

Just Imagine...

Micah 6:8; Luke 10:25-37; John Lennon: "Imagine"

Richard A. Rhem
Lakeshore Interfaith Community, Mother's Trust
Ganges, Michigan
July 12, 2009

Having recently celebrated once again our nation's independence, I have been reflecting on that founding vision in light of this present moment of our history. Let me state my intention up front:

Being in awe of the miracle of the founding of these United States and of the vision upon which the nation was founded in the late 18th century, I will suggest that we need an equally radical and visionary declaration for the Age of Global Community into which we have entered.

Let's begin by remembering the miracle of our founding and of the vision that came to expression in our founding documents. Specifically, let me remind you of the creation of our Constitution which is so much under discussion today because of the peril into which it has been placed in this era of American imperial designs.

In May 1787, 55 delegates from twelve of the thirteen states gathered in Philadelphia for a Constitutional Convention. The heady days of 1776 and newly won independence had finally been ratified in the Peace of Paris in 1783, but that newly won independence was by now severely strained. The new nation was a confederacy of sovereign states – thirteen sovereign states – not altogether unlike the present European Confederation bound together for purposes of trade. A confederacy is a weak instrument and the respective state legislatures wanted it to stay that way.

States rights were the first concern, especially among the more numerous small states that feared being swallowed up by the larger states of Virginia, Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania. Each state was jealous of their own sovereignty, and without a common enemy to fight, Americans seemed incapable of preserving their union. "Lycurgus," a pseudonymous writer in the *New Haven Gazette*, complained that the union under the Articles of Confederation "is not a union of sentiment – it is not a union of interest; – it is not a union to be seen – or felt – or in any manner perceived." Antifederalists believed that the preservation of republican liberties won by the Revolution depended on maintaining the sovereignty and independence of the States. John Francis Mercer spoke for the Antifederalists when he declared that he was "persuaded

that the People of so large a continent, so different in interests, so distinct in habits,” could not be adequately represented in a single legislature. Patrick Henry, the great orator of the Revolution, would have nothing to do with a central government; Virginia was doing just fine.

There were other voices, however, representing a larger vision. George Washington came out of retirement to participate in the Convention, becoming its chairman. James Madison clearly articulated the urgency and critical importance of a strong federal government, warning that, without it, the 13 states simply would not survive. Indeed, in Europe there was little confidence that the fledgling nation would survive and Britain, France and Spain were simply waiting in the wings to move in.

The initial years of independence were a sorry tale of weakness and incapacity to govern. Only that authority freely given by the States to the Confederate government could be exercised. There was no power to enact legislation or impose taxes.

In the summer of 1786 farmers in western Massachusetts determined to shut down the courts that were threatening foreclosure on their lands due to unpaid taxes. Shays’ rebellion, as it was called, shocked the nation. The impossibility of governing under the present structure was recognized and a Constitutional Convention was called for May of 1787. One month before the Convention, Madison said the hurdles confronting any reform (of the Articles of Confederation) were so great that they “would inspire despair in any case where the alternative was less formidable.”

The Convention was called for May 14; it actually began May 25 and serious discussion got underway on May 29. With only one recess, the Convention met for six days a week from 4 to 8 hours a day until September 17, when the document was signed. It was a steamy, hot, humid summer in Philadelphia. One breath followed another with difficulty. Windows had to be kept closed because of the swarms of stinging flies.

Madison arrived eleven days early, drafting the Virginia Plan which became the Convention agenda. The smaller states were threatened and unyielding. On June 14, William Paterson of New Jersey submitted the New Jersey Plan as an alternative move to the Virginia Plan, more to the liking of the smaller states. The Convention deadlocked. A committee was appointed to work out a compromise which was offered on July 5, debated until July 14 and finally affirmed on July 16. The compromise was approved by a five to four vote. From then on it was a matter of working out the details. By September 17, our Constitution was signed, ready to be ratified by the respective states.

Madison was disappointed. He felt that he had lost on critical issues. It fell to Ben Franklin, 81, the wise, elder statesman, to present the document for signing. He said,

When you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudice, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly, can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the Builders of Babel... Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.

Franklin had himself made compromise. He asked that “every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility.”

The Constitution of the United States is an amazing document that has served us well and has become a model for nations around the globe. Someone has said it is our most important export. What this document, hammered out in the oppressive heat of a Philadelphia summer, has created and enabled is the highest achievement of human government.

Reviewing that history, I was surprised at how tenuous was the establishing of this nation. It was a struggle – a hard-fought battle. Not everyone wanted to be free of the British Crown and, of those who did, there were many who had no vision for the great nation that emerged. We were almost not birthed. That we were was quite miraculous; that there were such leaders of the caliber of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Franklin and others was quite amazing; and, their vision of the principles upon which our nation is founded, which came to expression in our founding documents, is really amazing.

Admittedly we have fallen short of the vision and the visionaries themselves had blind spots. Nonetheless, in Franklin’s words to the Constitutional Convention regarding the Document to be voted on –

I consent...to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.

I suspect we would all agree that his estimate was right. This nation was born at the dawn of the modern period. The periodization of history is somewhat arbitrary, I suppose, but most scholars would agree that the 18th century was the blossoming of modernity – the Age of Enlightenment – the Age of Reason. It saw

the ascendancy of the human spirit – that was the historical context in which our nation was born.

The human spirit began to come to flower in the fifteenth century, and in the Italian Renaissance there was a great expression of art, of sculpture, and of architecture. After that long period of medievalism when the Church was so dominant and so oppressive, where there was linkage between throne and altar, finally, in the fifteenth century, there was a breaking out, a blossoming of the human spirit. I think the sixteenth century of which we are the children – children of the Reformation and the counter-reformation – was perhaps a detour. For a time the authoritarian structures of society once again asserted themselves. But inevitably the human person was going to break out. Our nation was born in that context of history when all forms of authoritarianism were overthrown. There was the assertion of the human spirit. There was the conviction that there was dignity in every human person and that freedom and liberty were the God-given and God-intended virtues with which the human being and society were to live.

So our nation was born at a point of newness. In the midst of history there is development. There is newness. Sometimes we get so depressed by the present. It seems as though things don't go anywhere and we get all enmeshed, and in a situation of no movement, of gridlock. We throw up our hands and we wonder if there's any hope, and if anyone can make any difference, if anyone can change things, if anyone can get things moving again. What I want to say to you is "Yes. Yes. Yes, in the long run there is movement. There is development." This nation was born at a point of newness. There was a new understanding of human government. There was a new understanding of the human person. There was an appreciation for the necessity of liberty and freedom in which human beings could realize their potential. There was a recognition that the finest form of human government was the government that governed least, that was a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" in that definition that Lincoln gave to this form of government 100 years later in the crisis of the Civil War. Lincoln really redefined the revolution when he said that this nation was "dedicated to the proposition that all people were created equal," and that the test of the Civil War was a test of whether or not this experiment indeed could come to fruition and realization of that high ideal for which it was initiated in the first place.

The twentieth century saw our nation engaged in great global conflict in which our philosophy of government, our conception of freedom, of democratic institutions, of the rule of law, have been severely challenged. World War I, World War II and, following victory in the Second World War, the decades of the Cold War's ideological struggle in which the world was brought to the brink of disaster – each side keeping its hand off the trigger, because of the realization that in nuclear conflict there can be no winners. Mutually Assured Destruction,

aptly named by the acronym MAD, kept the world “safe” during the decades of Cold War standoff.

And then 1989 – do you remember the fall of the Berlin Wall – people dancing, singing, weeping, embracing. Do you remember the euphoria?

In the summer 1989 issue of *The National Interest* an essay appeared that created a great deal of discussion. It was written by a State Department planner, Francis Fukuyama, who boldly entitled his essay “The End of History.” Fukuyama saw in the reform policies of Gorbachev not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such – that is, the end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. He argued that Karl Marx saw history as having an “end,” meaning its fulfillment in an ideal political system. Marx saw the conflicts and contradictions of all previous societies being resolved in a utopian classless society. According to Fukuyama, Marx borrowed the idea from the German philosopher Hegel who argued that history would culminate at a moment “in which a final rational form of society and state became victorious”. According to the report of Fukuyama’s essay in *Time* (9/4/89),

For Hegel, history “ended,” in this sense, with Napoleon’s triumph over the Prussian forces at Jena in 1806. That battle, to Hegel, marked the vindication by arms of the libertarian and egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution.

A French-Russian philosopher, Alexander Kojève, believes Hegel was right because at Jena the “vanguard” of humanity implemented the French Revolution’s goals. The motto of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” has been seriously challenged in this century but Fukuyama argued the ferment occurring within the Eastern bloc points to the triumph of these ideals.

You can imagine that Fukuyama’s contention met with serious criticism at the time. In a series of responses printed in the same issue of *The National Interest* there were challenges raised to his thesis. One respondent, Gertrude Himmelfarb, pointed to a different reading of Hegel.

In another reading of Hegel, however, all of history is a constant – and constantly unfulfilled – attempt to realize and actualize those principles. The dialectic does not consist, as Mr. Fukuyama says, in “a beginning, a middle, and an end,” but in “a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis,” in which the synthesis of the preceding stage is the thesis of the present, thus setting in motion an endless dialectical cycle – and thus preserving the drama of history.

Hegel was an Idealist, not a utopian. It was Marx, having defined history as the history of class struggle and socialism as the abolition of classes, who had to contemplate a final, classless state of history – although even he was enough of a Hegelian to be uncomfortable with that end, avoiding any discussion of it except for a few hilarious sentences in *The German Ideology* (very early Marx) about the completely fulfilled, de-alienated man who would hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and “criticize” (philosophize) in the evening.

As it happened, history did not come to an end either with the French Revolution or, as Marxists once believed, with the Russian Revolution. A good deal of history transpired between and since those revolutions – not only the humdrum “panorama” of ordinary history (as Hegel called it) but momentous, world-historical events. Even the most ardent Hegelian would be hard put to dismiss communism or nazism as minor set-backs in the relentless march of history; he might even be moved to see in them dimensions of human consciousness, potentialities for evil, which bode ill for the progress of Spirit or Reason. At the very least, he might be inclined to put off the end of history to infinity, making it an Absolute by which to judge the present, a star by which to steer our course, but with no expectation of reaching that final destination.

I entirely agree with Mr. Fukuyama’s opening sentence, that “something very fundamental has happened in world history.” My only problem is with the rest of the paper, in which liberal democracy is universalized and eternalized, bringing history to an end. Would that it were so. I myself have been too traumatized by communism and nazism to have any confidence in the eternal realities of history – except the reality of contingency and change, of the imponderable and the unanticipated ^aand, as often as not, the undesired and undesirable.

The twenty years since 1989 have proved Himmelfarb far closer to reality than Fukuyama, and that not because the values and virtues of western liberal democracy are less than they are heralded to be but rather because even the best political and economic framework and principles can be wrenched and wrecked by human hubris, greed and ruthlessness. Witness the present economic chaos in which we find ourselves, broken government bought and paid for by special interests, a designation pointing to the fact that the common good, the public wellbeing, is not the goal.

In the July, 2009, issue of *Vanity Fair*, there appears an article entitled “Wall Street’s Toxic Message” under which appear the following in bold print:

When the current crisis is over, the reputation of American-style capitalism will have taken a beating – not least because of the gap between what Washington practices and what it preaches. Disillusioned developing

nations may well turn their backs on the free market, warns Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz, posing new threats to global stability and U.S. security.

Interestingly, Stiglitz refers to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, obviously agreeing with Fukuyama that that was a pivotal moment in our times.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, marked the end of Communism as a viable idea. Yes, the problems with Communism had been manifest for decades. But after 1989 it was hard for anyone to say a word in its defense. For a while, it seemed that the defeat of Communism meant the sure victory of capitalism, particularly in its American form. Francis Fukuyama went as far as to proclaim “the end of history,” defining democratic market capitalism as the final stage of social development, and declaring that all humanity was now heading in this direction. In truth, historians will mark the 20 years since 1989 as the short period of American triumphalism. With the collapse of great banks and financial houses, and the ensuing economic turmoil and chaotic attempts at rescue, that period is over. So, too, is the debate over “market fundamentalism,” the notion that unfettered markets, all by themselves, can ensure economic prosperity and growth. Today only the deluded would argue that markets are self-correcting or that we can rely on the self-interested behavior of market participants to guarantee that everything works honestly and properly.

The consequence of the implosion of free market capitalism and the economic meltdown in the global community may lead developing nations to turn away from market capitalism which he contends is the only system that can bring them prosperity and free them from poverty. He writes,

But my concern here is more with the realm of ideas. I worry that, as they see more clearly the flaws in America’s economic and social system, many in the developing world will draw the wrong conclusions. A few countries – and maybe America itself – will learn the right lessons. They will realize that what is required for success is a regime where the roles of market and government are in balance, and where a strong state administers effective regulations. They will realize that the power of special interests must be curbed.

But, for many other countries, the consequences will be messier, and profoundly tragic. The former Communist countries generally turned, after the dismal failure of their postwar system, to market capitalism, replacing Karl Marx with Milton Friedman as their god. The new religion has not served them well. Many countries may conclude not simply that unfettered capitalism, American-style, has failed but that the very concept of a market economy has failed, and is indeed unworkable under any circumstances. Old-style Communism won’t be back, but a variety of forms

of excessive market intervention will return. And these will fail. The poor suffered under market fundamentalism – we had trickle-up economics, not trickle-down economics. But the poor will suffer again under these new regimes, which will not deliver growth. Without growth there cannot be sustainable poverty reduction. There has been no successful economy that has not relied heavily on markets. Poverty feeds disaffection. The inevitable downturns, hard to manage in any case, but especially so by governments brought to power on the basis of rage against American-style capitalism, will lead to more poverty. The consequences for global stability and American security are obvious.

Stiglitz sees our present failure as putting the democracy birthed here in a bad light.

Faith in democracy is another victim. In the developing world, people look at Washington and see a system of government that allowed Wall Street to write self-serving rules which put at risk the entire global economy – and then, when the day of reckoning came, turned to Wall Street to manage the recovery. They see continued re-distributions of wealth to the top of the pyramid, transparently at the expense of ordinary citizens. They see, in short, a fundamental problem of political accountability in the American system of democracy. After they have seen all this, it is but a short stop to conclude that something is fatally wrong, and inevitably so, with democracy itself. (p. 85)

Finally he returns to Fukuyama, pointing to where he was wrong but also where he was right.

The American economy will eventually recover, and so, too, up to a point, will our standing abroad. America was for a long time the most admired country in the world, and we are still the richest. Like it or not, our actions are subject to minute examination. Our successes are emulated. But our failures are looked upon with scorn. Which brings me back to Francis Fukuyama. He was wrong to think that the forces of liberal democracy and the market economy would inevitably triumph, and that there could be no turning back. But he was not wrong to believe that democracy and market forces are essential to a just and prosperous world. The economic crisis, created largely by America's behavior, has done more damage to these fundamental values than any totalitarian regime ever could have. Perhaps it is true that the world is heading toward the end of history, but it is now sailing against the wind, on a course we set ourselves. (p. 85)

I wrestle with a subject like this, way beyond my pay scale, which is to say my level of competence, because finally as a follower of Jesus it is my passion to see a movement toward a more compassionate world. We began with the marvelous vision with which this nation was founded. We rightly stand in awe of humane

values which came to expression in our founding documents. Every Fourth of July we celebrate the Declaration of our Independence. But history moves on. John Donne wrote “No man is an island entire of itself,” but today we must recognize no nation is an island entire of itself. If anyone doubted the intimate inter-connection of all the peoples of the earth, the present economic disaster should remove all doubt.

Pope Benedict XVI issued his third encyclical since assuming the throne of St. Peter. The encyclical dealt with global economic order, urging world leaders to work for the common good. In an article in *the New York Times* (July 8, 2009), it was reported that he addressed the current situation:

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI on Tuesday called for a radical rethinking of the global economy, criticizing a growing divide between rich and poor and urging the establishment of a “true world political authority” to oversee the economy and work for the “common good.”

He criticized the current economic system, “where the pernicious effects of sin are evident,” and urged financiers in particular to “rediscover the genuinely ethical foundation of their activity.”

He also called for “greater social responsibility” on the part of business. “Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty,” Benedict wrote in his new encyclical, which the Vatican released on Tuesday.

More than two years in the making, “Caritas in Veritate,” or “Charity in Truth,” is Benedict’s third encyclical since he became pope in 2005. Filled with terms like “globalization,” “market economy,” “outsourcing,” “labor unions” and “alternative energy,” it is not surprising that the Italian media reported that the Vatican was having difficulty translating the 144-page document into Latin.

This is an important call to recognize and face up to the imperative necessity of the global community beginning to act according to the reality into which history has evolved. Many will write off the Pope’s call as just another religious idealist peddling pipe dreams. Such an international authority will be struggled against no more fiercely anywhere than in our own nation. Why yield any element of sovereignty when you are number one – even if crippled and losing ground. But the time is coming when a radical new envisioning of our global community will occur if the human story is to continue.

But why should we wait until there is no option because of disaster? Why should we wait for the environment to collapse, endless war, and greedy, ruthless

operatives to amass fortunes while of the 80% of the world's population that live in Asia, Latin America and Africa, 1.4 billion subsist on less than \$1.25 a day?

It is not that no voices have been raised over the centuries, voices of prophets, poets and dreamers. The biblical tradition is replete with calls for justice and compassion. From the Hebrew prophet Micah, for example,

He has told you, O Mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6:8)

And Jesus, the great storyteller, answered a lawyer's test question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" by asking him, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" The lawyer responded with the summary of the Law and the prophets –

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus affirmed the answer and said, "Do this, and you will live."

But that didn't satisfy the lawyer whose motive in asking the question is suspect and he asked further, "And who is my neighbor?" And that question of course led to one of Jesus' most memorable parables, the story of the good Samaritan, (Luke 10:25-37). A man journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho is ambushed, robbed, beaten and left half dead. A priest saw him and passed by on the other side. A Levite did the same. Then a Samaritan came by, saw the wounded one, had compassion on him, gave him first aid and then brought him to an inn where he took care of him. Leaving the next day, he told the Innkeeper to look after him and upon his return he would cover the cost. Now in response to the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of the three was neighbor to the victim?" The answer, of course, was obvious: "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise."

The story gets its punch, of course, because while religious leaders might be expected to show compassion they fail to act. The one who shows mercy is a Samaritan, one despised by the Jews, reflecting an ancient feud. Showing mercy knows no bounds. So it is on planet Earth.

A striking image of our real planetary situation was expressed by the famed astronomer, Carl Sagan – no professor of belief in God.

“We succeeded in taking that picture (from deep space), and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.

The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.

Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity – in all this vastness – there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us. It’s been said that astronomy is a humbling, and I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

Carl Sagan

Can you hear that and not be moved? Is it not compassion we need and would the deep wellspring of compassion that lies within the human breast be tapped if we had such a vision, such a grasp of the reality of our human situation? If only we could imagine....

In case you missed the news, Michael Jackson is dead. I acknowledge some lack in myself but I could never get into him or his music. But I know it has to do with some deficiency; I never got into the Beatles either. In both cases it was I against the universe I guess. Certainly there is musical genius that I have missed. I confess this because a few Christmases past we received a Christmas card with a poem by John Lennon entitled “Imagine” as well as a variation on the theme that transposed the poem from an amazing expression of human imagination to an expression of Christmas hope. The original is:

Imagine

By John Lennon

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today....

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
No religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one.

The Christmas card version from our friends Peter and Helen Hart was entitled
"Imagine Reversed..."

Imagine there's a heaven
It's easy if you try
When love is all around us
And beauty fills the sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today....

Imagine all the countries
It isn't hard to do
The rule of law to guide us
And religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

Imagine our possessions
I wonder if you can
As gifts for need and hunger
According to God's plan
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

Our hope is not just dreaming
For once was born a Son
Who lived so we might follow Him
And the world will be as one.

Obviously for Christmas, for a Christian, Lennon's expression is inadequate. It was a telling critique of religion, I must say, suggesting religion is one of the divisive elements in the human world, indeed a source of violence which cannot be denied. But it need not be and the positive potential of religion is picked up nicely in the "Imagine Reversed".

If you look closely at "Imagine Reversed," the last two lines of all four stanzas are the same with the exception of the fourth stanza where the next to the last line is changed from "I hope some day you'll join us" to "Who lived so we might follow Him."

Rather than an invitation to join the dreamer the reverse version points to a concrete human example, obviously the one whose birth Christmas celebrates. A not insignificant change from an open invitation to join in a human hope to a human life as model that incarnated the dreamer's vision. Even so, Lennon's original is a marvelous portrayal of an alternative world envisioned by a dreamer.

Dreamers and poets are critically important to inspire us to imagine, to imagine a better way of being, to imagine a better world, an alternative world reflective of the God of love and compassion – not just for our nation, not for one continent, not for one race but for all humankind. Just imagine,

All people living for today
Living life in peace
Sharing all the world
And the world will be as one.

I am quite aware that that sounds like fantasy talk – wholly unrealistic in the present world situation. Where would you begin to point out the flash points of present – the Middle East – Iran? Iraq? The Israeli-Palestinian ongoing crises? Afghanistan with escalating military engagement? The straining of relationships with Russia? Honduras? North Korea? The volatility of Pakistan? Spin the globe and peril seems ubiquitous. One might be tempted to throw up one's hands and say hope of any amelioration of the world's peril, the struggle for power and

preeminence, the exploitation of the weaker by the stronger has always been the story and will be until the End – an end some religious traditions might see as the final intervention of God in Judgment and Redemption.

Or might it be an End that is of human making – a nuclear Holocaust or an environmental disaster? And in the meantime conflict, violence, war and human suffering and tragedy. Gathered here as an assembly of good people, the fortunate ones, civil, decent and essentially well-meaning, it must feel like I am overdrawing the threat and painting the picture far too somberly. After all there have been wars and rumors of wars forever. There have been good times and bad times. Isn't it better to try just to do one's best and get along as best one can?

Is our time really different? Has everything changed?

Albert Einstein in the wake of the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan – He whose genius was critical in creating the atomic weapon – said “Everything has changed except our thinking.” And the world Einstein knew has changed dramatically in the meantime.

He also said, “Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.”

In *The Abolition of Man* (1944), C.S. Lewis wrote:

Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. The battle will then be won. We shall ... be henceforth free to make our species whatever we wish to be. The battle will indeed be won. But who, precisely, will have won? For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what they please.

The only hope for a human future as well as a humane future is to imagine an alternative universe in which a global community learns compassion. As Jesus taught us to pray -

Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.

That will be the case when we learn that our neighbor is anyone who crosses our path in need and we allow compassion to flow like a mighty stream.