

“A Trust Walk”

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This has been a hard week in our nation and in our world. Right now, we are in the midst of a struggle with the Government shutdown. You turn on the news and we find overwhelming struggles that can require us to question God, because where can God be in the middle of this mess? We have had natural disasters with two major hurricanes, other flooding situations. We have experienced worse than what we could imagine human beings could do to each other, with massive shootings. We have also been frightened by global tensions, in recognition that North Korea has the potential with nuclear war heads to shoot missiles that could reach Hawaii.

Then, this past week, to watch the whole state of Hawaii fleeing and hiding, sticking children in manhole covers, because for 38 minutes they were sure that they were going to be destroyed by nuclear disaster. Thank God, it was some single person pushing the wrong button twice. Our hearts are with them today as they still emotionally recover, and help their children recover from that emotional trauma.

There are civil wars that continue to go on. The crisis in Myanmar and the civil wars in Syria and Yemen leave the world on edge. And it leaves the US and Russia playing a dangerous game of chess where the stakes have never been higher.

It can feel like the world is falling apart. And, then I got something from Ken Arentson this week. See, I like it that he is retired. It gives him more time to read stuff that he can give to me. [Laughter.] He was using it in his Wednesday group, so of course I stole it and used it for my Wednesday group and, even worse, I used it today because it just kind of fit.

It was Time magazine. Apparently, they are going to hire a new editor, and in the meantime, they have guest editors each time the magazine comes out. This time it happened to be Bill Gates as the editor for this one issue. Bill Gates had a different response to all of the negativity and resenting the challenges that face us. He laid out, in his introductory words, a whole different way of looking at things that I really appreciated. I'm assuming that if I did, the rest of you will appreciate it as well.

He laid out an argument for why the world is actually getting better; how it is improving and not getting worse. Gates believes that while things I have mentioned are truly awful - and that is a quote - the world is actually, by and large, bigger and more positive in its trends.

He uses these examples, and I think we needed to be reminded of them: In 1990, more than one-third of the globe's population lived in extreme poverty; today it is less than 10 percent. Now you think back to 1985, we were doing Live Aid and everything, because we saw people in Ethiopia and other places dying. [It's] not nearly at the same scale today. A century ago it was only legal in 20 countries to be a homosexual, today over 100 countries have made it legalized. Women are gaining political power and now make up more than one-fifth of the members of Parliaments around the world. The world is starting to listen when women speak up about sexual assault, and that is just in the last few months.

More than 90 percent of all children in the world attend primary school. My father-in-law had to leave school and go to work with no more than an 8th grade education. Now, over 90 percent of the world's children - from the poorest place to the wealthiest place - over 90 percent get that primary education. It's truly amazing, just in a generation, the differences we have seen. In the United States, you are far less likely to die today from accidents on the job, or in a car, than your grandparents were.

When I was a boy and in high school, we lived on the iron range in northern Minnesota, and it would be a regular day when you would hear another miner was killed working. They don't have that same issue today. The requirements and protections that are in place, and the improvements with technology, have made it a much safer world for people, not just on the iron range in northern Minnesota, but all over the world. It is a better place to live.

Now, remembering the world's improvements is vitally important for Christian people, because when we get bitter, and cynical, and resentful, that the world is going to heck in a hand basket, what does the rest of the world feel like? As Christians, we feel God created this world and we humans have a purpose; and God has a purpose, and God's purpose is not to annihilate this world. Now the paradox - the discomfort - is, this disease of the problem is that, by the same token, we have free will. We have the potential now to annihilate ourselves, and if we are (and I'm using this word theologically), hell-bent on destroying ourselves in our free will, when and where and does God step into that mess? That is where trust comes into play. We can't control the dictator in North Korea. We can't control what we do as a nation, and we have to rely on something greater. Thankfully we do have a blessing in this world, and that is a Divine Creator of the Universe, who is also a redeemer, in Jesus Christ and, very importantly, a *sustainer* in the Holy Spirit. And that sustainer not only sustains our faith, but I hope and pray that that God sustains our world - and that is truly a blessing.

As we were walking through this in my class on Wednesday night, one of the members of the class made a really good statement. I shared it before, but it was so appropriate, he brought it up on Wednesday. He said, "Dr. King was right. The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And, in the same way, there are going to be problems in this world that will drive us to our knees, but the arc of justice is truly improving our world. We are not as barbaric, most of the time, as we were a thousand years ago. We are improving morally, ethically and perhaps spiritually.

The key is the responsibility that each one of us has to be Christ in the world today, to be that lover where there is hate around us, to be that person who has the courage to speak out when others are timid, and to believe that God will protect us, guide us, and sustain us in those very difficult moments.

Now, the Bible knew exactly what I'm talking about right now. The arc of justice may have been bending in the time of Jesus, but that didn't mean that it was all Easy Street from there on out. When this was being shared, John the Baptist had already been in prison and murdered. They knew grief, but Jesus didn't give up. He didn't get cynical and say, "Why bother? The Roman authorities are just going to kill us all anyway."

Jesus began again and trusted that God would provide the right people to step in as Apostles. When we can no longer do the task, we have to trust that the ones coming next will sit in those seats, take up their Bibles, respond in prayer and make a difference in this world. That is why we try so hard to nurture them, encourage them and set a wonderful example for them so that they can continue to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite Theologians – 20th century theologians – (he is just a wonderful man) [is] Rudolph Bultmann. And Bultmann said that, “Wherever Jesus was active, the time was fulfilled and the kingdom was present.”

Now in a world where there is a lot of pain and suffering, wherever you can see a good thing happen in this world, it can only be by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So when you can see in a week like this that North and South Korea as, bitter enemies as they are, can come together and say, “We are going to have the same girls’ hockey team.” That may not seem like a whole heck of a lot to you and me (although hockey is pretty important where I come from). [Laughter.] They will walk together in the Olympics. That is a group of people making a statement saying, “I’m going to put trust, hope and reconciliation above my hatred for you.”

It is a beautiful statement, for sports can play an amazing role - and I hope it does in February. I will be very anxious, and I will cheer for Korea as they come in together. I hope that example is one that we can all follow. It is important that we learn from the past so that we do not continue to hurt and damage the future.

We are facing horrendous challenges, brutality, bombings - this week alone - to think about that bombing in Kabul, I think there were 14 injured and 7 dead. I can’t remember and forgot to write it down, but what happened was brutal.

Or, to turn on the television and hear about the brutality and child abuse where that husband and wife in California tortured 13 children of their own, I can’t imagine. The human propensity to sin is enormous, but it cannot sabotage the power of the Holy Spirit to move the arc of justice and righteousness towards the kingdom of God. And, the kingdom of God on earth is what the passage speaks of today and what we need to be about.

We can dream of a time when the kingdom will have politicians that will put the nation’s wellbeing above their own personal ambitions. We can dream of a time when people will see each other as children of the same God, rather than enemies to be manipulated and destroyed. We can dream of a time when children can have a future without abuse; a future with opportunity; a future where children will view others as themselves - as truly worthy. And, it is getting better.

It is our task to make sure it doesn’t stop or reverse, so that in all the ways in which we try to work as a congregation, it is to bless, heal and restore. And these hopes and dreams are not pipe dreams. Scripture says, “All things are possible through Him who loves us,” God will make these things possible.

Thirty years ago they thought it would be impossible, twenty years ago they thought it would be impossible - that over 90 percent of the world’s children would get a primary

education. And yet, that is where we are today. In the very same way, we believe, with God's leaning and God's sustaining power of the Holy Spirit we can make those things happen. The arc of justice can continue to move, and our world can continue to get better.

Now, I needed to hear that sermon today, I got pretty crabby by Friday when I saw everything was shutting down, I got pretty crabby when I saw the bombings and all of the disarray that is going on, and I thought we needed kind of - at least I did - a little mental spiritual shift.

As we are reminded of what God is doing, let us not get fed up with the things that make us step back once or twice; but may we keep moving forward, trusting that the arc of justice will ultimately prevail.

And, it is in Jesus' name, that we trust and place our faith. Amen