



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS AND THE GOOD NEWS

January 22, 2017

Psalm 27

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?*

*God is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

*When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*

*Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.*

*One thing I ask of God,
that I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of God
and to inquire in his temple.*

*For God will hide me in divine shelter
in the day of trouble;
God will conceal me under the cover of the divine tent.*

*Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path.*

You're ready to go to bed after your favorite show, and just before it ends a newscast comes on the television that the news will follow in five minutes, updating you on the tragedies in Syria, the protests around the nation, a new home-alone case that has been uncovered in Aurora, Illinois, and then the picture changes to show 5 baby ducklings huddled together beside a busy highway. Then

the newscaster says “Find out how these ducklings were miraculously rescued and what happened to their mother,” all right after this show. Curiosity has gotten the better of you and you postpone bedtime in order to hear the news.

News is an anomaly. News is so much a part of our culture that we feel obligated to watch it in order to be informed conversationalists the next day. Yet the news, by definition and in order to sell, must be new, and in the quest for new things each day, the media have often prostituted their integrity in the name of successful ratings. “If it bleeds, it leads,” is often the motto.

All of this is complicated even further by “fake news.” Consumers have to be experts in assessing the source of our information, and with the plethora of new agencies, especially on line, it takes a degree in journalism to determine reliable sources. We are inundated with such a volume of information, stories, emotions, and commercials that we fail to stop to ask questions about the reality of the things we see and hear about. It’s easy to forget that every story told has a bias, whether told by a historian, a documentary writer, non-fiction author, or a newscaster. Even the best of these is biased. Every telling is subjective and interpretive. It can be no other way. Three people who witness an accident tell different stories based on the corner on which they were standing, the perspective from which they viewed the accident, influenced by their prejudices, their priorities, and the filter through which they analyze the occurrence. Add to this subjective bias to begin with all of the sensationalized editing in order to keep you tuned in or salacious headlines online to pull you in, and we have not news, but fiction.

In addition to the manipulation by the media and sloppy reporting and editing to keep us tuned in, we tend to internalize what we see and hear. If a child is abducted, it is too easy to universalize the situation to think that every child will be abducted. If a newscaster projects the bottom falling out of the economy, it is too easy to panic and think that this is a prediction rather than a sensationalized premonition.

Our obsession with wanting to know what’s going on at any given moment in the world may be a status symbol of sorts. When we can plot, even erroneously, who is up or down in the news and how people are faring elsewhere, it gives us a false inspiration to speak articulately about world affairs and the geopolitical realm. Alain de Botton, a British-based philosopher and author of *The News: A User’s Manual*, believes that in contemporary culture news has largely replaced religions as “our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority.” The news—not scripture, tradition, or inspirational ritual—informs how we handle suffering and how we make moral choices. A desire to know what’s going on all hours of the day and night actually makes us more shallow than we may want to admit, Botton comments. Our moods tend to rise and fall with the media’s reports, sending us into a hysterical and mistaken belief that disaster is imminent, like Chicken Little who thought the sky was falling.

De Botton offers sound reasons why we ought to ponder our obsession with the news. Is there a strange desire in us to experience catastrophe vicariously? Is it possible that we yearn for something big to happen, but not so big that it will overwhelm us? Society tells us that we can’t afford to miss any news lest we fall behind. The world is changing so rapidly, and has become so small, the least catastrophe on the other side of the globe is on our iPhone in a matter of minutes.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Marty believes that we have long thought that keeping up with the news is part of what it takes to be an engaged and enlightened citizen. But is that really true? An avalanche of news, he says, lends pessimism and cynicism to our perspective. I surmise that I might die of cancer, he says, because I've eaten too many of the wrong brand of tomatoes. Waves of tragic stories are more likely to paralyze than motivate us. We hear of gun violence, and it is brutal, but instead of motivating us to do something about gun violence it serves only to make us more nervous. The news wants to quantify the number of days that the average life is likely to be cut short by guns, disease, car or plane accidents but the reality is that the most dangerous killer of people is poverty. The news doesn't report that; it doesn't sell. The preponderance of negative stories can easily distract us from beauty and joy and other good qualities that foster life. But the news that comes from the paper or the internet or the television is not the final word. (*Christian Century*, November 23, 2016)

In our obsession with the current news, we are distracted from the old news, the good news that is found in biblical texts, in the faith of a community of people such as surround us today, in the traditions of communion and worship that renew us with an old story that is grounded in something larger than all of us. The Psalmist declares that

God is our light and salvation; God is the stronghold and foundation of life. Of whom shall we fear? One thing I ask of God, that I might behold the beauty of God. Teach me your way, O God, and lead me on a level path.

Here's old news that has fortified people for thousands upon thousands of years, through wars and holocausts, through tyrants and genocide, through civil unrest and international disasters. Here is good news that is grounded in tradition and the lives of millions of people who have faced life by faith.

While the evening news tends to foist upon us the role of victim, the good news is that God shows us a better way. We can overcome, not by control, but by calm. We don't need to navigate in fear as the evening news wants us to believe; the good news reminds us that to be afraid is to believe in evil more than we believe in the One who has overcome evil.

Our brains tell us, and society concurs, that we can't afford to miss any news, lest we fall behind. Perhaps faith tells us that we can afford to miss all kinds of current news, especially if we want our life back. It's not an issue of watching the news to keep apace of current events; it's a matter of being obsessed with the news, giving the evening news free rent in our brain that controls and enervates. People of faith are people rooted and grounded in something larger than the whims of the evening news. We can live in the context of the good news that God anchors us in an abiding love that does not seek to escape the world but neither does it become discombobulated by the world's disasters. God is our light and salvation, the foundation of life. Lead us, O God, on a level path.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

We gather today, God of life, giving thanks that our time here together is good therapy; singing and praying together, laughing and crying together is good medicine for the soul. At least for this one hour, our minds are centered in your love even as we abandon our penchant for feeling sorry for ourselves.

You have blessed us with the gift of life. We are surrounded with friends; we are trusted with responsibility; we are endowed with conscience; we are provided with all things needful; we are loved by you and those around us. To remind us, you have given us parents, teachers, and soldiers; artists, inventors, and crusaders; scholars, pioneers, and prophets. You give us life through these who give to us.

We pray today for those in our world who are burdened not by too little, but by too much:
those who have so much power that they have grown indifferent to the rights and claims of others;
those who have such good health that they cannot understand the sick or reckon adequately with their own mortality;
those who have so much wealth that they prize possessions more than people;
those who have so much knowledge that they have grown proud and self-sufficient, and have lost the common touch;
those who are so caught up in their own lives that they lack any cause larger than themselves.

We pray for those who have too little, whose basic needs in life are not met: those who are hungry; refugees who have fled their homeland to avoid being killed, but find closed borders and unwelcoming people; those who cannot afford adequate healthcare for their families; those who can't earn a living wage; those who have been betrayed by society; and those whose minds and bodies have betrayed them to addictive behaviors. Wing your way to them through us as we care for the least of the least.

With the inauguration of a new president, we are reminded to pray for all leaders of the world, from those at the top to those local leaders. We pray that those in power will not forget their purpose in being appointed but will be inspired to make laws and enact policies that will ensure liberty and justice for all.

Nurture us, O God, that we may be nurturers. Empower us that we may empower others. Inspire us that we may inspire those most in need. Bless those who are sick and those who are recuperating; bless those who are grieving and those who are celebrating. Give us this day all we need to be more effectively the body of Christ. We pray in the name of Christ, Amen.