

“Starry, Starry Night”

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I love that picture from “Starry, Starry Night” that Van Gogh did - and you see it on the bulletin - and I really never noticed before just how amazing it is, that amidst all the shining lights and the Starry Night, that some people have thought were shining joy and beauty; and others, lights are frightening and fearful and, yet, in the middle of it all, is a Church.

Van Gogh, who I don't believe was particularly religious, although his family was, put the Church in the center of all that fear and that beauty, and all that happening as a poem. Notice it is not in the light. It is almost in the dark – stable, controlled, sustaining – always moving forward with hope and anticipation. And, I love that idea.

Now, last week we talked about - and there were a few of you here - and I handed out tests. And we did only eight questions because there wasn't room on the test for 12 or 13 on one side of the piece of paper. So they took the test, now if you are sitting next to somebody that might have been here last week – frankly, they did a very poor job on the test. So, to tell you how bad it was – mostly people scored a zero. I heard a couple of people with a one and a couple with a two, and one person who had read the book who got a six, but we won't talk about him, Gary Ordway. [Laughter] But, by and large, it was zero, one or two.

Now, out of those tests of 13 questions that was originally on the test, a troop of chimpanzees took the test [laughter] and they scored a four [laughter] because out of 13, randomly these little chimps could point their finger and get four right. They did better than the Presbyterians sitting around you. [Laughter.]

The reason for that is we think we knew what was right. And, the reason we got all of these wrong was because we thought the world was worse off than it actually is. So we made it worse. We scored worse on the test than the chimpanzees - and I'm giving this information from a man named Hans Rosling, who wrote this amazing book called “Factfulness.”

He went through, looking at the UN and other statistical information from reputable groups, and found amazing statistical information that is reassuring in this world; where the “Starry, Starry Night” is showing both very bad things happening in our world and wonderful things coming to light. But the thing that came to light through this “Factfulness” book and the study from the UN, was that our world is getting fundamentally better on an enormous level.

Now, I want to explain this by giving you some information. Now, don't worry if you were here last week. I want to get into more detail, so that you are getting something out of today. First thing, I would like to go through a couple of questions that were on the test for those of you who were not here. Some of the questions were, and this is the first one:

1. Where does the majority of the population of our world live?
 - a. Low-income countries
 - b. Middle-income countries (right answer)
 - c. High-income countries

The answer was the majority of the people on this earth live in middle-income countries. Just about everybody got that wrong.

2. In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has:
 - a. Almost doubled.
 - b. Remained more or less the same.
 - c. Or, been cut in half. (right answer)

The answer is that it has been cut in half. We are not getting worse, we are getting better.

And, finally, the third question:

3. There are two billion children in the world today, aged 0-15 years. How many children will there be in the year 2100, according to the United Nations?
 - a. 4 billion
 - b. 3 billion
 - c. 2 billion (right answer)

It is staying the same. Now, how in the world can that be? Doesn't it always just double? The answer is no, because since so many people have moved from extreme poverty into a higher level of hope, they are not having to have eight children, in the hope that two will survive. They believe they will be able to raise and save just about all of the children that they bring into the world.

The author argues very vehemently that to use language like, "we are now in a growing economy, or an economy that is now stable and good" – you can't use terms like that anymore. He argues you have to use four levels: level one for extreme poverty. And, in extreme poverty you have no medical care, you have no tools, no opportunity and, because there is no medical care, people die around age 50. Many women in childbirth and many children die. When you get to level two, you have at least some medical care. You have children finally being able to go to school, to learn things. By level three, you have a lot of medical care and you have better food, and you are living longer. Your age is about 65, that you live to. Then, of course, we are in level four - where it is very, very good.

But, think for a moment about the difference between just being in level one, with extreme poverty and near death at any given moment, to level two.

1942 was this incredibly bad year in Bangladesh. In that year they had an incredibly horrible cyclone that came through and then a tsunami after that. On that October day in 1942, two million people died and, because it was 1942, they didn't have the technology to be able to get help from other parts of the wealthier nations. No one came to their aid. As many people died from exposure, after everything had gotten better, as died in the original earthquake and tsunami.

Now between 1942 and today, Bangladesh, which is still one of the poorest countries in the world, moved from level one - extreme poverty - to level two and it made all of the difference. Now they all have enough to eat. They have better communication to the outside

world because of technology. They were able to educate their children better, and part of that education was: “Children, if you see three red flags and three black flags go up on buildings, you run to the evacuation area.”

And finally this very poor nation, at a level two, finally had enough money to be able to invest in a security system, so that there would be alarms and sounds and technology to recognize when the tsunami was coming, and to have at least some recognition when the earthquake was beginning; because they usually happen a few minutes slowly before the big one moves - and it gave them just enough time. Those things, along with the technology of our being able to communicate better with each other and provide aid, made all of the difference.

By 2015, Bangladesh had another horrible cyclone and tsunami, and this time only 132 people died - two million in 1942, to 132 in 2015. The kids knew where to run, the rest of the world knew it happened and they sent in over 10 tons of protein-packed biscuits that they dropped from the air to provide enough sustenance that the people survived long enough. The infrastructure was in place so that many of their buildings were strong enough to sustain that kind of earthquake and tsunami, so that the people and the evacuation sites did not have the buildings come in on them. That is what a difference it made between 1942 and 2015.

Now, it isn't just in that area. Things continue to change dramatically for us, as well – even in level-four countries like the United States. Think about in this country at the turn of the century. In San Francisco, when that earthquake went through and totally leveled the city. And, look at what happened on Friday? An earthquake with over a seven on the Richter scale. Fifty years ago, even thirty years ago, [that] would have leveled everything in Anchorage and everywhere else. I looked yesterday, (but very briefly because my wife made me go to two movies yesterday.) [Laughter.] (We had a heck of a good time.) I hadn't heard when I goggled about death. I even goggled “death count in Alaska” and I couldn't get anything on Google. I don't think, yet, there have been many, if any, deaths – because the infrastructure was in place, because our technology had improved. We have places set up for people to go, and just years ago – just a few years ago – there would have been incredible destruction.

Now you can argue the difference between 1942 and 2015. That's a long time. Do we have to wait all that time for change? And, the answer is, “no,” some of this change happens incredibly quickly.

I will give you another example: In 1996, 27 percent of this country felt that gay marriage was appropriate. In 2016, the number of people in this country who believed that same sex marriage was appropriate was all the way up to 72 percent, and continuing to climb. Twenty years and we have increased our ability to be open, affirming, loving and supportive of people who we were not able to be that way for in the past – in just 20 years.

Look in the way in which change can happen quickly and make such a difference. I truly believe that a big part of that is the hand of God moving in our midst, and we don't even recognize it. We still believe that everything is going so badly and, in part, that is because we human beings, by nature, love the dramatic.

So when we listen to the news, and the news people know that they need readership, or people watching, so they do the dramatic, because that is what gets our attention. And, with all of these outlets and different types of social media, it is much harder to get our attention, so they have to make it [news] even more dramatic in order to get our attention. And, watching all of this incredibly dramatic stuff makes it seem so horrible.

Now, that doesn't mean that there are not real problems in this world; but I think it is important that we stop thinking we are on the Titanic, because when we think the world is going to hell in a handbasket, why bother to give? Why bother to even try? Because it won't make any difference, anyway. And, frankly, that is just not true. We are making incredible inroads in so many ways, as I shared last week.

Again, 20 years – from 1996 to 2016: In 1996, 29 percent of the world's population was in extreme poverty – level one – no children getting education, no medical care, eight children to survive. Twenty-nine percent of the world. Today, it is down to *nine* percent. We have been blessed in 20 years at that dramatic change for the good.

Now our path, in Jesus' name, is to continue to work so the other nine percent move from one to two; to make sure that this other 20 percent – now that level two is about 30 percent – we move them to level three. That will make *all* of the difference. Then we won't have to have high infant mortality rates. Then we will be able to stay and keep our world population in check. Then we will have enough food and energy and ability to continue to care for our world. It doesn't have to be bad.

All of those statistics that I learned in school in the '60s and '70s that were horrific didn't happen, because they didn't take into account technological change, and the benefit of lower income countries improving. China and India, alone, 30 years ago were level one countries. They are level three today.

Now that might scare some of you and – in our heart of hearts – when we are truly honest, we are in fear in a fourth level world country in the United States because, if they are getting better, will there be enough that we can still stay on top? And, as a Christian, that is a scary thing to even voice, because it sounds selfish, and it sounds arrogant, and maybe even racist.

This is where our faith comes in – to believe in a God who *should* make everyone come out of poverty – out of level one, two and three. That we can all live together and their blessing does not have to mean our decline. That we can live together with everyone doing better.

That is our prayer. So that all might live in that Starry Night, where the lights can shine, and people have hope and life and joy – and I believe that is right around the corner. It continues to require our prayer, our care, and working with people in our midst, to help them understand that they do not need to fear the other – that we all do better when everyone is eating, receiving good medical care, and getting educated. And, then watch how Heaven and earth – as it says in Revelation 21 – will become closer and closer together.

That is the Advent message, as Jesus' first coming we celebrate, and the second coming we look forward to. In Jesus' name. Amen.