

WRAPPED IN THE FLAG 7/2/17

Thoughts before we begin: *The love of one's country is a splendid thing. But why should love stop at the border? ~ Pablo Casals*

Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it. ~George Bernard Shaw

I am not an Athenian or a Greek, I am a citizen of the world. ~Socrates

Wherever the oppressed are congregated, there Christ is present--and not on the side of power.” - Rev. Thomas Starr King (1824-64)

And in the hymnal: #592, 597.

Story: Buddhist tale of a man out walking in a field when a hungry tiger begins to chase him. He runs and falls over the side of a cliff, grasping a sturdy vine as he falls. He is dangling over the edge when he looks down to see there are tigers below, waiting for him to fall. He looks above, and there are two tiny mice, one white, the other black, nibbling at the vine. He looks around, and right beside him, growing out of the side of the cliff is a ripe, red strawberry. He holds the vine with one hand and reaches for the strawberry. . . it was delicious.

Sermon: Quite a few decades ago, Alexander King was a frequent guest on the Tonight Show. He told wild and witty stories about his mis-spent youth and life in general. One of his books was called, *May This House Be Safe from Tigers,* which was a blessing he had seen carved over the doorway of a friend's house. He reasoned with the friend, "But. . . but there are not tigers here!" His friend nodded knowingly and replied, "See?" So, King had a similar sign made and hung it over the mantle in his own house, and he too reported that this blessing is 100% effective!

One of my teachers said that one of the duties of the church is to reveal what is hidden, to bring it into the light, and if necessary, to sound a warning. So, obedient to that call, I am speaking this 4th of July holiday weekend about dire happenings in our country, about the figurative tigers that threaten us and what possible blessing could banish them. This will not be pleasant to hear.

When we octogenarians were kids, the 4th of July was celebrated with fireworks, fried chicken, and strawberry shortcake. In my neighborhood, we awoke to the sound of cap guns and ladyfinger firecrackers, the pungent odor of punk and gun powder. My cousin and I had loaded our repeater cap pistols the night before in anticipation of mayhem on the 4th, but our ammunition — the long red paper strips of caps — always jammed in the innards of the gun, so we never got off

more than three shots in a row. But, we played happily at murder and war and passed the time until night when the real celebration began — when the sky blossomed in lights sent up in rockets, accompanied by explosions that no doubt damaged our hearing. The neighborhood dogs howled, and we shouted hooray for the incandescence that surrounded us. We midlings were given sparklers to inscribe the air with our names and secret messages that glowed for a few seconds, then disappeared. The toddlers chased fireflies. The 4th of July was a mid-summer festival, a celebration of light in which we basked and played with dangerous things — explosives, incendiaries, and the American Flag. It is a wonderful memory now, 3/4 of a century later, when I recall those days with the hindsight of years, when I was innocent/ignorant of the real, the full-bodied, 3 dimensional, multi-layered history of my country.

I suppose the first generation of U.S. citizens thought or hoped that they had escaped the feudal economic systems of Europe, wherein wealth was owned by a privileged few: nobles, who had inherited land grants because some ancestor had done a favor for some king or queen; and the prosperous merchant class that owned the factories, mills, ships, banks, etc. that powered commerce, while the vast majority of people worked the land, labored with the commercial entities for wages that seldom raised them above poverty and never above dependence. But this system, like a virus, was somehow transplanted here as capitalism, and the same distortions and cruelties soon manifested themselves here to break the backs and hearts of generations of workers. Now, the 1%, the monied class, has been able to buy the only institution with any hope of limiting its power — the U.S. Congress. And, irony heaped upon irony — one of that class, a shady billionaire, now occupies the executive branch and has already planted a drone to the Supreme Court. It does not bode well for the republic.

Critics of the economic/political system thought the situation was dire before, with a tiger behind us, gaining fast. Now, we are over the cliff and dangling by a thread with tigers above and below. Kenneth Burke once wrote that people “build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss.” Yes, society is a chancy business, but does it have to be so severely skewed in favor of the fat cats? The Zen story about the man between tigers has been used to illustrate the general human existential condition — so precarious, temporary, between. . . .

Now, as in times past, our human situation matches the political/economic situation, and the congruence is difficult to bear, except in its precious moments of awakening to the beauty and bounty that surrounds us. Back to that in a moment. As though Orwell’s “1984” were not chilling enough, his “Animal Farm” shows how revolutions can begin with noble ideas and ideals of liberty and justice for all, then gradually degrade into petty bickering. The greedy always

wanting more, the disadvantaged complaining and suing for their rights, accusations flying back and forth. The new farm begins to look more and more like a fascist dictatorship, and the time is right for the rise of a demagogue. Demagogues have appeared in democracies since ancient Athens. They exploit a fundamental weakness in democracy: because ultimate power is held by the people, it is possible for the people to give that power to someone who appeals to the lowest common denominator of a large segment of the population. Demagogues gain more power by advocating immediate, forceful action to address a national crisis (usually of their own making) while accusing those of a moderate and more thoughtful disposition of being soft, weak, and unpatriotic. The demagogue's aim is to mislead rather than to lead. The characteristics of fascism and the demagogue are printed on the insert in today's bulletin. You can look at these later and decide for yourselves if our beloved country has crossed some line in the sand or edge of a cliff.

(Insert)

DEMAGOGUE: Four traits of a demagogue:

One is that they fashion themselves as a man of the masses, second is that they trigger waves of great emotion. The third is that they use those waves of emotion for political benefit. The fourth is the most concerning, which is they threaten or break established rules of governance. — Michael Signer, on NPR

FASCISM: According to political scientist Lawrence Britt, fascism is identifiable by fourteen characteristics that include, 1) powerful nationalism, 2) the emphasizing of a single enemy as a threat to be eliminated, 3) the supremacy of the military in abolishing that threat, 4) disdain for human rights, 5) obsession with national security, 6) controlled mass media, 7) religion and government intertwined, 8) the rise of corporate power, 9) suppression of labor power, 10) disdain for intellectuals and the arts, 11) obsession with crime and punishment, 12) fraudulent elections, 13) rampant cronyism and corruption, and, 14) insistence on male domination and the control of sexuality.

A colleague, Davidson Loehr, the only UU minister to serve as a Fellow on the Jesus Seminar, wrote a prophetic book called, "America, God, and Fascism," in which he argues that the combination of Christian fundamentalism, the manipulation of the media and information systems, the power of huge corporations, and an aggressive foreign policy, can spin into a perfect storm that resolves itself into a kind of fascism. Well, John Adams himself lamented that democracies did not last forever, nor even very long.

How ironic it is that religion aims to, purports to, be a helpful, benign force in the world. And yet, perhaps monotheism contains tendencies that lean toward fundamentalism — ONE power that must be obeyed, bowed down to, appeased,

else he get angry and destroy the world, according to the story. But, this story originated thousands of years ago in the middle east, and the model the people used to describe God was based on the behavior of the kings and governors who ruled over them. These rulers tended to be touchy, fearful, easily affronted, prone to violence, undeterred by laws or ethics, capricious and willful. The writers of the Old Testament were limited, as are all people, as are we, by their world view, their own experiences, and the language they speak. Most mainstream religions have interpreted scripture through the lenses of history and sociology. They have searched for the deep wisdom in the old stories and let much of the culture-specific prejudice and short-sightedness just be part of the story that reveals the character of the writers but not the character of God. Not so the fundamentalist biblicists who insist that the Bible is above such scrutiny and interpretation, in a class by itself and inspired.

European religious fundamentalism is congruent with both the political system of monarchy and with the traditional family structure. All have one strong ruler and many obedient subjects. The structures are hierarchical, and power, sometimes absolute power, resides in the one (or the 1%) at the top. Trouble comes when one or another of those is changed. Say, a woman and mother decides she deserves to be able to manage her own money or leave her husband. Say, commoners revolt and establish a democratic political system. Then, all the other arrangements are also called into question. Now the systems of heaven, nation and family are not congruent, do not reflect one another. There is dissonance, unease. The freedom enjoyed in one area spreads to others.

Our religious forebears, the Universalists, contributed to this dissonance when they parted with the old jealous king model and image of God. What if, they seemed to ask, God is supremely good, a kind of benign power? But the ONE power was still there in their thinking. Other theologians speculated that the real religion of America was polytheistic, based not on ONE supreme power but on many diverse centers of power and will — as many as there are citizens and entities of interest, such as rivers and trees, bees and mountains.

Fundamentalist Gods, Kings, and Heads of Households can rule because their power is a fearsome thing — with teeth and claws. It can kill as easily as it can bestow gifts and favors. To avoid the harm and receive the benefits, all we have to do is obey, tend to business, don't cause trouble or stand out, and don't question their authority. Fear keeps people in line, and kings and more modern demagogues use fear, scare tactics to get what they want, which is, baldly stated, our loyalty, our obedience, and our wealth. Just keep the money flowing into the hands of the already wealthy, and all will be well, except for the land, the water, the trees, the bees, the climate. . . .

We in the U.S. have seen wave after wave of these scare tactics. During the second great war, it was the Japanese citizens who might be spies, and so, for the safety of the country, they were herded into concentration camps and kept there until the end of the war. Of course, their property was forfeited and went into others' hands. More recently, after September 11, 2001 attacks, the invasion of Iraq was justified on the grounds that Saddam was making weapons of mass destruction, so we were told we must destroy him and his country first. And it was all a fabrication, not even a misinterpretation, an outright lie. Every demagogue knows, if you scare them badly enough, they will let you do anything.

So, beware of fear mongers who tell you that terrorists are out to get you, Muslims are out to get you, because we are in greater danger from the fear mongers themselves. Fortunes were made during and because of the Iraq war, and much of it was "borrowed" from the Social Security fund and never paid back. And here's the kicker, the irony, no one can sell you safety, mountain bunkers and bomb shelters notwithstanding. But, everyone wants to feel as safe as possible and to provide as much safety for their families as possible, and what, exactly, is possible?

There is a touching scene in Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" when Sam and Frodo, the two Hobbit heroes lie exhausted on the slope of the mountain they must climb in order to destroy the ring. Frodo cannot go on. Sam reminds him of the stories they heard as children, the ones where brave folk did difficult things and kept going, he says, "Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going, because they were holding on to something." And Frodo replies, "What are we holding on to, Sam?" "That there's some good in this world, Mr Frodo. And it's worth fighting for. Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo? It'll be spring soon. And the orchards will be in blossom. And the birds will be nesting in the hazel thicket. And they'll be sowing the summer barley in the lower fields... and eating the first of the strawberries with cream. Do you remember the taste of strawberries?"

And Frodo, who had forgotten all about the Shire, his true home, the taste of food and water and, yes, strawberries, because of the static caused by the ring in his pocket, begins to remember. Sam carries him up the mountain and they fulfill their mission. Keep this in mind, because there is static in the air. People can be bullied by fear. The antidote for fear is perspective, the remembrance of our ground — the stories of our people, the beauty of the world, our place within it, the spiritual sustenance of the taste of strawberries, and when there are no strawberries, the memory of them may do, the story that strawberries grow even on the cliff side. And that is our task — to keep our wits about us, to remember the power of non-violence, to refuse to be moved by greed or fear, to remember

and pass on the stories and wisdom that can restore us when we are exhausted from the struggle.

We are indeed in constant danger from figurative tigers, and cliffs where we can lose our grounding, and even from tiny rodents. Yes, we are vulnerable in this world, and the people who threaten us with imaginary dangers usually want to sell us a bill of goods that will cost us our civil rights. As George Carlin warned, they do not care about us. If there is to be caring and kindness in the world, it must come from us. And that is also our task — to look out and around as well as up and down, because out and around are all the other beings in the same situation as we find ourselves.

The Wisdom of Insecurity teaches that safety is a very temporary thing — arranged by parents for beloved children, and there is a danger in trying to prolong or extend that safety into our adult years, when demagogues usurp the role of parents, but not for our sakes. I think the Buddhist story of tigers is a great and useful teaching. This IS where we are, with tigers above and tigers below. If we can learn to see and to accept this, what else or who else can frighten us? The vine we cling to may be getting thin, but nearby — look — strawberries.

— Rev. Armida Alexander
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of Stockton, Illinois