



First United Church of Oak Park

God's Alternative Facts

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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December 10, 2017

This morning we lit our peace candle in the advent wreath. Just last Thursday night, we lit other candles for peace here at First United, when we hosted an ecumenical community peace vigil as part of the National Vigil against Gun Violence. This was part of a larger effort to commemorate the children, teachers, and staff who were gunned down in Sandy Hook, CT, five years ago. Ours was one of many vigils being held in early December all over the country, by people who want to stop the madness of gun violence.

Some people would say we are banging our heads against a wall, with little or no hope of achieving our goal. And recent events certainly make it look like that might be true.

- Last week the U.S. House Judiciary Committee approved a bill that quickly went to the House floor for a vote; it passed. Although the bill includes a measure to tighten background checks, gun control advocates are dismayed that it also includes the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act, which requires each state to recognize the concealed carry laws of all other states, no matter how lax they may be. As the NY Times said, that would mean that “the permit of a gun owner from Georgia, where weak standards allow even abusive partners to carry guns, would be legally valid” in New York, and, I might add, in Oak Park, Chicago, and other parts of Illinois.¹ Our more stringent concealed carry law cannot override Georgia’s lax one.
- It seems like we are banging our heads against a wall. For the second year in a row, there are over 600 homicides in Chicago, most of which are due to gun violence. Although the number of total shootings is down about 20% from last year at this time, I think most of you will agree with me that 3300 shootings is 3300 too many.²
- It seems like we cannot get ahead on gun control. On Black Friday, the shopping day after Thanksgiving, sales of guns and ammunition skyrocketed, due in part to aggressive discounts and promotions. On that day alone, the FBI conducted 203,000 background checks, an increase of nearly 10% over the previous year.³ Even assuming that not all of those 203,000 people actually were able to purchase a firearm, whatever the final sales total comes to, it’s still alarming.

Hard facts and statistics like this do not deter the few dozen people who gathered out on our lawn in 20-degree weather to proclaim their hopes for peace. Every year they raise their votive candles and their voices against the violence and in support of a different way of life. Several other times during the year they gather in front of the church to witness to their dream.

They are not the only people here at First United who tilt at what look to be proverbial windmills. Many of you wage your own battles for justice and equality, for peace and human flourishing. Maybe you do this at work, or in your neighborhoods, or on social media. Some do this quietly, through prayer or check writing or

¹ “Going National With Concealed Guns.” NY Times editorial. 6 December 2017.

² <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/data/ct-shooting-victims-map-charts-htmlstory.html> and Madeline Buckley, “Chicago Passes 600 Homicides for only Third Time since 2003” Chicago Tribune 20 November 2017.

³ <http://money.cnn.com/2017/11/27/news/companies/black-friday-gun-sales/index.html>

steady friendship. Others volunteer or are more public in their protests. There are a variety of gifts, but it is the same Spirit who plants in our hearts a hope for human flourishing.

Remembering that hope is part of what we do during the season of Advent. Every year we recall the visions for peace and human well-being that God gives us in the scriptures.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares. . . (Is 2)
My chosen shall enjoy the work of their hands. . .
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together (Is 65)

These words from Isaiah sound a lot like the words we say together every Sunday:

Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

This is an Advent themed prayer, if ever there was one. It is a prayer that leans into God's promised future, a future in which the deck is not stacked so high in favor of a few people and to the relentless disadvantage of so many others.

But is Advent just a prayer we repeat, sometimes without thinking, or an annually recycled vision? I think not. I believe Advent and its dreams are essential building blocks for making the world a better place.

A couple of years ago, I was reworking a course I taught at McCormick called The Church and Social Change. I came across a YouTube video of an interview that Bill Moyers had done with a guy named Marshall Ganz, who teaches community organizing at the Kennedy School of Government and is a veteran of the Farm Workers Movement.⁴ Ganz said something that was really helpful to me. He said that hope is an essential element of every effective movement for social change: hope in the hearts of the people the movement is trying to help, and also - and this may be more important - hope in the hearts of the leaders and volunteers doing the movement work. In order to persevere, which is a challenge in any effort to improve social conditions, people have to be able to believe they can actually make change happen. They have to have hope.

This was an important insight for me, because, as we've all probably experienced, what many seminary students and their mentors specialize most in is not hope, but critique. We are schooled in many seminaries to tell people what's wrong with them; we are taught to help people understand and repent of their racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and all of that is very important; but it's only part of the story. As Christians, we need to be able to do more than break things down; we need also to know how to build things up, and for that we need imagination and hope. "Si, se puede; Yes, we can," was what fueled the Farmworkers Movement. "We shall overcome" fueled the Civil Rights Movement. Hope, believing transformation is possible, makes all the difference in the world, because it not only helps people know where they are going, it also helps them sustain defeats and the setbacks.

Advent is a time for hope, but for an honest hope, not a trivial one. We read of hope as the days get cold and the nights get shorter and shorter. It is dark and dreary and uncomfortable in December, and it's a dangerous

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-vmsUoNRqc>

time for people who don't have homes or a kitchen pantry full of food. Hope is the flame that rises out of the embers of their woundedness and struggle.⁵

Hope is fueled by our imagination. In 2008, the creator of Harry Potter, JK Rowling, gave the commencement address at Harvard University. She titled it "The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination." In this speech, Rowling talked about her own failures and what she learned from them. More importantly, she talked about imagination, which she defined as "the capacity to envision that which is not," and "the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared."⁶

Rowling went on to talk about one of her earliest jobs, at Amnesty International. This was a pay-the-rent job, not the job-of-her-dreams, yet Rowling looks back on that work as an incredible opportunity, because in it she learned about the depths of human depravity as well as the expansiveness of human goodness. She did not learn about these first hand; she learned about them through her imagination, stimulated and formed by the people she met, the letters she read, and the stories she heard.

A few years later, Rowling wrote about magic, which in her Harry Potter books is basically having what it takes to be able to turn what a character imagines into reality. A good magician can turn this communion table into a bird, or whatever else she wishes. And a magician whose intentions are evil can turn the table into an assault rifle. Just because it's imagination doesn't mean it's good. Like any other human gifts, hope and imagination can be used for many purposes.

One of the purposes for which hope and imagination can be used is to promote the good news of the gospel. "Thy kingdom come," Jesus teaches us to pray. During Advent, we put flesh on that petition. We hear God's words of comfort and promise. We hear God's encouragement to turn around our lives and live less selfishly. We hear God's abiding concern for those left behind by poverty, illness, or political callousness. We are caught up again in God's dreams for human flourishing, and are invited to make it our dream. Every year, in Advent, we lean again into that good news and into the good news of Christmas.

Don't be afraid, said the angel to the shepherds.
Look! I bring good news to you - wonderful, joyous news for all people.
Your savior is born. . .
Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace.

Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to believe this good news. Don't be afraid to act on it.

It is not pointless to light candles of peace. Nor is it pointless to hold vigils in the dark and cold of night. In his name, we can make this world a better and more peaceful place. Si, se puede. Yes, we can. May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

⁵ Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

⁶ <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/06/the-fringe-benefits-failure-the-importance-imagination> Accessed 7 December 2017.