

Doom and Gloom or Soon to Bloom?

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Readings

Matthew 13:3-9

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Sometimes" by Sheenagh Pugh

Sometimes things don't go, after all
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell
faces down frost, green thrives, the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from the war,
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

Sermon

I came of age, as many of you did, during the deepest freeze of the Cold War, that time of essentially useless air raid drills in schools and almost as useless bomb shelters.

And I recall quite clearly, as I've shared before, a moment in fifth grade when one of my best friends, Ricky Weinstein, declared that he didn't think we'd make it past the eighth grade, that a nuclear war would have ended everything by then.

Well, we made it through eighth grade and then into high school and most of us on to college, during which time the Vietnam War offered yet other reasons for despair.

No surprise, then, that in college during the late sixties and early seventies, at the same time that many of us were protesting the war, many of us also found ourselves attracted to the idea of utopian communities, communes, back to the land, and so on.

And though I never joined a commune, I was indeed intrigued with the idea of utopia, the idea that it might be possible to create a society, maybe a world that was, well, sort of perfect – everyone's needs met, no war, no hunger, no poverty. Intrigued enough to at least take a class in utopias, reading fictional portrayals of utopia as well as exploring real world attempts in the direction of utopia: from Brook Farm of the New England transcendentalists to Amish communities to the kibbutz movement in Israel.

Then as the seventies rolled on, the idea of a New Age took root in my generation and for many others – though I expect most “new agers” were unaware that the idea of a “new age” was, actually, a very old idea, often arising – like the dream of utopia – during times of turmoil and chaos.

Now, sometimes such dreams of a better place are of a golden age or a better time in the past – often also imagined. A recent presidential campaign was, as we well know, predicated on just such a premise; and it was just the latest example of this yearning for supposedly better times in the past.

But the writer Zadie Smith, born of a black mother and white father, puts this sort of hankering after better past times to rest with a few cogent lines she spoke to a German audience a few days after our 2016 presidential election (when she was in Germany to receive an award). Zadie Smith noted that the imagined simpler, better era that many were yearning for was an era during which, as she put it, “I could not vote, marry my husband, have my children, work in the university I work in, or live in my neighborhood”

In other words, she said, what she was calling “time travel” to the past “is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others.”

Instead, then, of some notion of “time travel” – either to a better past or an imagined utopian future, Smith invited her listeners – as I invite us today – to turn attention to the world as it actually is.

How is the world these days? As my sermon title asks, is ours a world of doom and gloom, with even greater catastrophe in one or another form just around the corner, or are we, in spite of many appearances, soon to bloom into some sort of utopia, new age, perfect world – or at least a much better world?

To be sure, there *is* plenty of doom and gloom to go around if all you do is read or listen to the daily news – or worse, get your news from a heavy diet of social media. You've perhaps seen the studies that suggest that the more time we spend on social media, the worse we feel about ourselves and about the world.

But are things really so bad, all bad, and getting worse?

Maybe not.

I was heartened in this regard several weeks ago to read a column by Nicholas Kristof in *The New York Times* which he titled “Why 2017 was the Best Year in Human History.”

This from Kristof, who, as in that column he reminded readers, mostly reports on such realities as war, poverty, and human rights abuses, and so might understandably be thought by many readers to be “gloomy, an Eeyore with a pen.”

Quite the contrary though. Kristof affirmed in the column that he is, as he wrote, “actually upbeat, because I’ve witnessed transformational change.”

What sort of change?

As Kristof reported, dramatic improvements on the planet in such measures of human well-being as literacy, access to electricity and clean drinking water, along with dramatic decreases in hunger and poverty and violence. It’s all there in the numbers he shares, the same information shared in a couple of new books, one by Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, and the other by journalist Gregg Easterbrook: *It’s Better Than it Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear* (which I’ve been lately reading).

Now, neither Easterbrook or Pinker (like Kristof) skirt the real dangers we face – including the possibilities of catastrophic nuclear war or runaway climate change which could reverse just about all these measures of human well-being. But they both point out that not just recently but over the scale of human history, real progress in human material well-being can be catalogued: longer lifespans, eradication of many diseases, less hunger, and much else. Now, every violent death, every instance of torture, every hungry child is of course a tragedy beyond words. But, these writers affirm, the larger picture is one not of gloom, but of general improvement in human well-being – blooming you might say.

Even in our own nation? Though I hardly have to remind you that we are in the midst of tumultuous and polarized political times, dangerous in many ways; and though it may feel as though we are going backwards on issue after issue, from civil rights to the environment and much else, it is nevertheless important to note from whence we have come.

For example:

Civil rights? Needless to say, we have much more to do, particularly as we learn more about the continued entrenched realities of systemic racism and white privilege; but we are light years away not only from African American slavery but from the lynchings and legal segregation of Jim Crow.

The environment? No question that we face grave dangers, particularly when it comes to global warming and climate change, even more particularly given current national political leadership. But note this: Activism and political pressure along with shifting cultural norms over the past fifty or sixty years has resulted in cleaner air and water, a shrinking ozone hole, and other major environmental achievements.

Now, we must note and remember well that progress in civil rights or regarding the environment, or in relation to other issues is not inevitable, not magical. Always must we be vigilant and often active. This said, why not be inspired by the achievements of the past as we seek to protect victories won and continue our work for... civil rights,

human rights, ecological sustainability... sane gun legislation... arms control... and on and on.

Look, we could argue as to whether things are getting better or getting worse, but it would be a little like the conversations between the old man and his neighbors in that ancient tale from China about the lost horse – each conversation concluding with the old man asking: Who knows?

In that sort of open-minded spirit, then, let me invite us to a little deeper consideration of the nature of our lives:

Perhaps, to begin with, we might be able to agree that the human situation when it comes to material well-being and human rights has, even with notable backtracking from time to time, generally improved significantly in many ways over the long stretch of time.

I expect we could then further agree with the caveat that there is no guarantee that this improvement will continue unabated or that some major catastrophe might not interrupt this generally upward trend altogether. As the warning in some investment ads puts it, past results are no guarantee of future performance.

What then?

Well, it seems to me spiritually healthy – sort of spiritually relaxing if you will – to let go of any idea that things are either destined for doom and gloom or for soon to be blooming.

I think this is why that old Chinese tale strikes a chord.

Now, this may not feel “spiritually relaxing” at first. Because the “who knows” of this story pulls the rug out from under us, the rug which for some of us is the rug of pessimism, which offers a kind of security through knowing (or thinking we know) that things are going, well, going to hell, and which for others of us (though these days it might be a smaller number of us) who assume with rose-colored glasses of optimism that all will be well, ever onward and upward.

But here’s where the “relaxing” part comes. You see, if the rug of either pessimism or optimism is pulled out from under us, we may find ourselves in a more spacious way of being in the world, free of feeling we know for sure what is blessing and what is curse, free of thinking we know what’s going to happen one way or another. And so more relaxed in our living.

And then?

Just do what needs doing, unencumbered with thoughts of what might or must be. This, in our personal lives as well as in the lives we share in community, in our nation, and on this dear earth. Just do what needs doing. Yes, often having goals, but letting go of attachment to those goals, thinking we know how things will or should go, free of attachment to the fruits, as some spiritual traditions put it.

One day at a time. One foot in front of the other. Doing the best we can, where we are, with what we’ve got.

After all, regardless of whether the trends of human material well-being are onward and upward or not, the essence of the human situation it seems to me remains about the same as it has always been. Isn’t this why so many ancient spiritual scriptures

and teachings still have meaning for us, even in this era of quite astonishing technological change and scientific discovery?

The essence of the human situation? We are born and we die; and in between we experience some mix of joy and sorrow, not evenly distributed. And all of this somewhat of a mystery, a mystery within which all the traditions offer similar messages: Be kind, knowing that we are kin, knowing that we share common roots and common destinies – not only with one another as humans, but with all life. So let go of grasping after those things just for ourselves which do not bring enduring happiness, and instead grasp each others hands in common purpose... striving, in the spirit of the parable of the sower, to be good soil for the seeds of those universal teachings of kindness, care, compassion, and love.

Well, my friend Ricky Weinstein was wrong, as you may have noticed. We made it way past eighth grade. (As Easterbrook writes, “Pessimism is almost always a poor guide.”)

Given this, I’m inclined to not give up on the human story just becomes of some blips (and sometimes worse) in the political landscape; I’m inclined not to let go of seeking to enhance the flourishing of all life in whatever small ways I can, in spite of too much human cruelty and violence, in spite of storms and droughts and rising seas.

And you know what? We *may* indeed be moving in what some have called the “great turning” from the industrial era to an ecological era, from an era defined by anthropocentrism (human-centered) to an era of eco-centrism (life-centered). Not “utopia” (which after all has the double meaning from Greek of either “good place” or “no place”) – so, not utopia... for whatever comes, there will still be challenges to be met, problems to be solved... there will still be suffering and sorrow – but just maybe in a more inclusive, world embracing, all life embracing context.

Who knows? But it wouldn’t hurt to live our lives in that direction, would it? After all, as we heard earlier:

*“Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.”*

--Sheenagh Pugh

So may it be.