A Change is Gonna Come
First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia
Rev. Abbey Tennis
November 6th, 2016 11:00 AM

Description: We begin exploring our spiritual theme of November – Impermanence – on the eve of the Presidential election. How do we cope with uncertainty when the stakes are high? Join us as we explore how to hold onto hope for a better future when we know the only constant in life is change.

Sermon:

In October of 1963, the singer Sam Cooke, his wife, and his entourage called ahead to make reservations at a motel in Louisiana. Knowing they had a place to lay their heads after a long day, they headed to the motel, only to be greeted by a nervous white desk clerk who told the group that they had no vacancies left. After arguing with the clerk and demanding to see the manager to no avail, the group eventually left, yelling irately at the motel staff and blaring their car horns. When they arrived at another motel that would accept them downtown, the police were waiting for them and arrested them for disturbing the peace.

Just a few months earlier, Bob Dylan had released his song “Blowing in the Wind” and it had deeply affected Cooke. Cooke was surprised that a white artist could write such a powerful song about racism. As a popular African-American singer and composer in the 1950s and 60s, Cooke had experienced more than his fair share of racism, but the motel incident seemed to change something in him. He needed to take a more active role in the Civil Rights movement, though he was afraid of losing his largely white fan base.

He wrote the song “A Change is Gonna Come” that you’ll hear later in the service a few months after that motel incident. As many of you know, the song became one of the anchor songs of the civil rights movement, even though he performed it publicly only once. Cooke was fatally shot by another white motel clerk two weeks before the song was released. He was 33.

It’s been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon’ come, oh yes it will

I often wonder how Cooke could have written that refrain – “I know a change gon’ come. Oh yes it will.” Not “I think a change gon’ come.” Not “I believe a change gon’ come.”

I know a change gon’ come.

It was still early in the Civil Rights movement. Dr. King had delivered his “I have a dream” speech that summer, but only 3 weeks before Cooke was arrested at the motel, 4 little girls
had been killed on their way to Sunday School when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham.

It was a time of violent uncertainty. The stakes were high. From where did Sam Cooke draw his hope?

We gather together this Sunday just 2 days before a presidential election. The campaign season has been both historic and abhorrent. We have watched campaign rhetoric that is racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and sexist excite and unite a large number of Americans. There has been lying and secrecy, reports of foreign governments hacking into candidate correspondence to try to influence the election. Hawkish foreign policy proposals have gone unchallenged, and millions of Americans have watched our leaders and media assert that violence towards women, immigrants, and those in foreign countries is normal and acceptable.

I don’t know about you, but I have been struggling to align my commitment to affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person with the political rhetoric I’ve been hearing.

This Sunday, we begin our monthly spiritual theme of “Impermanence,” and all that we know for sure is that change will happen. Barring some unimaginable catastrophe, come January, we will have a new President of the United States. With that person will come changes in policy, changes in worldview, changes that will touch our lives in direct and indirect ways. And I, like many of you, am anxious about what those changes will look like.

Will violent prejudice put my transgender loved ones at greater risk? Or my Muslim loved ones? Will women be able to choose what to do with their own bodies? Will people of color continue to be killed with impunity by those charged with keeping us safe? Will the next generation of poor young men be sent to die in war?

This is a time of violent uncertainty. The stakes are high. From where do we draw our hope?

In our reading this morning, the poet Langston Hughes writes:

“O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free…

America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!”

1 Let America Be America Again – written in 1935 by Langston Hughes
“Let America be America again – the land that never has been yet - and yet must be.”

Though this poem was written in 1935, Hughes’ words speak as powerfully to our time as they did to his. He writes of America as a “land where Liberty is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, but opportunity is real, and life is free, equality is in the air we breathe.” But then he says “There’s never been equality for me, nor freedom in this “homeland of the free.””

America – the land of freedom that never has been yet.

Hughes writes of what Quaker writer, speaker, and activist Parker Palmer would call the “Tragic Gap.” Parker says “The tragic gap [is] the gap between the hard realities around us and what we know is possible among us — not because we wish it were so, but because we’ve seen it with our own eyes.”

For example, “We know what greed looks like, that’s a hard reality around us, but we also know what generosity looks like – we’ve seen that with our own eyes. But we stand in a gap always between greed and generosity… it’s an eternal part of the human condition – we’re not going to achieve perfection.”

For Parker, the ‘capacity to stand and act in the tragic gap’ is the task for any of us who would wish to make a positive difference in our world.

If we can’t tolerate standing and acting in that middle ground – that tragic gap – we flip out on one side or the other. “Flip out on the side of ‘too much reality’ and what you get is corrosive cynicism – “I’ll get greedy; I’ll take mine and forget about those other people.” If you flip out on the side of ‘too much what’s possible,’ you [get] irrelevant idealism – floating above the fray; disconnected from the daily struggle.

Corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism sound like 2 very different things, but they function in the same way – both take us out of the action; both keep us from engaging in the real and hard work of creating change…

Parker writes, “the great names in human history – known and unknown – [are people who] stood in that tragic gap until the day they died. They never saw the final resolution of their dreams and aspirations, for all of the work and effort and selfhood that they put into them. And none of us who takes on a large and worthy task ever will see the final resolution. We have to stand there, keep putting one foot in front of the other, keep working for what we know is possible despite the discouragement of the hard realities around us.”

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“It’s been a long, a long time coming but I know a change gonna come”

“O, let America be America again - The land that never has been yet – and yet must be.”

Both Sam Cooke and Langston Hughes are men who stood in that tragic gap – continuing to put one foot in front of the other, working for they knew was possible despite the discouragement of the hard realities around them.

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I find comfort and inspiration in the stories, words, and music of these two men and so many others who have kept their eyes on the prize and hand on the plough while uncertainty swirled around them and failure nipped at their heels.

But stories like these two can sometimes feel so far removed from my own reality that, when my heart feels isolated and full of despair, no recounting of the deeds of the famous can restore my hope. When I am nearing hopelessness – whether about the future of our world or about something more intimately connected to my own life – I need more.

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Many years ago, the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell told this story to her congregation in Portland, Oregon:

“My son Madison calls me last week. He is due to graduate from Yale in a few more weeks, but he thinks maybe he won’t because he behind in a required math class. Way behind. Hopelessly behind. Maybe he’ll just drop out of school, he says. It’s only a piece of paper. Besides, why should anybody study math when people are starving? In his voice I hear confusion, desperation. What have these four years of school been about? He doesn’t know.”

She likens her son and several other congregants who are struggling with despair to the Israelites of the Hebrew Scriptures, wandering in the wilderness. “They have left home. They no longer know what their moorings are, what will give comfort or meaning or peace. The future is uncertain, and they live in darkness.”

This is closer to the way that hopelessness shows up in my life – it is intertwined with intense anxiety, it distorts my perspective on what really matters, it feels intolerable – so uncomfortable that the only relief would be in escape. These are the “I’ll just drop out of school” moments. Or the “I’ll just move to Canada” moments. The corrosive cynicism or irrelevant idealism moments.

3 Sermon: Hope Is the Thing with Feathers – 4/16/95; from book “Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken,” p. 193
Sewell continues, “Out of such circumstances is hope born. I mean real hope. Not the hope of the innocent. Not the hope of the naïve, the thoughtless hope of one who has never had the boot of life squarely planted on his neck.”

“No,” she continues “real hope is born of darkness.”

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Real hope is born of darkness. Real hope – the hope that sustains and renews us – the hope that strengthens us to stand and act in the Tragic Gap no matter what is going on in the world around us – this hope comes into being only when we find ourselves in times of uncertainty. When the stakes are high.

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“I wake up with my son’s telephone call on my mind,” says Sewell. “Before exercise, before prayer, before breakfast, I write to him.

Dear Little Bear –

Please remember that all thinking people are appalled by the world we have made. You are asking the right questions. Why should you study math while people are starving? You may decide to help make a world where there are fewer hungry people. You may also decide that beauty and order are important for our survival, too, and that math teaches us these values. In the meantime, you do need your degree from Yale. No, you may not drop out. I love you very, very much, but even if I could take on the pain of growing up for you, I wouldn’t; you’ll learn more by navigating these rough waters yourself. I will promise to be with you.

Love, Mom”

Rev. Dr. Sewell did for her son what so many of us need. When he lost his moorings, when he could no longer remember what would give comfort or meaning or peace, she held onto hope for him until he could find his own hope again. Sometimes we have a friend or loved one who can do this – the person we call to tell us that it’s going to be ok, even though they do not know the future any more than we do. Sometimes a community of struggle can hold onto hope for us – a community of people of color, or women, or LGBTQ people, or people with disabilities.

Both Sam Cooke and Langston Hughes were spokespeople of a kind for the black community’s collective hope in their respective times – sharing hope in verse and in song to help the downcast lift their heads once more. Sometimes a religious community can hold onto hope for us – a church like this one where you know that every Sunday you will get a

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4 ibid p. 194
5 ibid p.194
smile and a hug, hear a beautiful song, receive a word of inspiration, and feel the warmth of a cup of coffee between your chilled hands.

And when we let a loved one, or a community of support, hold onto hope for us, that hope becomes more tangible.

Instead of focusing on the massive problem of world hunger, instead of seeing the last four years of school as a waste of time, Madison heard his mother articulate a future of possibility for him, and a promise to stay by his side.

Instead of only seeing an unyielding political system, people of color in Langston Hughes’ day saw the Harlem Renaissance. Instead of only seeing a vast number of nameless violent racists, people of color in Cooke’s day saw the small but effective act of a lunch counter sit-in, or a bus boycott, or a song that could change people’s hearts.

Instead of only seeing a frightening presidential election, we look around us and see a congregation joining together to create a library for the local underserved elementary school, we see a community reflecting deeply on how they can better welcome the newcomer and care for each other, we see Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans, Atheists and more gathering as one people to support each other’s diverse spiritual journeys.

No matter what is coming in the presidential election, we must continue to locate our hope within our hearts, and within those people and communities who hold hope for us when we feel only despair. This is not a time for corrosive cynicism or irrelevant idealism. This is a time when we must firmly plant ourselves in the tragic gap. This is a time when we promise to be with each other.

In this time, I promise to be with you.

   It’s been a long, a long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will.

Amen and Blessed Be.