

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

Two friends sat silently over their espressos, each sunk in misery. Finally, one heaved a sigh and said, "You know, I wish I were dead." The other sighed in his turn and said, "If only I felt that good." There is no doubt that many in America today are living in despair. Senator Bernie Sanders believes that the Democrats lost the presidential election because they ignored the plight of many American workers. He said that Trump recognized that there are millions of people today—working-class people, middle-class people, low-income people—who are living in despair. As Senator Sanders said, Trump won because "he talked about a collapsing middle class in America. He is right." Many Americans are living in despair.

One Lutheran pastor points out an example of the despair. The day after Sylville K. Smith was fatally shot by police in Milwaukee, people gathered for a prayer vigil to mourn and to protest injustice. Residents in Milwaukee wondered where hope may be found when this shooting fit a pattern of violence that was decades in the making. The pastor quotes a New York Times article, "Milwaukee, a city of nearly 600,000, joins other embattled parts of the country like Baltimore and Ferguson, Missouri, where police killings did not so much draw outrage for the deaths alone, but for the systemic problems that have so many black people feeling hopeless." Many, too many, experience the despair of racism in our land of "liberty and justice for all." Despair.

The despair has expressed itself in anger, in hateful words and violent acts against immigrants, documented, legal immigrants. As I mentioned last Sunday, the man who shot the two legal immigrants from India shouted slurs against the immigrants, told them they did not belong here, and came back shooting them both and killing one

of them. There is a wave of anger and violence against people of color, against Muslims, against Jews, and against any one that looks Middle-eastern.

In such a context of despair, the church needs to express hope in our words and in our actions. We are a people of hope. Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote about Abraham, a patriarch of the Old Testament and a person of faith. Unfortunately, the lectionary reading from our Romans passage this morning ends in the middle of the paragraph. In the very next sentence after our passage ends, we read, “Hoping against hope, [Abraham] believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations....’” God had promised that he would make of Abraham and Sarah a great nation. But, Abraham and Sarah were old, well beyond child-bearing years. Finally, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90, they had a son. Abraham’s hope is an example for us, for all.

Christian hope is not the cheery belief that all’s for the best despite all the evidence to the contrary. Later, in Romans, Paul wrote, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” As one commentator wrote, “The hope of a person of integrity is the hope that emerges because that person has lived through the worst and not lost faith. That hope finds its proof not in a full checking account or promotion or even in robust good health but in the love of God, which the Spirit daily confirms in the lives of those who endure suffering boldly.” The church needs to proclaim this hope.

Dannagal G. Young, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Delaware. She relates an experience she had in one of her classes. She showed the class a recent video of a 9-year-old girl, Zianna Oliphant, tearfully addressing a Charlotte, North Carolina, city council meeting. “It’s a shame that our

fathers and mothers are killed and we can't see them anymore," she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's a shame that we have to go to their graveyard and bury them. And we have tears. We shouldn't have tears. We need our fathers and mothers to be by our side." As soon as the clip ended she felt a stillness across the class. She asked, "So, after watching this, how do you think empathy might operate in the heart and mind of someone who has opposed the Black Lives Matter movement?"

After a few seconds, a young woman in the back raised her hand. "I was going to say something unrelated," she hesitated, fidgeting with her pen. "I actually saw this video last night. I saw some of it. But, it made me feel so bad that I had to shut it off." Her reaction to this video is what has been termed as the "narcotizing dysfunction" of media, whereby people become so overwhelmed by information about news and current events that they become paralyzed by it.

Dr. Young adds, "Perhaps the real risk is that when people become overwhelmed by stories of pain and trauma they begin to lose hope. Without hope, they are unable to take action to create change. Without hope, people seek to avoid the thing making them feel bad in the first place, rather than seeking to change it. So, they protect themselves by turning away."

We cannot turn away, we cannot disengage from what is happening. The church must proclaim hope in our socio-political climate of distress and despair. It needs to be more than words. It also needs to be action. If you know immigrants or refugees, help them feel welcome. Tell them you are glad they are here. If they run a business, support them. It also has the additional benefit of keeping the money local, in the community. If you hear people make disparaging remarks about immigrants, refugees or the poor,

challenge them. But, do so only if it is safe. Volunteer at agencies that support immigrants and refugees, such as Lutheran Family Services or Catholic Social Services. I realize they are not Presbyterian, but I think that is Ok. Volunteer at agencies that help the poor. Contact your representatives, senators, and other political leaders about issues that affect the poor, the stranger, the vulnerable.

James Wind came across a piece of art at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. He came across a piece of art titled "America's Joyous Future" that haunts me. The artist Erika Rothenberg took a piece of everyday life, in this case a small church bulletin board, and turned it into a provocative work of art. She spelled out life at one local congregation in simple white letters against a stark black background.

EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL

Mon. Alcoholics Anonymous

Tues. Abused Spouses

Wed. Eating Disorders

Thur. Say No To Drugs

Fri. Teen Suicide Watch

Sat. Soup Kitchen

Sunday Sermon 9 a.m.

"America's Joyous Future"

As he left the museum, he wondered what all its visitors thought as they considered this work of art. Did they see "America's Joyous Future" as an indictment of churches and synagogues that preach pie in the sky in their worship services while remaining oblivious to the real hurts and needs of people? Or did they see it as a sign that our congregations are deeply immersed in human suffering, that their doors are wide open to the pathologies of the times? Instead of pie in the sky, [are] the thousands of local congregations in our land lifting brave hope out of the ashes of human suffering?

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.