

Sermon: Proper 17A

Title: What If It's True?

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This summer I read George Orwell's *1984*. It's a dystopian novel in which the future is terrifying and oppressive, people are deprived of their dignity and humanity, and everyone lives in fear. It describes media driven thought control and pervasive surveillance and fake news. This is the novel that gave us the expression "Big Brother is watching."

I also read all of Huxley's *Brave New World*. This is also all about the future and is dystopian, but it describes a giddy, happy, anesthetized, loveless future, vacant of all the humanity in human beings. It describes cloning and self-medication and there was not one character that I cared the least about.

And then I read H.G. Wells' *The World Set Free*, which predicted atom bombs and radiation poisoning. Yes, it's been a cheery few weeks in the Craig living room.

There are elements of all of these novels that were deeply predictive. Things that at the time that these novels were written, seemed outrageous and outlandish and impossible. And yet there are aspects of all of these worlds that have come true for us.

I think the reason why I'm so fascinated with fiction is because there is something in the creative imagination that is also predictive. If we can imagine it, we can make it happen. Sadly, we have a tendency to use that not for our good, not for the betterment of society, or anyway, not very often.

I think it must be a disappointment to God when we do that, when we learn to split the atom and the first thing we do is make a bomb. When we create the magnificent tools of production that emerged at the end of the 19th century, and then immediately reduce the experience of our fellow human beings to the worst parts of the industrial revolution. (See the works of Charles Dickens.)

Because God uses God's imagination another way. God imagines the Earth and the sky and the sun and the moon and the stars. And they "are good." God imagines all creatures on the Earth and in the sea. And they "are good." God imagines humanity and we are "very good."

God imagines human beings who are capable of love and goodness, mutual affection, showing honor. God imagines that we thrive in community, are zealous and ardent in spirit, that we rejoice in serving the Lord. God imagines for us a life filled with hope that enables us to be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer. God imagines us to be people who contribute to those who need us and extend hospitality to strangers.

And imagining these things, God creates them. The potential for all this virtue is placed in us as part of the *imago dei*, the thumbprint of God that is placed on each of our souls.

It can seem unlikely, even incomprehensible, that God created us to be creatures of goodness. It can seem unlikely that we are, by our nature, people who bless and rejoice, people who live in harmony, and people who are humble in the face of our God.

Looking around our planet today, we do not seem to bear resemblance at all to the wondrous and marvelous beings that God had in mind when he imagined and created us.

In our readings this morning, Paul gives us a glimpse of what it would look like.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

It seems hyperbolic and outlandish to think that we could be all those virtuous things. Surely no human being could attain that level of virtue. Paul speaks to this with the words “if it is possible.” It is easy for us to reply, “I’m sorry, Paul, it is not possible.”

But remember that that is what they said when George Orwell and Aldous Huxley and HG Wells and Albert Einstein and Marconi and Nikola Tesla imagined. They said, “those things are impossible, they cannot be done.” Circumnavigate the globe, split the atom, go to the Moon, none of this can be done.

But we know now that it can, all of it. We know now that if God puts a dream in our heart, it’s very likely in our power to realize that dream. Not all of us, not all of the time... but when it is possible, if it depends on one or more of us....

And so it’s worth reading through Paul’s letter again and asking, what if it were true?

What if we were capable of being all the things that are described in this portion of the letter to the Romans?

How would the world be different if we could aspire to and achieve even one percent of the empathy and kindness, compassion and zeal for justice that is described in these two

paragraphs. What if even one percent of us could realize one percent of those qualities? How would the world be changed?

Perhaps it wouldn't be in any great way. Perhaps our aspiring to what God imagines here, would not result in the end of all war, it would not feed the world's hungry, or put an end to suffering.

But what if our aspiring to the dream that God imagines here for us resulted in one person being fed, one person experiencing forgiveness, one person experiencing the unconditional love of God, has shown by one of us? Wouldn't that be worth it?

This is the math of God's imagining. If one percent of us could achieve one percent of this litany of virtues one percent of the time, the world would be one hundred percent better.

We read this list and we think, "that's not me" and "I could never be that good." But I don't think God is asking us to be all in all. I think God is just asking us to imagine ... imagine that we could be just a little bit more virtuous. Because we know that what God imagines can come to be in the people God created and loved.

What if we imagine the future that God wants for us with as much confidence as Huxley and Orwell and Wells had? What if we imagined it with as much hope in our hearts as they had fear in theirs?

Would the time come, when people would look around and say, "People used to think a compassionate and loving world was impossible and yet here we are"?

I think it already exists. It is called the Kingdom of God. And it is the work God does in us that will make it manifest "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*