

Sermon: Utopia for Realists (Part I)
Text: Acts 2:1-21
Date: June 4, 2017
Context: WWPC
Pentecost Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Acts 2:2

In the credit where credit is due department, I have my wife to thank for what we are planning to do for the rest of the summer. My hope is that by the end of it, you'll agree she is to be thanked. If don't agree, then the fault will almost certainly be mine, not hers.

Earlier this spring, I was feeling a strong urge to go off book -- that is, off the lectionary -- and to preach a summer sermon series.

From time to time I think it's valuable and helpful to focus our homiletical lens and explore specific topics or themes. But it does beg the question of which topics and themes to focus on, what the content of any given series should be.

So I'd been pondering that question for a while when Robyn introduced me to a book, which she had read for her own professional reasons. As I noted in my newsletter article earlier this week, the book is called *Utopia for Realists*.

It's by Rutger Bregman, a Dutch historian and journalist. And here's how it starts:

“In the past, everything was worse.

“For roughly 99% of the world's history, 99% of humanity was poor, hungry, dirty, afraid, stupid, sick, and ugly.” But in the last 200 years, all of that has changed. In just a fraction of the time that our species has clocked this planet, billions of us are suddenly rich, well nourished, clean, safe, smart, healthy and occasionally even beautiful” (*Utopia for Realists*, page 1). (He might be referring to himself here, since he looks like a cross between a pro surfer and a movie star.)

So, you might wonder, what caused this remarkable historic shift? What drove this progress?

Was it scientific discovery? Advances in medicine, for example, or the paradigm-changing advances of the Enlightenment in general? Or was it great advances in political theory and economic practice?

I'm sure it was many things, perhaps a little of all of those things, all happening at the same time.

But in Rutger Bregman's theory of history, the main cause of these remarkable advances in human well-being was one simple thing: They were driven by individuals who saw possibilities no one else saw, lone visionaries who saw a different future from the present conditions in which they were living.

He writes:

“The foundations of what we today call civilization were laid long ago by dreamers who marched to the beat of their own drummers. The Spanish monk Barolomé de Las Casas advocated equality between colonists and the native inhabitants of Latin America, and attempted to found a colony in which everyone received a comfortable living.

“The factory owner Robert Own championed the emancipation of English workers and ran a successful cotton mill where employees were paid a fair wage and corporal punishment was prohibited.

“And the philosopher John Stuart Mill even believed that women and men were equals.

“One thing is certain” he concludes: “without all those wide-eyed dreamers down through the ages, we would all still be poor, hungry, dirty, afraid, stupid, sick and ugly” (page 21). (Except for him. Pretty sure he'd still look like a cross between a pro surfer and Brad Pitt.)

It's worth noting that the gains Bregman is referring to have not been restricted to Western countries. It's not just industrialized Europe and North America that have benefited from this progress.

Rather, we're seeing gains all over the world, including Africa, Asia and South America, where there is less disease, less hunger, less poverty today than at any time in history.

Now, having made so much progress, you would think our work is done, that the global community has finally achieved Utopia--that dream state where we're all happy, where justice reigns and peace prevails on earth.

And yet we all know this is not true. Ironically the gains of the last two centuries have produced a new generation of global challenges.

As this is a sermon and not a lecture, I won't trace the causal connections linking these welcome advances with these new challenges, but we know them well: the rise of religious extremism and terrorism, dramatic and rapidly increasing income inequality, climate change.

Which is why Rutger Bregman is calling for a return to utopian thinking. He argues that we now need "a new lodestar, a new map of the world that once again includes a distant, uncharted continent -- 'Utopia'" (pg. 20). Something that will drive new discoveries and new kinds of progress

Hence his book. *Utopia for Realists*. A roadmap intended to guide people who take reality seriously toward a sustainable future.

That's really when the light went on for me. Because in addition to thinking about a summer sermon series, I was also aware that this Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, was on the horizon.

And it occurred to me that Mr. Bregman's book is misnamed. It really should be called *Utopia for Realists, the Sequel*.

Because Luke, the author of the book of Acts, beat him to it. Last week we observed Ascension Sunday--the day on the church calendar when we remember that moment when Jesus exited the world's stage, and took his leave from the disciples forever.

And here is what he says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

It is the very last thing he says to them. You go out and do this. I've taught you everything I know. I'm trusting you to continue this work.

It's up to you to build communities of love and peace, of mercy and forgiveness, across the world. To create little outposts of the Kingdom of God in places you've never been before, places that have never heard this great Good News of God's redemptive love.

It must have seemed like an impossible task to the disciples, in part because they were, effectively, starting from scratch.

I shared this quote last week from John C. Holbert, Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology but it bears repeating today.

[With] the resurrection of Jesus precisely nothing has changed; the Romans are still evident on every street corner of the land, and Israel remains that pathetic far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire and shows few signs of ever becoming anything else. Their king is another debauched member of the Herodian line of half-breeds, and the governor is a despotic and cruel tool of the overlord Rome (From A Long Look at Heaven? quoted on patheos.com, May 23, 2014).

Jesus of Nazareth was, I believe, the most far-sighted visionary in the history of the world. God's own envoy, possessed by a revolutionary, transformational vision of what the future might look like.

Except that after three years of focused effort to teach and implement and realize that vision, not much had changed. For all practical purposes, Caesar was still Lord, and Jerusalem was still under his thumb.

And now Jesus is gone and the disciples are left not only do this work in Jerusalem by themselves, they've also been charged to realize this vision, to realize the Kingdom of God in Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth -- places that are completely unknown to them, and where they are not known.

Taken as a whole, it's an overwhelming challenge. No wonder they spent their days locked away in an upper room, off stage and out of sight. Who wouldn't?

What's worse, this grand plan that Jesus announces to them went off the rails almost immediately, before the disciples could even pack an overnight bag.

Because here's what happened: Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth came to them.

Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And not just Jews. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

Maybe that had to happen. I think there's a reasonable chance the disciples might never have done it otherwise.

They might never have left the safety of that upper room, the safety and familiarity and comfort of their own little community to go out into this unknown, unfamiliar world and do this thing that Jesus has asked of them.

Honestly, think about this for a minute. Go out and establish communities of love and peace in places you've never been before, in cultures you don't understand, where you don't speak the language, among people who may not share your values, or welcome your presence.

And do all of that in the context of a highly militarized culture that is devoted to the worship of Caesar, an earthly Emperor who is not just unsympathetic to your aims, but will almost certainly view you as seditious, as criminals, committing a capital offense.

Who would do that?

Well, it turns out that the disciples would. For it's not just the world that turns up on their doorstep on the day of Pentecost. This blast of the Holy Spirit that arrives on that day launches them out into it.

The story that follows is extraordinary. It's messy and complicated. Like all good stories, like all true stories, it's marked by conflicts and setbacks. Striving to realize God's Kingdom, God's Utopia, they are met head on by realities they did not know awaited them, and could not have seen coming.

Which is why I think it's the perfect story for us right now. Because here's the thing. Being church today seems like an almost impossible task.

It feels like we're trying to be church, trying to grow our church, trying to realize the Reign of God and the goals of our ministry plan in a hostile culture where hate is on the rise, a culture whose language we do not speak and that does not share our values.

And on a larger view, it feels like the progress we've made as a country toward our Founders' vision of Utopia is all being undone. That if our leaders have their way, Americans will, once again, become poor, hungry, afraid, poorly educated and sick. And that our rivers and streams and air are about to get dirty again, even as the climate itself continues to change.

So on this Pentecost Sunday, it to many of us like we are living in a crisis moment. But like all crises, I think the danger of these times also presents us with an opportunity.

Our own little Pentecost moment, really. Not as dramatic, perhaps, as that first fiery day when the Holy Spirit roared into the room blew the doors off their hinges, and not as far flung.

But it doesn't have to be. Because, once again, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth have come to us. They are our neighbors.

My friend Tom Brackett is an Episcopalian priest who lives here in Asheville. He does not serve a parish however. Rather he is a so-called "missioner." That is, his work is focused on new church developments and missional activities.

I'm going to share with you a FB post he put up recently that describes what this missional work looks like.

"People are scared," he writes. "They're angry. And they're right to be.

"My dear mother lived through the terrors of World War 2 in Northern Germany.

Through her stories and through my own lifetime of inquiry, I have come to recognize the process by which an anxious and depressed culture was seduced into isolationism, a false mysticism, violent racism and then mass-scale genocide.

In my personal opinion, we are watching some of those same dynamics playing out right now in our [own] culture . . . "fear of the other" that has become socially acceptable behavior.

I am grieved and so I am resolved to go out of my way to appropriately encounter the "other" in my own Asheville community, whenever possible.

I am handing them my personal card, looking them in the eye and saying, "I am glad you are here." to people who do not look like me. I am offering, "If ever I can be of support to you, please do not hesitate to call me."

I am NOT asking whether or not the person in front of me is "documented" or "undocumented" as a way of pre-qualifying whether or not they deserve kindness and compassion from a tall white guy that cares.

I am not certifying whether or not we are in agreement on matters religious, political or cultural, either.

If this makes sense to you, I invite you to try this on in your own ways. If this doesn't make sense, I hope you will ask me to share with you how I came to this place.

Either way, keep me in your prayers/intentions (or hold me in the light). I have a sense that this is some piece of reclaiming my own humanity. I hope you'll join me! It would be a lot more fun to intentionally do this together.

Or as our text for today puts it, When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And the world itself had come to them.

But that was about to change. Because the Holy Spirit was about to blow in and fill that room, and fill their lungs with the very breath of God, and these ordinary people were about to go out and do extraordinary things.

And the really Good News is they left us a road map for how to follow in their footsteps. A story which I call, Utopia for Realists. And for the rest of the summer, we're going to follow it.

And I can't wait to see where it leads.