A REASON FOR OPTIMISM

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

Those words of Jesus seem especially relevant for today.

In recent weeks, I’ve had the hardest time being optimistic. I read the newspaper or watch the news on TV, or I see the headlines when I surf the Internet, and I soon feel this overwhelming urge to shut my eyes and plug my ears and scream, “Enough, people! Enough!”

I see what’s going on in our world, and my heart sinks and I shake my head and wish I had a teddy bear to hug tight because it’s just too frustrating . . . too infuriating . . . too gloomy . . . too scary.

I remember how, when I was a kid, my friends and I would be playing outside almost every Saturday morning—after cartoons, of course. We had no video games or cell phone apps to entertain us for the rest of the day, so we had to use our imaginations and make our own entertainment.

We were pretty good at it, too, if I do say so myself. My buddies and I had a lot of fun playing Cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and my personal favorite, Batman and Robin.

For some reason I never got to play Batman, only Robin (all my friends were bigger than me!)

Eventually it would get to be noon. And my friends and I would suddenly stop our playing and listen to this sound. A siren, blaring in the distance. We all froze right where we were until, after about a minute, it stopped. Then we would go back to playing and having fun.

For the longest time I didn’t know what that siren was, but what I did know was that it gave me the shivers. Big time.

At first I thought it was some kind of neighborhood dinner alarm, letting us kids know that it was noon and time to go home for lunch. But when I eventually asked my mother what it was, she said it was an emergency warning siren. Every Saturday at noon it was tested to make sure it worked so that, if there was an actual emergency, people could be warned to go in their homes or run for the hills or whatever the heck we were supposed to do to stay safe and alive.

Now, that emergency warning siren was supposed to be a good thing. And I guess it was. But for me, a young kid of five, six, seven years-old, it
was mostly a terrifying thing.

That siren was my introduction to the so-called “real” world. A world where bad stuff could happen at any given moment—even if you were a kid, out in the back yard having fun playing Cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, or Batman and Robin.

Thinking back on it years later, I came to realize that the emergency warning siren I heard every Saturday at noon was the beginning of the end of my happy, innocent childhood. Life took on a darker, much less safe, much more frightening tone. And the worst thing of all was that there wasn’t anything that could be done about it. There was no real Batman and Robin to come to the rescue and beat up the bad men and women. And not even my real-life heroes—my mom and dad—could stop things like flash floods and hurricanes, or prevent the Russians from dropping an atomic bomb and obliterating us from the face of the earth.

As a kid, when I thought about all the bad stuff that could happen, it scared the crap out of me. So I tried very hard not to think about it; at least until the next Saturday at noon, when I would hear the emergency warning siren go off once again.

Sometimes, when I see what’s going on in our world today, with all the terrorism and school shootings, prejudice against others because of their race, religion or sexual identity, obscene greed, callousness and hostility toward the poor and needy, the denial of climate change and the threat it poses to our world in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence, and the hazardous ignorance and foolishness of people that happens every day, I feel the same kind of fear and helplessness I experienced as a young kid. No, I don’t hear an emergency warning siren blaring in the distance; but I do hear these internal alarms going off in my mind.

You see, the more I read the newspaper and watch the news these days, the more I start to think that the whole word has gone crazy, and humankind has totally lost its sanity. And that our political leaders, the people who are supposed to be in charge—or who want to be in charge—are the most insane ones of all. And, I’ll be honest, it frightens me. A lot.

I’m afraid for our children, and for future generations.
I’m afraid for our nation, the United States.
I’m afraid for the world and the whole human race.
I don’t want to feel that way. There’s nothing that would please me more than to be able have faith in other people, and in our leaders.
I want to believe that inside every human heart there’s inherent goodness, and that, in the end, that goodness will win out over the malevolent, destructive tendencies that manifest themselves way too often in
way too many people.

I want to believe that, for our own health and wellbeing, and for our own survival as a species, we human beings will ultimately smarten up and repent of our destructive, sinful ways: the ways of greed. Anger. Pride. Covetousness. Divisiveness. Ignorance. Violence. Prejudice and hatred.

I want to believe that there will come a time when, after all the pain and heartache humankind has experienced, we finally turn away from the darkness that exists in the human heart, and toward the divine light that has been revealed to the world in Jesus Christ. Christ’s light of love. Justice. Righteousness. Mercy. Kindness. Forgiveness. Goodness. Caring. Sharing. Understanding. Acceptance. Tolerance. Generosity and charity.

I’d like to believe that human beings will heed the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Roman church to “...not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

I’d like to believe that, if it gets to the point where all seems lost and the world finds itself on the brink of obliteration (and I fear that we’re closer to that point than we dare to admit), we human beings will come to our senses. And we will be able to pull ourselves back from the edge of self-annihilation in the nick of time, breathe a huge sigh of relief, and say to each other, “Phew! That was way too close. We almost brought on our own demise. We must never let that happen again. So, now let’s work together in love, ask Almighty God for mercy and divine guidance, and make sure that no near-disaster like that will ever occur again, for our own sake and for the sake of the whole human race.”

Is that kind of mutual cooperation—if only for the sake of our own survival—is such teamwork and collaboration even remotely possible for humankind and the world?

My fear is that it’s not possible. I mean, let’s face it. That’s never been done before in all of human history so far, and seeing what has been going on in the world in recent times, I’m not all that confident that we could do it now, or anytime in the near future.

Sorry, I know that sounds gloomy and pessimistic; but I sometimes get the terrifying feeling that humankind simply doesn’t know what it’s doing, what kind of terrible mess it has gotten itself into--to which I pray, “Father, forgive us.”

As you can probably tell, sometimes I can be pretty pessimistic about humankind and the dangerous, unwise path it seems to be traveling down. But at the same time, I don’t hesitate to say that, as a Christian, I’m very optimistic about the future. That’s because I have a deep and abiding faith in the God who created us in God’s image and created the heavens and the
earth.

Why do I say that?

Well, I figure that any God who would willingly become flesh and dwell among us, as our God did when he became incarnate in the person of Jesus, must love us very, very much. Why else would our God have done such an incredible and audacious thing as to share our humanness, to actually become one of us, except out of a deep and abiding—and some would say even imprudent—love for human beings.

In John 3:16, that’s exactly what the author of that gospel declared. “For God so loved [this broken and hurting] world [and all the damaged, imperfect people who live in it], that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

What a hopeful and optimistic statement to cling to, especially when I’m feeling very pessimistic about the fate of humankind and the world.

That statement says to me that, as fast and determinedly as humankind seems to be racing toward the abyss and writing its own death warrant, God is racing even faster. And I’m greatly optimistic, to the point of even being willing to bet my very life and my eternal destiny on it, that God is going to reach the edge of the abyss first, before we do, and lay himself down in front of it like a divine safety net, to stop us before we tumble down over the precipice and destroy ourselves.

That’s why I place a lot of faith in Jesus’ words, “Do not be afraid, little flock.” I don’t want to be overcome by fear, and Jesus encourages me not to be.

“Do not be afraid, little flock.” When I hear that statement, I drink it up desperately and thirstily, and I’m refreshed by it like a dehydrated person drinking up a cold glass of water. Those words of Jesus comfort me, give me hope and help me garner my courage when things in the world seem especially bleak and scary.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

I reflected on that statement for a while as I was writing this message, and as sometimes happens, praise God, I heard what I believe to be the Holy Spirit speak a word of insight. In this case, it was only a single, solitary word—but it’s a word I would have glanced over without much thought if I wasn’t listening carefully for God to speak.

The word the Holy Spirit spoke to me and caused to jump out at me was, “pleased.” “. . . your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

That one word, for me, is extremely significant. God our Father has
been pleased to give us, to give humankind, the kingdom.

What that tells me is that, no matter how bad things seem at any given time, we need not despair and worry that things are totally hopeless because God hasn’t given up on us. God couldn’t have given up on us, because Jesus said God is happy, delighted, thrilled, overjoyed, to give us the kingdom.

And if God hasn’t given up on humankind yet, even with its bleak history of wrongdoings and transgressions and failings, and if God is still pleased to give us the kingdom, it has to mean that God is fully invested in humankind and in our wellbeing for the long-haul, even up until the very end.

Which gives me every reason to hope and have faith and be very optimistic about the future of the human race and our world, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Yes, despite the pessimism I often feel, I’m still extremely optimistic. I’m optimistic, not in the ability of human intelligence or amazing scientific breakthroughs or political diplomacy and negotiations to save us; no, my optimism is grounded solely and completely in the love and grace of God, which can and will save humanity from itself, in spite of itself.

I came across a quote by a man named Adoniram Judson that sums up in ten words what I’ve been saying to you for the past ten minutes. Of course, I know how disappointed you would be if I only gave a ten word sermon. I want like to make sure you get your money’s worth on Sunday mornings, so you never feel shortchanged.

But if I were to give this same sermon, “A Reason for Optimism,” in ten words, I might well use this quote from Judson:

“The future is as bright as the promises of God.”

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Well, one of the promises of God we heard this morning comes straight from the horse’s mouth: from Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh. “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

That, to me, offers humankind a divine lifeline, as well as an incredibly bright future for us and for the world. And it gives me—and all of us—every reason on earth, and in heaven, to be brimming with hope and optimism.

May we never give up on God, or lose faith in God’s ability to transform and redeem the world. Indeed, let’s help God do just that. Because Adoniram Judson was absolutely right.

The future is as bright as the promises of God.” And for that, we give thanks and praise to the Lord. Amen.