

“Seriously”

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So, how’s this for an opening sentence:

“The world’s going to hell in a hand-basket.”

Actually, that’s not shocking news to anyone paying even a little attention nowadays, for there are surely many indications of this dire assessment.

A major indicator of the world’s fate came to me this week when I watched President Bush uttering a speech to the Economic Club of New York. Maureen Dowd wrote: With “the dollar’s crumpling, the recession’s thundering, the Dow’s bungee-jumping and the world’s disapproving, yet George Bush has turned into Gene Kelly, tap dancing and singing in a one-man review called ‘The Most Happy Fella.’”

He began by laughingly calling the latest news on the economic meltdown “a interesting moment” and ended by saying that “our energy policy has not been very wise” and that there was “no quick fix” on gasp-inducing gas prices.

“I’m coming to you as an optimistic fellow,” he told the Economic Club, and his “chortling and joshing” manner certainly indicated that he was simply not taking all the bad news too seriously.

“You know, I guess the best way to describe government policy is like a person trying to drive a car in a rough patch,” he said. “If you ever get stuck in a situation like that, you know full well it’s important not to overcorrect, because when you overcorrect you end up in the ditch.”

Dowd replies, “Dude, you’re already in the ditch. Boy George crashed the family station wagon into the globe and now the global economy. Yet the more terrified Americans get, the more bizarrely carefree he seems. The former oilman reacted with cocky ignorance a couple of weeks ago when a reporter informed him that gas was barreling toward \$4 a gallon.”

And even among his own folks, he’s not sounding too serious.

“I think 2008 is going to be a fabulous year for the Republican Party!” he said. That must have been news to House Republicans, who have no money, just lost the seat held by their former Speaker of the House, and are hemorrhaging incumbents as they head into a campaign marked by an incipient recession and an unpopular war.

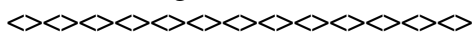
If only they could see things as the president does. Bush, who used his family connections to avoid Vietnam, told troops serving in Afghanistan on Thursday that he is “a little envious” of their adventure there, saying it was “in some ways romantic.”

Afghanistan is still roiling, as is Iraq, but W. is serene. “Removing Saddam Hussein was the right decision early in my presidency, it is the right decision now, and it will be the right decision ever,” he said, echoing that great American philosopher Dan Quayle, who once told Samoans, “Happy campers you are, happy campers you have been and, as far as I am concerned, happy campers you will always be.”

So it is that while he waited for McCain to show up at the White House to be given presidential approval of his presumptive Republican nomination, Mr. Bush offered the waiting press corps a little soft shoe performance, reminding us all of Nero’s fiddling while Rome burned around him. (—Maureen Dowd, March 16, 2008, in The New York Times)

See! The world *is* going to hell in a hand-basket.

Is it time we got serious about this stuff?



Unfortunately, this theme is not only about the White House or Capitol Hill or even the presidential race. Unfortunately, this is really a personal issue for you and me and for us as a congregation of liberal religion.

Sooner or later, we must get serious too.

That's because of who we are and who we claim to be: "a voice of reason and hope in the midst of devastation". That claim, by the way, is a pretty serious one and, unfortunately, carries a whole lot of responsibility.

Have we ever risen to that responsibility? Yes, many times over the centuries.

Look at the story of Unitarian martyr, Michael Servetus (for whom one of our congregations here in the Pacific Northwest is named.) Do you know his story?

Michael Servetus lived in the 1500's in Europe and he was a very devoted Christian. One day, after much prayer and study of Scripture, he came to the conclusion that the church-ordained doctrine of the Trinity was incorrect. He was so convinced that he wrote a book called *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

Now, it is hard for us to visualize the political and ecclesiastical situation of his day, but that book caused a major furor. So much so that John Calvin, the religious and political leader in those days, after he had heard about it, sent forth a warrant for Servetus' arrest. By the way, in those days heresy—and that's what the book was—heresy was a *capital offense*, punishable by death by being burned at the stake. Michael Servetus words were very serious.

Amazingly, Servetus actually went to Geneva to confront Calvin, and he went there with the purpose of convincing Calvin—through the authority of Scripture—that the Trinity was a fallacy. He wanted to show Calvin the errors of his ways.

Of course, he was arrested and tried and condemned to death. On the day of his execution, as he walked the pathway toward his death, he turned to his executioner and pleaded with him to run him through with his sword, quickly ending his life. He feared that as the flames engulfed his physical body, his misery and suffering would be such that, out of desperation, he would recant his beliefs. Michael Servetus said, "If I go back on what I believe to be the truth, I will lose my soul."

Michael Servetus had a religion which was quite literally a matter of life and death.

Just to let you know, Servetus was not the only one willing to give his life for the sake of his religion. There were literally thousands of others.

What kind of religion is it that people will give up their lives for it? In the case of Michael Servetus, it was none other than Unitarianism. I point to this story this morning because I believe that it is a story about us today. Yes, it is a story about you and me in this 21st century—we Unitarian Universalists right here in Eugene, Oregon, right here inside this Hilton Hotel on this very day. I am talking about you and I'm talking about me.

I don't necessarily mean that you or I need to write a revolutionary book on theology.

I don't necessarily mean that you need to travel to the Vatican to protest its pernicious doctrines of sexism and homophobia.

I don't necessarily mean that you need to get out here in the Puget Sound to build houses for the homeless, serve food to the hungry, comfort the sick and dying, visit those in prison and on death row.

I don't necessarily mean that we should urgently contact our government representatives to demand justice be enacted in all the ways it needs to be and must be.

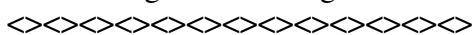
I don't necessarily mean that we recognize our duty to speak out to the world on matters of freedom and justice and equality.

And I don't necessarily mean that we must prepare ourselves and devote ourselves to the propagation of the Gospel of our Unitarian Universalist faith, even unto the point of laying down our lives to make these thing be so in the world around us.

But I *do* mean to say that sooner or later, we are going to take our faith seriously, and perhaps that time is now.

I *do* mean that sometimes or other, we will begin to take seriously our very name—our beautiful faith in the unity and interdependence of all things—our faith in the beloved gospel of universalism and its promise of the affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

I am talking about talking our faith seriously, and perhaps now is the time.



Taking things seriously, like all other possibilities for human behavior, is a coin with distinct sides.

For instance, the people who drove those planes into the World Trade Center towers were very serious. And, it's pretty obvious that suicide bombers of all sorts are very serious.

On the other side are those who see the vision of peace and justice and love presiding in our world. The Great Turning group right here at Shoreline Church are quite serious about their behavior, even as they valiantly attempt to turn the abstract ideas about global warming and other aspects of our environmental crisis (very serious in itself) into tangible actions. That's serious work.



Here's what author E. B. White wrote:

It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge.

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy.

If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem.

But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world, and a desire to enjoy the world.

This makes it hard to plan the day.

And here what Annie Dillard wrote in her remarkable little book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with chemistry sets, mixing up batches of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Are we serious enough to employ our ushers in this way? Are we serious enough to listen to the truth of our world's condition and choose openly and authentically to act upon what we have learned?

And finally, are we truly ready to hear and to act on Adrienne Rich's words:

*But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die.*

Benediction

“There is imbalance and inequity in the world. Every action you choose affects the balance - may we choose justice and fairness and compassion and most of all, may we choose love. Whatever we do will become forever what we have done.”

— Wislawa Szymborska, Polish poet