

Good News

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There wouldn't be such a thing as counterfeit gold if there were no real gold somewhere. —Sufi Proverb

Ancient Witness: Luke 4:14-20

How are you doing? O.K.? Kind of tired? Worried? Exhausted? Yeah, me too. Lots of us are. And that's what I want to talk about this morning. How can we keep the faith in times like these? How can we not give up? How can we persevere? Those of us who want a better world. A more just and fair and peaceful world.

It's been two years, now, that we've been living with this pandemic. About one million Americans have died because of it. Our lives have been disrupted, especially children in their development. Businesses have failed. And it has been ugly. People refusing vaccines and masks because it is seen not as a way to care for others but as an imposition upon our freedom.

We've never been this divided as a nation. Well, maybe once before in our history. The integrity of our democratic process has been called into question with a Big Lie. And many believe it. This is unprecedented. Many will not even accept the results of the last presidential election. There was an insurrection led by the former President of the United States, himself—an attack on our Capitol and an attempt to thwart the transfer of power.

The gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater. We have a political system favors the 1% at the expense of the 99%. The billionaires and American oligarchs have been making a killing, while half of the people in the United States are living paycheck to paycheck. There is an economic desperation growing in this nation, and our political system is being held hostage by the super rich and huge corporations.

We seem unable as a society to make any significant progress on global climate change because of this captivity, even though a large majority want collective action by our government. We are losing this battle and are failing our children and future generations. They will reap what we have sown.

And now we have an invasion of Ukraine by the autocrat, Putin, of Russia. Thousands will die. Millions will become refugees. And there is a danger that this could escalate with the threat of a nuclear war.

Lately, it seems that if it weren't for bad news we wouldn't have any news at all. So how do we not succumb to a sense of futility? How do we not give up? How do we resist the urge to stick our heads in the sand to escape it all? How do we energize ourselves not to disengage, but to continue to act responsibly?

I'm reminded of this marvelous essay that the playwright Tony Kushner wrote a number years ago. In it he wrote:

I do not believe the wicked always win. I believe our despair is a lie we are telling ourselves. In many other periods of history, people, ordinary citizens, routinely set aside hours, days, time in their lives for doing the work of politics, some of which is glam and revolutionary and some of which is dull and electoral and tedious and not especially pure – and the world changed because of the work they did. That's what we're starting now. It requires setting aside the time to do it, and then doing it. Not any single one of us has to or possibly can save the world, but together in some sort of concert, in even not-especially-coordinated concert, with all of us working where we see work to be done, the world will change.

I heard a high-profile person say recently that if you are feeling doomed and resigned, like giving up, you're falling for propaganda. She was making a point that powerful people—autocrats, oligarchs—don't want working people and ordinary folks to hear that they can actually win. If you're feeling cynical because all you see is bad stuff, it's going to make you feel like nothing is happening, but that's engineered. Because a resigned citizenry that has given up is what the ruling interests want. They want people who believe nothing is going to change. They want people in despair, telling themselves a lie that nothing can change.

So the remedy is to **share good news!** Good news is what we need to remind ourselves that change is possible, that we can make progress. Things like the successful John Deere strike this past summer. Like the organizing efforts to bring a union to Starbucks across the country. Big companies hire lobbyists to kill these stories. Plus, the news and social media all love the negative stories, the bad news because it drives ratings. As the old maxim goes, "If it bleeds, it leads." The algorithms favor bad news and the anger and strong emotions it generates. So we need to be intentional about this.

It might help to remember that Jesus was all about sharing good news. The Greek word, *euangelion*, translated as "gospel" literally means "good news." And in his inaugural sermon, Jesus read from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has appointed me to share good news!" Good news for the poor, for the captives, for the blind, for the oppressed, for those with crushing debt. The world is changing, he said. A new kingdom is coming, a new order is emerging. It's right under your noses. It's within you and around you. But you have to look for it. Most amazing of all, there's this Loving Presence, Abba, God in the world, calling forth goodness, calling forth justice, calling forth compassion. Like leaven in bread. Like a mustard seed spreading it's plant like a weed. But we need to look for it. Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King Jr.'s spiritual mentor, put it like this: "All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born... Look well to the growing edge." We need to look well, to look for it.

Jesus showed just how revolutionary good news was. How dangerous it was to the powers of domination. How threatening it was.

Because when they see it, the people don't feel like giving up any more, they don't feel so disempowered. We feel more strength, more courage, more hope. As Isaiah wrote (40:29-31): Those who wait for God, will renew their strength, will soar on wings like eagles, will run and not grow weary, will walk and not be faint.

This is what sharing good news can do. Now, I'm not saying that we ignore the bad things that are going on, pretend they don't exist. But when we pay attention to goodness and beauty that is emerging all around us, we can change the world.

I'll end with this story. A man sat at a metro station in Washington DC and started to play the violin; it was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that 1,100 people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. Three minutes went by, and a middle aged man noticed there was musician playing. He slowed his pace, and stopped for a few seconds, and then hurried up to meet his schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in the till and without stopping, and continued to walk. A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. Clearly he was late for work. The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother tagged him along, hurried, but the kid stopped to look at the violinist. Finally, the mother pushed hard, and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on. In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money, but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition. No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the most talented musicians in the world, playing incognito. He had just played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, on a violin worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100.

How much are we missing? How much beauty? How much good news? How many acts of kindness, generosity, courage and sacrifice? How many ways that a new world is emerging before our eyes?