

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 19, October 10, 2021
Proper 25

“Don’t Worry Be Happy”

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126;
Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

Our Scripture from Jeremiah contains, in part, his consolations to the exiled people of Israel.

“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of nations...See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth...the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor...with weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back...”

This week I was not feeling the consolations. I was pretty bummed out by where our country is heading. Start off with Global Warming.

When I saw that Senator Manchin had put the nail in the coffin of the Clean Energy Program of the Build Back Better Agenda, my spirits sank. Doesn’t this senator read science books? Hasn’t he seen that a good chunk of our western states is burning up? Doesn’t he know that we have only a ten-year window to fix this before disastrous – I should say more disastrous – tipping points will be crossed? Many days, these headlines don’t inspire joyful singing.

Any optimism that I had that we Americans might do the right thing to save our planet was circling the toilet drain. We had a ten-year window we were told, to fix this, and we'd already used up four years of that under Trump, and another year, maybe two, under congressional gridlock.

I get it that West Virginia is coal and gas country. Our family gets royalties from natural gas, and I am perfectly willing to be phased out of business as we transition to clean energy. We will all need to do our part. The Clean Energy Program had the promise of moving us toward that goal, sooner rather than later. No, I was not feeling consoled. So also a carbon tax. Now, it's all off the table. Absolutely, no consolation for our planet. And two thirds of the anti-science party believe there's no problem.¹ Nothing to see here, folks. Just move along.

Yes, we need jobs in West Virginia, but coal is virtually dead. Already with mountain top removal, coal can be extracted with the labor of just a few out of the several hundred previously needed when miners were crawling through dangerous tunnels far underground. Many states now prohibit the purchase of electricity generated from the burning of coal, further drawing down the number of jobs in the coal industry. Oil and natural gas sanctions are not far behind. I get that.

But, Senator Joe, if we don't save the planet, tell me what our future is. Where is the hope? Or do we shut our eyes and just sing another chorus of Bob Marley's "Don't Worry Be Happy?" Tell me. What's the plan?

How about reading James Hansen's *Storms of My Grandchildren* or Bill McKibben's *Eaarth* (no, that's not a misspelling. The planet we used to call Earth no longer exists. We're presently in a Not-So-Brave New World).

There are a number of very good, very sound, recently published books on the Global Warming Crisis we are presently living through – 99.9 percent of climate scientists are in agreement.² If you don't believe this, you're probably living in a state that's not on fire or under water. Or

¹ Andrew Romano, "Poll: More than two-thirds of Republicans say Climate Change is 'Not an Emergency,'" Yahoo! News, October 22, 2021.

² Ibid.

watching a politicized news channel -- Fox, OAN, Breitbart or Newsmax. These folks don't seem to be reading science books either.

Yes, maybe the only resort left to us is "Don't Worry Be Happy." And pop open another Bud.

Though I found that wretched little ditty sticking in my craw when I came across an incredible news item. Some guy, Rick Wiles, on TrueNews.com was warning Americans about the perfidy of the COVID-19 vaccine. It is a means of injecting eggs into your body which hatch into synthetic parasites. To control your mind or something. Did you know that??? Must be true. The guy was deadly serious, and he had a silver cross on his lapel.

Or maybe these folks attend a prosperity gospel church that will bathe you in the delusion that God wants you to get rich while they put you to sleep with "Happy Jesus Music." No, God doesn't need you to have a Rolls Royce or a McMansion. God doesn't want us to sleep through our planet's distress.

For myself, give me a strong dose of Matthew 25 or Micah 6:8. (Look these up. It's your Bible study for the week.)³ And get us to our feet with a rousing rendition of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." I don't want a gospel that's pabulum. I want to mainline the straight stuff, full strength. And from the psalter, let's have Psalm 1. Look that up too. And the first word of that psalm is NOT "Happy." It's "BLESSED" -- an entirely different matter. You've heard my rant on this mistranslation before. BLESSED. Got that?

Having said that, I'm already starting to feel a little more upbeat. If I can stop laughing from that story of the synthetic parasite egg guy.

Yes, indeed, Jesse, "Keep Hope Alive."

So now, let's go for the substance of that hope. I'm starting to actually feel breezes blowing over those promised brooks of water in the Negev Desert. The substance is the particularity of my spiritual journey.

My journey back to the church began after attending a student conference with Dr. Martin Luther King. King's message was a positive message of love, of hope of community. I decided right then and there, if

³ Hint: The Parable of the Last Judgement. Answer to the question, "What does the Lord require?"

this is what the gospel is about, then include me in! This was real Consolation.

My spirit soared. And that flame has not gone out. It has been nourished in study and prayer, through sermons and late-night bull sessions. And through the great hymns of the church as well as those of the sixty's activism. A few outstanding seminary professors were the yeast in that bread. Also don't forget the balladeers: Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, Country Joe and the Fish. All inspiration. Though ostensibly secular, but Spirit infested.

As we struggle with repairing our social safety net, some say \$3.5 trillion is way out of reach. My next-door neighbor Helen reminds me that if we just eliminated one or two aircraft carriers and its attendant ships from the budget, close some of our several hundred bases around the world -- that would pay the bill on Build Back Better! Just a little cut would do it. We already spend more on the military than the next ten countries combined. And are we safer?

Are we safer, as discarded Americans turn in ever greater numbers to the opiate of drugs, alcohol, gambling, mindless distraction and violence? Really? Safer?

Are we safer as more and more families are left with decrepit, crap schools that provide no ladder up and out of poverty? Left to live on the streets. Really? Safer?

Are we safer as more and more Americans become disillusioned by can't-do political parties? As political fantasies and insurrection consumes one of our major parties and ego and corporate lobbyists consumes the other? Safer?

Again, I turn to our columnist for the Common Good, David Brooks. David begins his most recent column, "**Scorn**," with the observation that when he grew up as a boy, we Americans had a common story.⁴

I remember learning that story in my earliest grades. Simplistic to be sure. A story that overlooked the ugliness of racism, genocide and poverty. A story grounded in military grandiosity. A myth that left out whole groups of us. Definitely a white, Northern European story. But there it was. Our class made its Pilgrim hats, the girls made dainty white Pilgrim aprons and we heard of that primal Thanksgiving Dinner. All was

⁴ David Brooks, "Scorn and the American Story," *New York Times*, Opinion, October 14, 2021.

Kumbaya. I tried to tell my mom, “They didn’t make the kids eat tomato aspic and other yucky stuff.”

I don’t know what our landscaper Jaime would have thought of it all. His people certainly didn’t come over on any Mayflower, though they’d been here for generations.

David continues: “When I was a kid, I was told a certain triumphalist story about America, which was loaded with words like “superpower” and “greatest.”

“That triumphalist story sounds tinny in 2021, and it seems to have been rejected by many in the younger generations. As that story has faded, our country has fractured, without a cohering national narrative. So we cast about for more realistic and inclusive ways to retell our story.”⁵

Our story need not be rooted in a winner-take-all mentality. Life is not a zero-sum game -- where, if you get something, I must have lost something. That’s the bedrock of racism. That’s grievance politics.

America is not a state of mind where we win by heaping scorn on others. That was a good part of what played out in the 2016 election and the Big Lie that resulted in a seditious insurrection. That’s a dead end for America.

Scorn plays out in class, race, educational and economic elitism — and, now, its whether folks are wearing masks and getting their vaccinations or not. Stop it, people! We’re better than this. There’re no parasite eggs.

Our story, too often, becomes rooted in humiliation. “Humiliation lingers in the mind, the heart, the veins, the arteries forever,” Vivian Gornick writes in Harper’s Magazine. “It allows people to brood for decades on end, often deforming their inner lives.” This is what the demagogue plays to.

David points out that many who we have scorned do overcome the temptation of victimhood. “Much of the drive and dynamism of American life comes from humiliated people saying, “We’ll show them who we are.”⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brooks, op cit.

For the LGBTQ community, Stonewall (a gay bar raided by NY police, where the first resistance was mounted to such brutality) has become a rallying cry. Brooks points out that the word, “PRIDE” has become synonymous with the LGBTQ community.

Black Power is the affirmation of agency in the Black Community, that it has the power and drive to achieve its goals and dreams.

The Latino Roundtable is the positive encouragement that this community provides to business men and women in the city of Pomona.

Here is Consolation. This is where we all return from the harvest bringing sheaves of accomplishment with joy and celebration. This is our child’s picture chosen for the weekly bulletin board. That “A” on a math paper. The homerun in PE. A newly founded nonprofit for good – all Consolation – a JOY to celebrate. A flood of righteous, steadfast solidarity. Consolation, for sure.

Are you feeling the Love yet? Feeling the Consolation yet?

I wasn’t quite out of the doldrums when I opened the “Verse and Voice” email in the morning from *Sojourners*, a magazine of Christian gospel activism.

The **VERSE** of the day was from Nehemiah 8: “And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Within our scripture sound guidance is indeed to be found. An encompassing Spirit uplifts all. And with God, ALL means ALL.

The **VOICE** was that of Maggie Smith from her poem, “Good Bones.” -- “This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.” This one-and-the-same Spirit gives AGENCY to all. We can do this! Si se puede.

And the **PRAYER** for the day was a plea for empowerment for that agency each is given: “Strengthen us as we lift one another.” In that strength is Active Consolation! For the entire community. Yes, sing aloud with gladness! And let us lift one another.

To boot, in the monthly issue of *Sojourners* was an empowering story of a Black mother who had chosen to fight the insensitivity of her local school by going outside the system and homeschooling her children. Despite the internalized belief that Black mothers are not knowledgeable enough to educate their children – a notion she felt indirectly and not so subtly fostered by the System – its teachers, its administrators, and even some of its black parents – intrepid, she plowed ahead.

This mother, Angela Jordan, has now been homeschooling for over twenty-one years. She began with an extremely conservative curriculum popular then in the Evangelical churches. A curriculum, she came to believe, that did not reflect the realities or the history of Black Americans. A curriculum that did not reflect the America she knew

So, she developed her own curriculum. When she realized that the existing associations of homeschooling parents didn't include her as a Black woman, Angela established an interracial association. She also thought that the existing association did not get what God meant when Christ brought a gospel of Good News for ALL. She made sure parents who believed in science were included. Yes, the kids could learn about dinosaurs. We need to talk about Global Warming. She made sure that parents of LGBTQ students would feel the embrace of acceptance. This experience would be safe for their children.

"They don't have to fight for an academic seat at a table in homeschooling,' Jordan said. 'They get to thrive and be in their skin, and grow up in that safety net with parents who are going to be their advocate.'" ⁷ Freedom and respect.

A most hopeful story. Yes, indeed, much to celebrate this week. Raging Consolation. A hymn wells up in my soul.

When you open the door later this month to those Trick-or-Treaters, do check for any synthetic parasites. They may have a trick or **two** for you. The delight of Halloween is our October Consolation. Amen.

⁷ Julia Oller, "These Families are Opting to Homeschool – Without White Christian Nationalism," *Sojourners*, October 19, 2021.