

Could It Happen Here?

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I don't know if I'm the best one to preach this, but I know this needs to be said from this pulpit.

When there is silence in the church or synagogue or mosque or temple about bad things happening around us, it can feed the demonic energy in the land. Hannah Arendt, called it the banality of evil, when reflecting on the rise of Nazism in Germany and the silence of so many, including the church. We humans are remarkably adaptable. Sometimes too adaptable. Think of the boiling frog effect... the notion that a frog immersed in gradually heating water will fail to notice the creeping change in its circumstances, even as it's literally being boiled alive. Sometimes, we come to accept the unacceptable... The better angels of our nature go to sleep. The increasingly bizarre gets only a curious glance and then a shrug.

What's going on in our country? What's going on in our country when a candidate for Congress body slams a reporter who is asking him about health reform? May 2017. What's going on when a law maker verbally assault another law maker on the steps of the capital, telling her she is disgusting for comments she had made earlier in the month about possible causes of a spike in crime during the pandemic, and when she responds that he is being rude he calls her a, you fill in the blanks... I can't speak such awful words from this pulpit. July 2020. What's going on when the leader of our country is given the opportunity to publicly and clearly condemn a white supremacist hate group during a nationally televised debate and instead he responds with an unnerving, possibly insider, phrase—"stand back and stand by". Sept 2020. What's going on when 13 people are arrested for a plotting to kidnap the governor of Michigan and incite a civil war? October 2020. What is going on in our country? And there is more going on behind the scenes.

The authors of the book How Democracies Die write this in their introduction. For those who have ears to hear, listen:

Is our democracy in danger? It is a question we never thought we'd be asking. We have been colleagues for 15 years, thinking, writing, and teaching students about failures of democracy in other places and times—Europe's dark 1930s, Latin America's repressive 1970s.

WE have spent years researching new forms of authoritarianism emerging around the globe. For us, how and why democracies die has been an occupational obsession.

But now we find ourselves turning to our own country. Over the past two years, we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States—but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places. WE feel dread, as do so many other Americans, even as we try to reassure ourselves that things can't really be that bad here. After all, even though we know democracies are always fragile, the one in which we live has somehow managed to defy gravity. Our constitution, our national creed of freedom and equality, our historically robust middle class, our high levels of wealth and education, our large, diversified private sector—all these should inoculate us from the kind of democratic breakdown that has occurred elsewhere.

Yet, we worry. American politicians now treat their rivals as enemies, intimidate the free press, and threaten to reject the results of elections. They try to weaken the institutional buffers of our democracy, including the courts, intelligence services, and ethics offices. American states, which were once praised as “laboratories of democracy”, are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism as those in power rewrite electoral rules, redraw constituencies, and even rescind voting rights to ensure they they do not lose. And in 2016, for the first time in US history, a man with no experience in public office, little observable commitment to constitutional rights, and clear authoritarian tendencies was elected president.

What does all this mean? Are we living through the decline and fall of one of the worlds' oldest and most successful democracies”? The authors write.

I choke on these last two words, “successful democracy”, when remembering how black voter turnout in the South fell from 61% in 1880 to 2% in 1912 when Jim Crow overtook the Reconstruction. Yes, we are one of the most creative nations on the earth when it comes to new forms of voter suppression. Our democracy has always been aspirational, never fulfilled. And yet, it has always been aspirational: Somehow, this idea... foundational to our nation ... that certain truths are self-evident, that people are created equal, that they are endowed with inalienable rights, that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed and that the purpose of government is to protect these rights....“this idea, a progressive force, constantly and necessarily exposing our failure and showing us new paths forward.” (Robinson)

I also realize how naïve I've been all these years. How about you? Even though acutely aware of how imperfect our democracy, still, I've taken it for granted, like the US post office; that it's just a given, that we will always have a democracy, that we will forever and always be

defined as a democracy in our children's school books. I never imagined that my country could become an authoritarian regime, even with all of its fault lines. Have you?

I don't want to hear this. You don't want to hear this. But we must. *The Democracy Index rates a hundred and sixty-seven countries, every year, on a scale that ranges from "full democracy" to "authoritarian regime." In 2006, the U.S. was a "full democracy"., the 17th most democratic nation in the world. Ten years later, in 2016, the index for the first time rated the United States a "flawed democracy."*(Lepore)

"We often assume that democracies die suddenly from a revolution or a military coup d'état. But it is far more often the case that they die slowly with a whimper, from the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms... And the same patterns repeat themselves, with remarkable consistency, around the world. The "21st century strongmen" someone writes, "do not suspend the constitution and replace it with tanks on the streets. They pay lip service to the constitution while behaving as though it didn't exist. Here are other features of authoritarian leaders. This will sound frightenly familiar... They all deride their opponents as criminals (remember- lock her up...), show contempt for their critics in the media, stoke conspiracy theories about opposition movements and question the legitimacy of any vote that goes against them. We know that extremist demagogues emerge from time to time in all societies, even in healthy democracies, from both the right and the left. An essential test for democracies is not whether such figures emerge but whether political leaders, and especially political parties, work to prevent them from gaining power in the first place, by keeping them off mainstream party tickets, refusing to endorse, or align with them and, when necessary, making common cause with rivals in support of democracy. Isolating popular extremists requires political courage. But when fear, opportunism or miscalculation leads established parties to bring extremists into the mainstream, democracy is imperiled. Though the current president has accelerated this process, he didn't cause it. (Runciman)

"Our democracy is in terrible danger", Thomas Friedman warns.

And it's up to all of us to save our democracy, not just the politicians and elected and appointed public officials. All of us. We need to reclaim our American values, many of which are rooted in our faith values...

We need to wake up! Not allow ourselves to grow accustomed to what we previously thought to be scandalous. We need to make sure our grandchildren hear our outrage rather than witnessing a mere shrug of the shoulders and a mumbling.. "that's just politics" ...

We need to be able to separate truth from falsehood. We need more clarity about the impact of Facebook and Twitter on our democracy. Yes, these social networks give voice to the voiceless, and they can really enhance transparency and be a great tool for organizing. But they have also, as Friedman writes, “become huge, unedited cesspools of conspiracy theories that are circulated and believed by a shocking—and growing—number of people. These social networks are destroying our nations’ cognitive immunity—its ability to sort truth from falsehood.”

We need to take care of our people. It is no wonder that so many feel such resentment when they witness the increasing number of millionaires and even billionaires in our country and feel their own lack of financial security, lack of health care coverage and lack of jobs with good benefits. Tyrants both feed and feed off resentment. Magnify resentment and manipulation becomes just that much easier. We need to raise income and wealth taxes and make our public life, from public transportation to health care, strong and rich again. Of course, this is what our religion is all about, God’s dream of justice...

We need to be able to say the hard thing at the right time. All of us do. To not censor or silence ourselves. This takes courage. Not only for leaders in the president’s party, who need to speak out, but for all of us... I remember being in the office of my state representative Davnie lobbying for 100% clean energy MN and against oil pipelines. I figured this meeting was a slam dunk; that we were both of the same environmentalist mindset. But he, courageously, raised up *his* very high value, real concern about the workers in greater MN who have relied on work from extractive industries through the generations. I was there for the earth and he spoke of the worker. I was taken aback but it shifted something in me. WE should never *just* talk about keeping the fossils fuels in the ground: this *always* has to be paired with talk about well-paying Clean Energy jobs. So often, don’t you agree, it’s when someone says a hard thing, respectfully but clearly, at the right time, that our mindset begins to shift

And we need to bite our tongue more often... to resist the temptation to take a cheap shot; that is, to submit to the guardrails of civility; to seek mutual toleration. It used to be that congresspeople from across the aisles rubbed elbows more often on the weekends in DC. Maybe they’d golf together or have a drink together at the club. They’d talk outside the law-making chambers, that is. In some ways though, that was the “good old boys club” We need to create more safe meeting places that welcome the wonderful and growing diversity of our Congress and of our entire citizenry.

But it’s more than just civility.... As the poet Auden wrote, and this sure sounds like a Jesus thing, “we must love one another. We must one another or die”.

The Midwest journalist and author of the memoir Godland writes about how her life fell apart, in the wake of the 2016 election, as the cultural and political polarization increased in the heartland, and she left her conservative Christian church and she and her husband divorced. While Many of her conservative Christian friends abandoned her after the divorces, not everyone did. She writes:

Several months after I moved out and filed for divorce, a friend of mine sends her father over to my house with a chair from her house. Instead of bringing me the hand-me-down chair, however, her father brings me a brand-new chair he bought just for me. It's leather and it's gorgeous. And I'm shocked.

*I've never met this man before. He's a local business owner and a **very conservative catholic**. I worry that he might judge me—he knows I've moved out and filed for divorce. But two of his daughters have divorced, he tells me. He says in a year I'll be doing better than before. He says it's hard, but he loves my writing and he knows I'll come through. While he moves the chair in, he jovially remarks on the sign in my living room that reads. "Resist!" and I'm embarrassed by his generosity, my politics and poverty. The only thing I have to offer him is a box of Girl Scout cookies, which he accepts gladly. The next day he sends me a picture of the cookies cut up into letters that spell "resist!"*

The hilarity and kindness make me cry. This feels the most like a Christian thing anyone has done for me in a while. He is a stranger who, because of the nature of the Midwest, knows me, knows all about my mistakes and my mess, who might even fundamentally disagree with my politics, but here he is, generous and kind, reassuring and self-effacing."

Somehow, we must find ways to connect, be civil, and even to love. We must love one another. This is how we will repair our damaged democracy into the future. All of us. No matter what happens on election day, we need to be about the work of our democracy.

But something more may be required of us very soon... is the song in you? grant us wisdom, grant us courage.... in the event, and we pray that this is not the case... of a stolen or marred election..... all of us, no matter what political party we were raised in, consider ourselves to be in now, or will be in the future.... I quote from the most recent Sojourner's magazine: "As people of faith and as Americans, we have a profound religious and civic duty to ensure that any attempt to subvert a free, fair, and safe election or to dishonor the electoral outcome is met with the full force of bold and sustained and nonviolent moral resistance." I

will include in an upcoming daily message a flyer from Sojourners: “7 Concrete Steps to safeguard the integrity of the vote.” And if you are not already on the Mayflower action alert email list, this would be a good time to sign up. Contact Rev. Briones.

I can hardly believe that I’m saying this. But then we couldn’t believe that a law maker would physically attack someone in the media, and that one congressperson would verbally assault another, and that a governor would be the target of an extensive kidnapping plan, and that a president would, not so subtly, encourage a white supremacist group during a presidential debate.

Take heart. We’ve been here before. We are remembering our American history. “During the 1930s American democracy staggered, weakened by corruption, monopoly, apathy, inequality, racial injustice political violence, hucksterism, unemployment, even starvation.” (Lepore) “The future of democracy is topic number one in animated discussions going on all over America,” it says in a 1937 New York Times article. “In the legislatures, over the radio, at the luncheon table, in the drawing rooms, at meetings of forums and in all kinds of groups of citizens everywhere, people are talking about the democratic way of life.” “Do we Blacks believe in democracy? W E B Du Bois asked the readers of his newspaper column. “Could it happen here?” Sinclair Lewis asked in 1935. (Lepore)

It’s not too late” Jimmy Stewart pleaded with Congress, rasping, exhausted, in the movie Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” in 1939. “Great principles don’t get lost once they come to light.”

It turns out that it wasn’t too late. We as a country pulled back from the edge... We can do it again. It’s still not too late.

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