

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
November 13, 2016
Rev. Kevin M Smith
Isaiah 65:17-25

God Wears Rose Colored Glasses

I come from a family of hunters, although I'm not one myself. My uncles and aunts hunted. My brother-in-law used to be a hunting guide in Montana. Although I never joined them, I sure enjoyed the venison and sausage that were the fruits of their hunts. All of them hunted for food or guided others in hunting for food. They loved getting outdoors and feeding their families at the same time.

There's an old hunting story about that says a lot about optimists and pessimists: *An optimist sees the best in the world, while a pessimist sees only the worst. An optimist finds the positive in the negative, and a pessimist can only find the negative in the positive. For example, an avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck. Shocked by his find, he was sure none of his friends would ever believe him. He decided to try to break the news to a friend of his, a pessimist by nature, and invited him to hunt with him and his new dog. As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by. They fired, and a duck fell. The dog responded and jumped into the water. The dog, however, did not sink but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet. This continued all day long; each time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve it. The pessimist watched carefully, saw everything, but did not say a single word. On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, "Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?" "I sure did," responded the pessimist. "That dog can't swim!"* (source: <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Optimist#ixzz4O6KdmO6G>) Some hunters just can't see the forest for the trees!

Winston Churchill, who led England through its darkest days of World War II, once said, "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." Today we celebrate our veterans and the sacrifices they have made for a country and a people who immigrated to this country filled with hope and purpose, and I think for the most part, bore generations of children who are filled with that same hope and purpose. Although I must say that having now passed through one of the nastiest, most bitter election years in the history of this country, I sometimes wonder if we have lost our way, lost our sense of hopefulness and optimism about the future. I'm especially concerned about an increase in hate-filled speech against people who have been oppressed in this country and between people who supported one candidate or another. (We have some safety pins here this morning. The wearing of the safety pin has become a symbol of solidarity with people afraid of anger and violence against them because of who they are or how they practice their faith.) Still, I do have hope for this country because I believe in its people and I believe in a God who is still creating and speaking of love, peace, and justice in a world that loses its way every now and then.

Every Veteran's Day celebration I remember our own Phil Evans, a veteran of WWII and the Korean War. Phil and I used to get together, and I loved to hear his stories about his service days. He had a keen mind for history and a dislike for war. Even with all of the horrible things Phil witnessed, he was a man of tremendous love and belief in a God of love. When Phil came home from the wars, he expressed his sense of creativity and love by going into the flower business. Phil grew beauty and hope adorned in peace. He used to share that beauty, hope, and peace with all us here at MSC when he made his "kissing balls" for Christmas and in other times when he blessed us with the fruit of his floral creativity. Phil expressed his hope and love by attending church regularly (*I miss seeing him every Sunday just over there.*) He wrote many letters to his nephew who was also a service member who often served in harm's way. Phil was a mentor and pastor to his nephew and loved him dearly.

Speaking of creating new things through love and hope, our God does a lot of that. We learned from the words of Isaiah that God, over and over again is "creat[ing] new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. [We are to] be glad and rejoice forever in what [God, the great "I am" is] creating; for [God was] about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." My friends, God is with us—Emmanuel—and is constantly creating something new to respond to all the hurt the world can dish out to each one of us. God is over and over again equipping us with faith to be co-creators of that new Jerusalem; and when we do join God in using our creativity and faith to rise like the Phoenix bird out of the ashes, we create places and times of joy, not only for others, but in our own hearts. The story of the human race is the story of living through the consequences of our sins—through all the times we have fallen short of God's loving mark for our lives and our communities—and creating something new and being transformed in the process. Life is constantly a cycle of birth-growth-decline-death and rebirth. With God by our side and in our hearts we all can be reborn when we practice the love of God for ourselves and in our families and relationships.

When Isaiah echoes God's words, "21They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands," we are to learn that the arc of God's love and co-creation with us is an arc, as Martin Luther King, Jr., once said that "bends toward justice." The most important work of God in the world is spreading love and creating justice for those who are, or feel, oppressed, even from the oppression we create for ourselves. God is on the side of the oppressed. We learn that over and over again in the scriptures of the Hebrews and the Christians, and in other faiths, too.

The justice that God seeks is a justice that does not end in wealth, or fame, or the rule of one people over another, or the abuse of one person to another, but rather it is a justice that practices peace ends in peace. God turns our swords into plowshares, even the swords of anger or jealousy or impatience we use on one another in our personal relationships. Veteran Phil Evans turned in his swords for bouquets of beauty and love. The peace that God seeks is the peace of joining opposites and enemies together: "25The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...they shall not

hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” Work that ends in justice is the coin of God’s realm and the balm needed between us.

On this weekend when we honor our veterans, those who have fought, lived and died so that we might enjoy freedom and all that entails, let us remember that freedom is far from free. May we join God in co-creating a world where former enemies become allies and friends, where strife between individuals disappears, a world where justice flows like a mighty stream and nourishes all the love and beauty and rebirth of people who seek to spread hope and love through faith in God and in each other. Let us move beyond the pettiness and rancor of the election year we have just witnessed and work hard to understand one another better and seek God’s guidance as we climb up God’s holy mountain together. May we remember that the cup that Jesus shared with his disciples is a cup half full—full of new life, resurrection from the death that world can deal, and all this by loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. Amen.