
This I Believe

John 1:1-18

A sermon preached in Page Auditorium on January 3, 2016

by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

Tomorrow will be a better day!

Your New Year's resolutions will take hold. Your favorite team will win. Our community will continue to grow stronger. And Durham Public Schools will be back in session with excited students once again at their desks. The students will be so grateful that the sloth of vacation is past.

Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day. That is the name of short essay written and read by a high school junior as part of the "This I Believe" series. This I Believe is a not-for-profit organization which publishes brief essays, written by individuals from all walks of life, regarding their core values. The series was started in 2004 and "is based on a 1950s radio program of the same name, hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow." ¹

Some time ago, I heard this essay read on NPR. Here is a portion of it.

I'm 16. On a recent night, while I was busy thinking about important social issues, like what to do over the weekend and who to do it with, I overheard my parents talking about my future. My dad was upset — not the usual stuff that he and Mom and, I guess, a lot of parents worry about, like which college I'm going to... Instead, he was upset about the world his generation is turning over to mine — a world he fears has a dark and difficult future, if it has a future at all....

As I lay on the living room couch, eavesdropping on their conversation, starting to worry about the future my father was describing, I found myself looking at some old family photos. There was a picture of my grandfather in his Citadel uniform. He was a member of the class of 1942, the war class. Next to his picture were photos of my great-grandparents, Ellis Island immigrants. Seeing those pictures made me feel a lot better. I believe tomorrow will be better than today — that the world my generation grows into is going to get better, not worse. Those pictures helped me understand why.

I considered some of the awful things my grandparents and great-grandparents had seen in their lifetimes: two world wars, killer flu, segregation, a nuclear bomb. But they saw other things, too, better things: the end of two world wars, the polio vaccine, passage of the civil rights laws...

I believe that my generation will see better things, too...I will see things as inconceivable to me today as a moon shot was to my grandfather when he was 16, or the Internet to my father when he was 16.

Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I've had a lousy day, my dad would put his arm around me and promise me that "tomorrow will be a better day."

As I listened to my Dad talking that night, so worried about what the future holds for me and my generation, I wanted to put my arm around him, and tell him what he always told me: "Don't worry Dad, tomorrow will be a better day." This, I believe.²

¹ About This I Believe, <http://thisibelieve.org/about/>

² This I Believe, "Tomorrow Will Be a Better Day", by Josh Rittenberg, Feb. 27, 2006

I appreciate the optimism, hope, and love in these words. And frankly, I was surprised when I looked up this essay and found that it was published in 2006. I don't remember most of what happened in 2006, or 2005 or 2007 for that matter, so the fact that this short essay stayed with me seems unusual.

I am grateful the optimism recorded here and agree that tomorrow will be a better day, and yet, I find something missing.

Why will tomorrow be a better day? Is it because human beings endure? Or because of technological advancements? These are true, yet don't seem to be enough.

As we look at the span human history, we see a variety of ups and downs. Technological and cultural advancements have come, and gone. We know that whole civilizations grow, prosper, provide security and stability, foster the development of art and literature, and often peak, then decline. Egypt, China, Rome, Persia, the Mayans and others have had grand civilizations that today no longer exist in the way they once did. Of course, depending on where you were in the social structure would determine whether or not the "civilization" was positive or not. Where the United States is on the roller coaster of human history we probably don't know. Historians centuries hence will make that determination. It seems to me quite likely that humans will continue to invent and create, and sometimes, forget and destroy. And when we forget and destroy, we need to backtrack and clean up our mess and rebuild. Human history doesn't seem to me to provide solid footing for optimism.

What about personal achievement? Sometimes our optimism is fueled by our own drive, ambition, and hard work. Every marathoner has accomplished her goal by putting one foot in front of the other. And the Nobel-winning scientists have persisted in the lab, long after the rest of us have gone home. Are we optimistic because of our own commitments or because we are focused on pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps?

Actually, I think we need help with our bootstraps. When I was in college, I worked at church camps during the summer. Typically in the cycle of a 10-week summer, weeks 7 and 8 could be difficult. The energy level of the staff was waning and we weren't close enough to the end of the summer to have one final burst of energy. Meanwhile, a fresh batch of campers arrived every Sunday afternoon with plenty of energy and a host of expectations for a wonderful week. I remember during one of those low-energy weeks, fatigue must have shown on my face, because in the middle of a lunch, a colleague scooted across the dining room floor, underneath the tables, to pull up my imaginary boot straps. It was a ridiculous move, which worked, raising my spirits for afternoon ahead.

That day in summer camp reminds me of how often we need something from outside of us to lift us up. Our optimism for a better tomorrow comes not from ourselves, either as individuals or as societies. Our hope comes from God alone. It comes from God who entered as the light of the world, the true light which enlightens everyone. (John 1:9)

The prologue of the Gospel of John, one of our readings for today, is a complex and fascinating passage which scholars study intensely. Discussion of the nature of the Logos, comparisons to the wisdom tradition in Judaism, and struggles over how to translate individual words make these verses intriguing. The prologue also captures our attention because it differs so much in style and content compared to the synoptic gospels. Personally, I find this passage powerfully hopeful.

This passage teaches that before anything else existed, God was present. And all that now exists came into being through God. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:3-4) Further, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full

of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) In these verses we see God’s essence and intent from the beginning of time; God creates and enters the world to bring the true light, to reveal grace and truth, to welcome us as children of God.

John’s prologue does not reference a nation waiting for a Messiah. There is no mention of ancient hopes long satisfied, though we know Israel had longed for the promised king. There are no explicit connections to the history that has gone before. Here we see only God, and God’s action. It is the creation of something out of nothing, purely by divine grace, only to bring life. God’s entrance into the world comes not as a response to us or our world, but instead by God’s singular initiative. Further, this light and life will endure for “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5) Tomorrow will be a better day, not because of what we have done. Instead, it will be a better day because God has entered our world as the light and life that can never be extinguished.

On Christmas Day this year, the New York Times ran an editorial titled, “Moments of Grace in a Grim Year”.³ Is “grim” the word you would use for 2015? The author wrote, “Humanity being what it is, the world remains a place of suffering and calamity. In 2015, catastrophes in the Middle East spread misery and terror the world over. The United States was brutalized, as ever, by the tyranny of gunfire. Our coarsened politics, so expert at keeping the populace fearful and distraught, got ever louder and cruder in the heat of a presidential race. The strutting and fretting promise only to get worse in 2016.”⁴

The title mentioned “grace” so I read on. As I did, I noticed a number of grace moments had a faith connection. There was praise for Pope Francis and his compassion for the lowly. The pope’s faith is clear. The author mentioned the hospitality offered to refugees in Western Europe. Church folks, including us, have been a part of that. Chapel offering money has been directed to refugee relief. Also mentioned was the response to the murders at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. The victims’ families, individuals whose faith in God is deep, found the grace to be able to forgive.

When we look at these examples and ask why, we see the light God. Faith motivated these people to care, welcome, and forgive -- faith that is enlivened and enlightened by the One who is our life and light.

Patrice Nelson, the current director of Urban Ministries here in Durham, recently shared a story. One of the shelter residents came to her to say goodbye because he has a job and was moving into a home of his own. He had worked hard and taken advantage of the opportunities provided to him at the shelter and said with tears in his eyes “I appreciate everything you all did to help me.” Reflecting on the conversation, Patrice noted that tears “flowed because the light had begun to shine after so many years of darkness, pain, hurt, frustration and loss.”⁵ Her faith in Christ and your faith in Christ, made a difference in the life of this shelter resident. Because the word became flesh and dwelt among us, because God took the initiative in reaching out to us, because God’s light shows us the way, we now take the initiative in reaching out to others. The lasagna dinners provided by this community of faith no doubt nourished that shelter resident.

There is light and life in our world.

This morning we are celebrating the sacrament of communion. Here we are reminded of what happened when God became flesh and dwelt among us. It propels us forward from this Epiphany Sunday to Holy Week.

There is a church I know that marks Good Friday with a Tenebrae service. As the passion story is read, the lights are slowly diminished until the congregation sits in darkness. As a bell is tolled 33 times, the Christ candle is removed

³ **New York Times, “Moments of Grace in a Grim Year” by The Editorial Board, Dec. 25, 2015**

⁴ **ibid**

⁵ **Urban Ministries Appeal Letter, Dec 23, 2015 by Patrice Nelson**

from the sanctuary by way of a side door. Some worshipers are moved to tears. When the bell falls silent, the Christ candle is brought into the back of the sanctuary, behind the worshipers, as the minister speaks a verse from John 1. It is the last word of the night.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”(John 1:5)

This I believe.

Thanks. be to God. Amen.