers in worship? Recently, I was in the home of a Roman Catholic who had been chosen as a "lector" (a reader) in worship. Her guide and a class accompanying its use emphasized the sacred nature of the Book, the need to communicate respect through the way scripture is read, and practical elements for clear, understandable delivery which would enable the message to be communicated.

I hope Baptists will take the public reading of scripture with equal seriousness and reclaim their full identity as People of the Book.

Hopevale: 1943-2018

December 20th was the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom in the Philippines of eleven representatives of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the young son of two of them. With the advent of the Second World War, many American missionaries were evacuated, but these chose to remain to continue their ministry, taking refuge in an inland jungle area on the Island of Panay. Upon their discovery by the occupying forces, they were brutally killed, all except the child being beheaded, and the child bayoneted. The place of their hiding was named Hopevale.

Word of the Hopevale Martyrs had an emboldening effect on the Baptist churches of the Philippines and, among American Baptists (then called “Northern Baptists”), it became an inspiration for strengthening the Denomination’s post-war international ministry. Sadly, the story of these people’s courageous commitment has been all but forgotten among many in our denominational life. But not so among Filipinos. In that country it continues a vital part of their tradition.

Through a series of unanticipated events, the Hopevale story has intersected with my own life in a number of ways, dating back to my early preparation for ministry and the opportunity that Alice and I had in retirement to teach briefly at Central Philippine University. Reflecting on these events, and aware that the 75th anniversary of Hopevale was coming, I set down some personal reflections. When these were shared with a Philippine acquaintance, I was surprised to be invited to come to the Philippine island of Panay and present the remarks as part of the Hopevale Diamond Commemoration.

At this four-day event, there was a large representation of Philippine Baptists, representatives of our own denomination, and also some Baptists of Japan, a meaningful presence given the background of the executions. For me, the observance was a

memorable experience, linking together the several ways my own life has been touched by this story.

The Hymnal in Baptist Tradition

One of our PCBA members, Mary Karne, recently passed on to me a unique treasure providing a window into earlier Baptist life in America—a hymnal compiled in 1843, two years before the slavery-related division of Baptists into “North” and “South.” Titled, *The Psalmist: A New Collection of Hymns for the Use of Baptist Churches*, the hymnal was the response of the American Baptist Publication Society and the Sunday School Society to “numerous and urgent calls, which, for a long time, have been made from various sections of the country.” The result was a compendium of 1,180 hymns and a supplement of 106 hymns “best known, most valued, and most frequently sung in the South.” It was published, as was the custom, without music, as the words were often sung to various tunes known in one part of the country or another.

What comes through clearly in the introduction to the hymnal is the high place hymn singing held in the Baptist churches of this period and of the care—theological, pastoral, and esthetic—that was used in their selection.

Worship, the compilers stated, is “the utterance of the [human spirit], aspiring upward to its Creator. . . . As it is an act of the heart, it should be expressed in the language of the heart. This is not cold, nor in the matter of common conversation, but fervent and impassioned. The expression of worship should be in language suited to such emotion. Sacred harmony is the union of measured sounds with the words of worship. In order to be sung well, the words of worship must be expressive of the emotions which belong to worship”

Good hymnals reach back over the centuries, connecting us with those who have worshiped and sung and prayed before us. While they may embrace contemporary expressions of faith, they also reach back to the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, to the chorales of Martin Luther, the hymns of Bishop

Ambrose, the chants of the early church, and the psalms of the temple. Hymns have enriched and shaped our lives, and Mary Karne's book reminds us that as Baptists, we stand in a vital stream of Christian tradition.

“I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual.”

It's a frequently-heard comment: “I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual.” A distancing of oneself from “organized religion”—in many cases, from the Christian Church as one experiences it. It's the expression of many younger people who find the church irrelevant to their lives and to the challenges of society, an organization in a time warp, contending against modern science, judgmental in nature, and too often identified with economic powers. The “Nones” (those answering “None” when asked which religious group they identify with) are increasing in number. The Pew Research Center reports one-fifth of the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today, being the highest percentage ever recorded in their polling.

Perhaps, rather than attempting to defend the church by rationalizing its purported failures, we should pay attention to what many Nones are saying when they claim to be “spiritual,” rather than religious.” We might dismiss this as empty, watered-down theology, something very nebulous to base one's life on. But, if we listen more deeply to what they're saying, might we find they are confessing they sense there's something beyond the banality of day-to-day life, that there must be some determinative reality “beyond,” some “ground” of being? To be sure, such a conviction would not be the whole of the gospel, but could it be a starting point, a point of connection between an emerging population and the Divine?

Champions of orthodox theology might be surprised to learn that Biblical faith had its origins in such a sense of mystery and wonder. The scholar, Rudolf Otto, has shown that a sense of what he calls “the holy,” or the numinous, has been basic to the development of all religion. Mightn't we take the Nones' confessions of spirituality seriously and join them in celebrating the wonder in life and then allow the Holy Spirit to lead us from

there? Certainly, the sciences, mathematics, law and analytical thought are indispensable in our world. But can they be the final touchstones of human life? Can they supply compassion and human relationships and a depth-of-life?

The concluding chapters of the book of Job and many of the psalms proclaim that the heavens “declare the glory of God.” Modern “prophets,” such as Rachel Carson, hold that “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life” is “an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.” Isn't such wonder a “hint” of God—a “door” into a fuller embrace of a God of love? Indeed, can one who has a sense of the wonder of life and a feeling deep within of a yet-undefined spiritual dimension be “far from the kingdom of God”?

Reaching Out

Millennials, Vocation, and Us

What grips young people today? What engages their energies and excites their hopes and gives focus to their imagination? Indeed, does anything do that? US News and World Report, writing about millennials (variously defined as between 18 and 30 or 35), says they have a reputation of being a "lazy, narcissistic do-nothing generation, too busy tweeting pictures of their lunches to get a real job and move out of their parents' basement, never mind engaging in politics." While I reject that definition of a generation that faces expensive education costs, high debt and joblessness and puts marriage and home ownership off into the future, the description uncomfortably reminds me of the definition given my own generation when I was coming of age. Far from being a Great Generation like the one before us, we were the "cool" generation: no great cause or aspiration beyond ourselves.

John F. Kennedy's idea of the Peace Corps changed that. The call to be part of a body of young people helping others in many challenged places around the globe was energizing, not only to those who joined the corps but also to others who were inspired to ask how their own abilities might be put to the greatest service. It was the nation's tragic engagement in the Vietnam War, later, that generated a wave of young adults expressing opposition to that war and to war itself and engaging in fervent endeavors to eliminate nuclear weapons. The intractability of such issues and the growth of the military-industrial complex, perhaps, led the next generation to turn inward again looking for the "dawning of the age of Aquarius." This is an admittedly oversimplified parade of generations. But it raises the question for me, "What is, or what might become, the central motivation in one's life?" For us in the Christian Church, it raises a more basic question: What is the church's obligation concerning a life-giving call to young people?

The "call" has had a vital place in the history of our Faith—a call to Moses to tell Pharaoh to "Let God's people go," to Amos to demand that "justice roll down like waters," to the Apostle Peter to announce to people outside his tradition that "God is no respecter of persons," to Francis of Assisi that all Creation is God's and is to be loved and cherished, to Dr. King to tell people about his holy dream. "The call" brings to the fore the distinction between a vocation and a career—a career being something you choose and a vocation is something you are called to. The church, made up of people "called to be disciples," has a teaching mandate regarding its young people—indeed regarding all its people—to make clear the call of God to the service of others. "The place God calls you to," Frederick Buechner rightly said, "is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Who Ministers to Whom?

The assumed purpose of the Seafarers Ministry of the Golden Gate is to provide a ministry of hospitality to workers on container ships docking at the Port of Oakland. But after more than a decade of volunteering at the Seafarers Center, I've come to believe the greater ministry may be to those of us who serve.

The presence of the Seafarers in the Center has opened my life to the world in a way I couldn't have anticipated: people—for the most part, young men—arrive from the Philippines, India, Russia, Rumania, China, Poland, Malaysia, Germany, indeed, country after country. Christians, certainly—but also Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Although English is the required language of international shipping, speech at the Center is a cacophony of languages. But what I observe isn't a confused babble, but a microcosm. A microcosm not only of the world's differences, but of its shared humanity. Men are sitting with their laptops talking on Skype with families half a world away. It may have been months since they've been home. How gentle and sensitive I find these men to be! Now and then, they call us over to the little screens to point to their wives and children and invite them to wave to us. However unfamiliar the language sounds, it's amazing how universal "Daddy" is.

I drive a van and pick up crew members from the ships, taking them to the center or to the shops. On the van one-on-one conversation opens my world even more. A chief engineer from the Ukraine shares his anxiety about the conflict in the eastern part of his country. A man from Manila hasn't gotten any word from his family since a typhoon hit two days ago. Another tells me he knows of Central Philippine University (where Alice and I taught for a short time after we retired) because his sister got her nursing degree there. A man from Northern India describes his homeland as the most beautiful place in the world

with its green terrain and lovely trees. A cook from Vladivostok—this time a woman—speaks of the poverty of her home area. A boatswain, showing significant trust in a representative of the church, talks in confidence about his captain's withholding hazard pay from their salaries, hoping we can advocate for them (which we can and do). Another man, very quiet, walks from the van without speaking and goes to the chapel and kneels for a while.

Sometimes seafarers ask why we do what we do. People through many ages have understood the need to “welcome the stranger.” In welcoming others, I find I’m being “welcomed” too—into the others’ lives. I’m reminded in this that angels are defined as messengers (sometimes of God) and also of a word from the First Letter to Peter: “ Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Ex Libris

It started in seeing how expensive books were in the Philippines. It's grown now to where 6,000-8,000 books from the United States are on the shelves of the theology library at Central Philippine University, in the homes of Philippine Baptist pastors, and in the hands of students at the University's College of Theology. The Philippine Book Project was begun ten years ago by PCBA, and I have served as its coordinator. It has provided a way for books from the libraries of retired clergy, professors, and lay people to be sent for use in that country.

The project idea came out of an experience Alice and I had soon after our retirement. We were privileged to teach as volunteer faculty at Central Philippine University, a highly-regarded institution founded by American Baptists in 1905. We found our time there enriching, but something we weren't prepared for was the cost of books! Teachers were photocopying chapters from basic texts for the use of students; young ministers were starting pastorates with only a handful of books; the fine university library building lacked many standard works in Bible, theology, church history, and general reference.

People who learned of our book project contributed appropriate volumes. The collected books were stored in the Edmondsons' garage and periodically boxed for shipment. A shipping firm, based in the Philippines, provided us with a preferential rate.

The time has come for me to step out of coordinating this endeavor. Many of our objectives have been met, but local pastors still need books, and the library needs to be supplied with some of the new, very expensive works it doesn't have funds to purchase.

I hope that my "retirement" will not be the end of the project but a "passing of the baton" to someone who shares this vision.

Open Letters

Open Letter to Georg Friedrich Händel

Dear Georg,

The Season of Advent is beginning—the season of waiting and anticipating and longing. Each time I hear your great work, the “Messiah,” I’m reminded that you understand what Advent is about. The music begins by joining much of humanity in its yearning for that which, hopefully, is coming but is not yet here:

- ***Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.*** How much we want and long for comfort in distressing times.
- ***Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*** If the good things prepared for us are to be received, we must make preparations, straightening out and clearing everything that stands in the way.
- ***Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.*** Pregnancy involves waiting. A seemingly interminable nine months, anticipating God to “be with us.”
- ***He shall speak peace.*** We long for it, don’t we?
- ***Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*** Do you have in mind the physically disabled or those who are spiritually unable to see and hear?
- ***He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.*** If only, we say, the needs, the nourishment, of the human family could be met!

Longing is natural to the human soul, a longing for what is not yet complete. Indeed, might we say, the Creator has placed this within us so we might yearn for what we do not yet see but which is true and right and just? Advent is the human season of the “not yet.” When all we can do is done, we can only wait.

You will never have heard of the young Jewish girl, Anne Frank. She wasn’t born until 1929, She left us a remarkable diary. The circumstances in which she was writing were grim, yet she was not without hope. She wrote, “There is nothing we can do, but wait as calmly as we can until the misery comes to an end. Jews wait—Christians wait—the whole earth waits.”

This is the time to wait, to imagine, to hope, to allow ourselves to be ready to celebrate that which is coming. It involves waiting quietly

and preparing resolutely. Followers of Jesus do that each time they pray “Thy kingdom come.” We wait . . . awaiting word of “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”

Open Letter to Scott Pruitt of the EPA

Dear Mr. Pruitt,

I'm writing to you about my grandchildren and the environment I wish to bequeath to them. You've been entrusted, as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, with the care and protection of the natural environment of our nation. Because I know you profess the Christian Faith (and like me stand in the Baptist tradition), you will understand that our world is God's world and you are accountable ultimately to the God of Creation.

When Mr. Nixon signed the bill creating your agency in 1970, with overwhelming bipartisan support, to "set and enforce standards for air and water quality and for individual pollutants," he said in doing so we "by conscious choice, transform our land into what we want it to become." I want that land to be a land—indeed a world—of fresh air and clear skies and clean water and healthy forests and verdant valleys and wide prairies. I want it to be a land in which my grandchildren's children can drink tap water without fear of lead poisoning, where they can run relays without polluted air damaging their lungs or causing asthma, where they can surf along our beaches without petroleum clinging to their skin, where they can marvel at glaciers, and plan their lives and build their homes without fear of cataclysmic storms.

Unfortunately, many of your actions run counter to the purpose of the EPA and indeed are destructive of the environment. You have removed or diluted environmental regulations involving methane emissions, pesticide use, clean air and clean water standards; replaced half of the Board of Scientific Counselors with non-scientists who are industry representatives; and lobbied the President to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord despite the overwhelming consensus of the world's scientists about the human influence on climate change.

You've removed from EPA's website previous statements by EPA scientists about climate change and awarded EPA grants to universities and non-profits on the basis of political, rather than scientific, concerns.

Any objective analysis will make clear that the short-term interests of the fossil fuel, chemical, and related industries are served by your actions. I acknowledge that our national economy is heavily dependent of the production of oil and that your policies may be of **short-term** economic benefit. But what is the **long-range** consequence? I share the concern of your agency's first Administrator, William Ruckelshaus, who served under Presidents Nixon and Reagan. He has said, "We've spent 40 years putting together an apparatus to protect public health and the environment from a lot of different pollutants. [Mr. Pruitt] is pulling that whole apparatus down."

I understand you have yet to look forward to grndchildren. When you do, I know you'll find them a precious gift. I pray that your stewardship of the environment will ensure them, and all of our grandchildren, a place of beauty and wellbeing.

To Our Islamic Brothers and Sisters

Many in the Christian community share a grave concern for the liberty and personal safety of Muslim members in our community. Some recent statements by public figures have exploited popular fears and incited anti-Muslim bigotry and acts of hatred toward people of the Islamic faith. Such statements and actions are contrary to the core values of our nation and our best instincts. The whole of any faith cannot be blamed for the actions of a few extremists who have a perverted understanding of their faith. We know that the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California has condemned recent terrorist attacks and has stated, "We deeply care about Peace, Liberty and Humanity and we stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters all over the world who got attacked by terrorists." To those at this Center in Oakland, we say we stand "shoulder to shoulder" with you!

One of the important principles of American life has been the practice of religious liberty and the protection of unfamiliar minority religions. We recognize an understandable anxiety in our land from the threat of terrorist attacks, but we stand against all demagoguery and bigotry that incites hatred against others, making them scapegoats for that anxiety. We share a common heritage about the treatment of "the other." The Christian scriptures state, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." And the Holy Qu'an calls for the protection of the asylum seeker (or al-mustamin), whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

Many concerned Christians want to work for compassion, mercy, love and hospitality. Therefore, we pledge ourselves to the following:

- To treat others as we would like to be treated and to challenge members of our own faith community to do the same.
- To recognize that all persons are entitled to dignity and respect as human beings and that none should be subject to hostility or discrimination.
- To support others who exercise courage in upholding justice for others.
- To speak of our own faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faith of others.
- To build bridges between the stranger and ourselves and, by example, to encourage others to do the same.
- To refuse to keep silent when we see others speaking ill of strangers, judging them without coming to know them, or when we see them being excluded, wronged or oppressed.

To Herr Beethoven (At 250)

Dear Ludwig,

Happy 250th birthday year! You don't know me, although I was introduced to you as a child when my piano teacher asked me learn your "Minuet in G." She also gave me a bust of yourself made of plaster-of-paris. I put it on a bookshelf in the living room, but regret to tell you, it fell off and broke its nose.

It's a great mystery! How can an 18/19th century deaf composer pour music from his soul into mine? You undoubtedly know, because, on one score, you wrote, "From the heart—may it return again—to the heart."

We can't evade your passion. The person was right who is said to have painted on the wall of a German opera house the motto, "Bach gave us God's Word, Mozart gave us God's Laughter, Beethoven gave us God's Fire." Your passion may have emerged from a deep, life-long struggle, a struggle that's hinted at in the marked-over, crossed-out, re-phrased lines we see in photographs of your manuscripts.

True, a person of struggle. Yet in the midst of that struggle, you had an optimism that lifts the human spirit. This must have been part of your understanding of God. Indeed, one might say your music celebrates the "godliness" of humanity and also the "humanity" of God! I find this expressed in your only opera, "Fidelio," telling of Florestan's liberation from political imprisonment. A theme surprisingly timely for today! Your commitment to human freedom was evident, as well, in your impulsive act of ripping the dedication page from your Eroica Symphony. No honoring of Napoleon once you learned he had arrogated the power of Emperor to himself!

But, tell me this: in your great choral work, "Missa Solelmnis," are you struggling with faith in human possibilities in its concluding prayer, "Grant us your peace?" You interrupt the

prayer with the rumble of drums of war, only then to have the choir cry out—almost in anguish—“pacem, pacem” (“peace, peace”). Do you believe that prayer will be answered, or are you leaving it as a question mark?

Many say your Ninth Symphony is the greatest piece of music ever composed. I find it a recapitulation of the life of the world, beginning with hollow fifths (“without form and void?”) waiting for the divine spirit to “move over the face of the deep.” Progressing through the formation of human thought, beauty, and struggle, we come to a disorienting dissonance, out of which a voice sings, “Friends, not these sounds!” And in response the chorus of humanity bursts out, “Freude, Freude,” (“Joy, Joy”). Joy, you say, is “Götterfunken” (sparks or emanations or radiations of the divine)! Might this be what Saint Irenaeus meant when he said, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive?”

I thank God for giving you to us. *Freude! Freude!*