

Christmas Eve 2017
Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of a cultural revolution we now call the Protestant Reformation. It was also 500 years ago that the English politician Thomas More published a little book called *Utopia*—the fictional account of an imaginary island visited by a Portuguese sailor who describes it as an extraordinary place—a society in which all work was done for the common good and whose residents used gold to make chamber pots and mocked ostentatious displays of wealth.

Since 1517, countless stories, books, essays, works of art and movies have celebrated utopian thinking as a driver of social change for improvement and progress. Countless works, as well, have been written and created warning us of the dangers when utopian thinking and practice goes awry. Do I need to say this is also the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia?

And what on earth does any of this have to do with Christmas Eve?

In the first chapter of the gospel of Luke in the Christian scripture, there's a story I'd like to share. A pregnant Mary—the soon-to-be mother of Jesus—travels south from Nazareth to a hill town in Judea to stay for several months with a kinswoman named Elizabeth who, though advanced in years, is also pregnant. Elizabeth's son, as an adult will go on to become known as John the Baptist. Do we know these stories and characters? So, two relatives, two pregnant women—pleased to see each other, and both believing that the children that will issue from their bodies into the world will have a significant role to play in the lives and history of their people.

I'm not going to go into the mysteries of the Bible tonight; and since this account was written generations after the fact, I don't know actually how much to trust the details.

Be that as it may, the story is fascinating in itself; it gives us a glimpse into the past, another society and its beliefs; and the extraordinary, utopian hope of mothers that their children will in some way be a gift and of use to kinsfolk, their culture and even the world.

Prior to Mary's visit, Elizabeth and her spouse Zechariah were given to believe, by an angelic voice, that the child they would parent would grow to be filled with the spirit of Elijah the prophet, and "would turn the hearts of parents to their children" and all "toward the wisdom of the just." For her part, Mary, too, had been similarly visited by an angelic presence, who greeted her with these words: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you; be not afraid," telling her she would bear a son and call his name Yeshua, Jesus—which means God delivers, or saves.

So, Elizabeth and Mary have met and shared with each other their joy; and then I find what follows quite remarkable. According to the narrative account, Luke records the words spoken by the young, pregnant Mary—the one told that her child would bear the name of a person who delivers or saves in the name of God. And what does this deliverance look like? Here's Mary in her "own" words as spoken to Elizabeth:

My soul magnifies the Lord...for he has regarded my low estate.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered the proud as *they* imagine themselves.

He has put down the mighty from their thrones,

And exalted those of low degree.

He has filled the hungry

And the rich he has sent empty away.

No demur, otherworldly piety in these words; no shrinking violet this young woman. Sounds to me like a defiant, hopeful expression of what deliverance in this life would look like for a people

occupied and oppressed by a brazen, foreign, imperial power; how deliverance would appear to someone like Mary, who, as she says, comes from the lower reaches of society. The mighty pulled down from their thrones (?); the proud, the wealthy scattered and sent packing (?); those of low degree exalted?!

I didn't make this up. It's right here in the Bible. Makes me wonder sometimes how many people who say they take it seriously actually read it. According to Luke, the mother of Jesus is interrogating and challenging the status quo, and believes her child will, in some way, be a force to turn the world upside down.

This is utopian thinking in the best sense of the word. A young woman, spurred on by voices, praises a God who is no respecter of persons, titles, pedigrees and treasure, and who delivers people from bondage. And Mary, according to this story in the gospels, believes that her child will have something real and concrete to contribute to the deliverance, the salvation of her people. No wonder Herod quaked at the news of the birth of this child and sought to destroy him. No wonder the Romans executed him as a disturber of the peace and of their absolute control over a subject people and nation.

Utopias are for dreamers; and what parent does not dream that their child will grow to both flourish and, in some way, make a significant mark for good upon the world? Hoping for something better is the utopian impulse in a nutshell; it's that which imagines a better world than the one we've got. It's neither naïve nor sentimental for human beings to imagine a state of affairs where, by challenging the corrosive poverty of sense and spirit, and its outworkings in anxiety, apathy and stagnation, we imagine for ourselves and our children that which we know makes for human flourishing, and the well-being of our planet with its myriad beings.

This is a basic value of utopian literature like that of the first chapter in the gospel of Luke. It doesn't offer a checklist or blueprint for a better society; it does not seek or demand perfection or perfect people. Rather, it presents us with an imaginative image of what human beings need in order to live well; without it, I think we'd be lost to disillusionment, rage and fury.

Utopian dreams, like that of Mary contemplating the birth of her child, have always existed, whether in song, art, or literature. We create such dreams no matter how harsh our situation. It is a testament that we have, and will never lose, the capacity to imagine a better world for ourselves, our families and this one and precious world in which we live.

May we go from this Sanctuary on this Christmas Eve full of good cheer, aglow with that human spirit which overcomes all that would have us believe that we can't come up with anything better—that pinched spirit of our times which demands that we shrink our imaginations of a world more just, fair and compassionate.

The spirit of Christmas? May we resonate and make real what Howard Thurman, renowned as the spiritual advisor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr, said, and which we read together this evening, and so I repeat:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
(then) The work of Christmas beings:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken
To fee the hungry
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among our brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart.

And may it be so. Amen.