

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God saw that it was good.

So begins the collected reflections of God's people about the mystery of God's work. The mystery of creation, the mystery of judgement, the mystery of salvation, the abiding mystery of the power of love. And it all began by overcoming chaos, by taking random, existing, available elements and making something new. And the Holy Scriptures mean to teach that that act was creative, and intentional, and inspired, and a good thing. The world was first created by the power of love, which ordered all things and thoughts, even the future itself, as an antidote, an optimistic alternative, to chaos. It is a theme played out in the creation stories of most other religious and cultural traditions as well: whatever deity those peoples looked up to was given thanks for overcoming the dark, random, chaotic beginning, and displacing it with a structure of justice and meaningfulness. And, in the beginning, it was all good. It was a blessing.

But then read the rest of the long book of Genesis! Murder, betrayal, immorality, cruelty, conquest, slavery, oppression, selfishness, and pessimism. Chaos attempts a comeback. And in the Biblical record, and the historical record, too, it only gets worse. The God of the Bible repeatedly and faithfully calls for a return to goodness, to righteousness, to the structure of justice, to faith, hope, and love. God even sends warnings by the way of prophets, and offers teachings by reams of commandments, but it always seems that chaos is playing the stronger hand. It seems to seduce even God's most faithful followers into acts which un-do creation, into the darkness of the void, as if the spirit of creativity, God's own breath, God's own wind, had never acted in the first place. It is a dark and pessimistic reality, hopeless and frightful.

So, what is a Christian to do? What should a Christian think? How should a Christian behave? The celebrated twentieth-century author, Norman Vincent Peale, wrote a volume called The Power of Positive Thinking, in which he asserted that keeping a positive attitude, a confident outlook, would empower even the worst sad-sack to make and control his own destiny. That book was the father and mother of all self-help books, and gained Norman Vincent Peale a place in popular history. You've probably heard his name before. Maybe you've even read his book. Peale was the senior pastor at University Methodist Church in Syracuse, a prominent place of worship on Genesee St, just down the hill from S.U. In those days of the Great Depression, Peale's celebrity allowed him the luxury of hob-knobbing with the rich and powerful of Syracuse and spending leisurely time writing fancy sermons, while his young assistant pastor, Webster Melchor, did much of the down-and-dirty work of that parish. Web visited the sick and dying just up the hill at Crouse Hospital, tried to evangelize bawdy college students, and spent time among the poor of the neighborhood once known as the 15th Ward, much of which was torn down 30 years later to build the viaducts of Rt. 81 through the city. Years later, as a seasoned pastor, Web Melchor became the senior minister of our Methodist Church in North Syracuse, and I remember well how he taught our confirmation class with authority and clarity. He didn't abide any horseplay. He took his job and his calling seriously. His own associate pastor told me a story years later, about a day of an impossible blizzard, and how, with desperate prayer, he finally made it to the office through the wind and snow. Web was there at the door waiting for him, and asked him about his plans for the day. The young associate told Web that he intended to spend the hours in the warm comfort of the church office, writing a sermon and catching-up on paperwork. Web startled him by saying, no, this was the perfect day to make home visits, because schools and businesses were closed, and everyone would be at home! Here, put your hat back on, and let's go do the Lord's work! At the end of that confirmation class, BTW, I sheepishly

went to Web's office and asked if he thought that I might one day become a clergyman, and for a time, this wise and focused man became my teenage mentor.

Have you heard the phrase 'toxic positivity'? It seems to be a trendy new concept, and I've been hearing it a lot lately. As a well-seasoned (or many-seasoned) person myself, I tend to be a bit skeptical about trendy things. Like Web Melchor, I've seen so many, like the power of positive thinking, come and go. But, I think there may be some benefit to Christians to consider the thesis of toxic positivity. The premise is that we can wrap ourselves in a bubble of positive fantasy, meanwhile losing our grip on reality. We grin and nod in the face of crisis, telling ourselves, and our children, not to worry, everything will turn out just fine. There may be wars and rumors of wars, there may be pandemics and rumors of pandemics, but after all, it can't happen here. We set ourselves up in denial, and it feels good. This is not what Jesus is preaching to his disciples. In fact, he has been trying to get them to understand that there will, indeed, be a crisis in their near future, that they will need to endure both his discrediting and his death, and that they, too, will be drawn into the calamity. He has been trying, the gospels tell us, to draw them out of their denial and get them to focus on their mission. Don't retreat to a comfortable place or state of mind to avoid the blizzards, but have the courage to meet the challenges head-on for the sake of your important ministries. Don't be alarmed, he says, but don't deny the existence of crises; they must come. Don't just wrap yourself in a bubble, looking with smiling awe at all those beautiful buildings in Jerusalem, but prepare yourselves for cost and loss while there is still time.

But, take heart and have hope, for the way has been paved, the trail has been blazed. In those books of the New Testament, the ones sandwiched in between the gospels and the Book of the Revelation to John, those epistles and letters and sermons written for the early Christian churches, there is a sense of urgency, and a plea to avoid toxic positivity. Don't deny the truth: there will, indeed, be martyrs for the faith, Paul will indeed be imprisoned, most of the disciples will be persecuted and killed, even your own Jewish relatives will disown you, and times will be hard. You will not be immune from these things, not even from natural calamities like earthquakes and famine. But, Christians, live through these things not with denial, but hope, not with paralyzing fear, but with joy that you can be soldiers in the fight against chaos. Like the veterans before you, you can be agents in God's holy purpose of creation, even when the world seems to be crumbling and all heaven is breaking loose. Those early Christian writers went so far as to say that the end times are imminent, that the Day of Judgement is close at hand, as if to underscore their message against the drug of toxic positivity, to highlight their message that happiness does not bring real joy, to remind the faithful that there is still much hard and joyful work to do.

So, what is a Christian to do? What should a Christian think? How should a Christian behave? The author of the Book of Hebrews, one of those early Christian writings, and from which we heard Shelly read today, gives a representative answer, not unlike the message from those other epistles we find between the Gospels and Revelation. The author writes: "since we have [Jesus] a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Approach, he writes, don't hold back. Hold fast, he writes, to hope, without wavering. Provoke each other to good deeds. Encourage each other and meet together. And don't deny the truth for some false, temporary benefit of comfort or happiness when God's ultimate, creative dream is at stake, and at hand. Amen.