

Sermon — Rebellion to Tyranny — Jan 25, 2025 — Patrick McLaughlin

I recently received an email expressing concern that I wasn't preaching optimistic, hopeful, uplifting things. And that is *true*. I mean, have you looked around, or read the news? Renee Good? Alex Patti? Both extrajudicially executed — murdered — in the street, on video for us all to see.

My task is to preach the truth as I see it and understand it. Not to make people feel happy and uplifted every Sunday.

In truth, I believe I would be doing you all a disservice if I were preaching happiness and optimism. I am *not* optimist right now. I am hopeful. But it's a hopefulness that is not Emily Dickenson's "the thing with feathers" singing in my heart. Instead, it's the hope that Matthew (@crowsfault) posted about on Twitter in 2022 — he wrote "Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of the cobblestones in her hair, and just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go."

That's the hope I see embodied by the people of Minneapolis, who are peacefully rising up against the invasion and oppression that has poured into their streets.

I *am* hopeful. But I'm honest, and a historian; I'm not optimistic. There are almost no cases of throwing off oppression that aren't bloody and painful. The unjust murder of Renee Good — and *others*; ICE killed dozens of people last year and has probably killed another dozen already *this year*, in just the past three weeks. And the regime is just gearing up.

"Already terrible things are happening outside. Poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes. Families are torn apart. Men, women, and children are separated. Children come home to find that their parents have disappeared." And while that describes what *is* happening in America today — not just Minneapolis — it's a quotation from the diary of Anne Frank, written on January 13, 1943.

Liberation *won't* be easy.

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote "... freedom is *never* voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." And he wasn't suggesting a petition.

I understand that hearing this is troubling. It doesn't make you happy, hearing it. It didn't make me happy reading — and writing this. But my job is to tell you the truth.

King wrote, in his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail “The question is not if we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or for love?” And elsewhere he wrote “One has a moral *responsibility* to disobey unjust laws.” I long ago committed myself to being an extremist — an extremist for love. And I’ve spoken out against government neglect and abuse of the people, and been arrested for it.

It’s not that I lack hope. I’m full of hope. I’m just unable and unwilling to pretend that things aren’t terrible — or to be silent about it. And I don’t care what that costs me. I remember the sense of grief and visceral revulsion I felt when I read that after the capture in 1851 of Thomas Sims, an escaped enslaved man, returned to slavery because of federal *law*, when other churches in Waltham, Massachusetts tolled their bells in alarm and anger, noted abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper, *Liberator*, reported that the Unitarian church’s bell would not sound, being stuffed with cotton. Let me make that clear — because so much money was being made on slavery and cotton and the labor of the enslaved by wealthy Unitarians throughout New England, they kept their peace. Their bell did not toll.

I presume that those ministers — many of them deeply troubled, but shackled by the leadership of their churches, men complicit in slavery — preached something more tolerable, something uplifting and optimistic.

And a decade later, the nation was drenched in blood.

Ironically, and rather hypocritically, Thomas Jefferson wrote “I have sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” Maybe he really meant over the *mind* of man — and didn’t care what the dozens of people he kept enslaved *thought*.

But for myself, I’ve sworn eternal hostility to every form of tyranny, whether over minds *or* bodies.

And trust me, I would *love* to again be living in a safer, saner, happier, less troubled world. But I have friends and colleagues who have put their unarmed, unarmored bodies on the line to stand up for their community and *our* rights. And I won’t *not* sound the bells of alarm. I am *hopeful*, but not optimistic, that we can avoid something even more terrible than we’re already seeing and experiencing.

I want to point back to the nation’s early revolutionary history; full of stirring mottos we’ve all heard — Patrick Henry’s “Give me freedom or give me death!” is probably the most famous. And there’s Captain John Paul Jones’ defiant “I have

not yet begun to fight!” Or Ben Franklin’s “Join or Die” and also “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” We celebrate the patriotism of Nathan Hale’s “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country”. And there’s Thomas Paine’s “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

This country is not its government. It is the land, the people, the founding documents and ideals of the nation.

One more motto; there’s *“Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”* Often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, who was exceptionally fond of it, it’s clear that he borrowed it from someone else — probably Ben Franklin, who appears to have fabricated a story about it being found embossed on an old cannon in Barbados. That kind of story is typical of Franklin; he never missed the opportunity to tell a good story or sell an idea by putting it in someone else’s mouth.

Those words were proposed to Congress as the motto to go on the Great Seal of the United States. And while it was rejected, Jefferson so loved it that he proposed that it be used by his home state of Virginia—which opted instead for the Latin *Sic Semper Tyrannus*, or Thus Always to Tyrants—and he adopted it for his own personal seal at least as early as 1790. The grim irony of an enslaver adoring the notion that rebellion against tyranny being obedience to god does not escape me.

But the *sentiment* is one that was widespread during the Revolutionary period. Today’s version would be the No Kings protests and signs we have seen during this past year.

That’s real patriotism, rejecting tyranny and oppression, and demanding that the rights that belong to every human being be fully and studiously upheld and respected. That is a glorious notion; the idea that each of us should be able to sit at home in peace and not have ICE come and beat in the door to drag us off for investigation, interrogation, violent abuse under color of law, and more — perhaps death. And that’s happened. Just this past week I read of an older Hmong man who was dragged out of his home in Minnesota — they didn’t even let him get dressed, but forced him out into the bitter cold in nothing but shorts and house

slippers. What had he done? Nothing. He's a naturalized citizen with no criminal record. And they did eventually let him go — but his seizure was an obscenity, and a crime. There was no warrant, and they smashed in that family's door and dragged him out. Everything about that is unjust *and illegal*. Those were *your* constitutional rights being violated.

And there's nothing hopeful in that story, save that the community around his family rallied; a local carpenter went and bought supplies to rebuild the door enough so that it could be closed. And neighbors have stayed with the family so that they aren't sitting alone. That? That's human, and hopeful.

But ICE has done that before, and will do it again — until they're stopped. And that's frankly terrifying, because they have been given a budget that is larger than *most* nation's military budgets, have hired men with little regard to their qualifications, and given them little training. Many of them appear to be Christian nationalists and January 6th insurrectionists who were *convicted* of their crimes against us and the Capitol, and democracy. People who have no respect for the law, or us, or our rights — and were pardoned by the president. (An aside; those pardons don't erase their guilt or convictions. A pardon simply wipes all punishment and consequences from the books. They're still guilty.) Those people have been unleashed on us, and are being told that they have absolute immunity as they go about their business.

And that business is intimidation. Sure, they're especially focused on people who don't look like me. And they claim they're going after criminals, but that's a lie — and their own statistics prove it. The overwhelming majority of those who are seized and held in detention have no criminal records at all. And a shocking number are citizens, who are seized because... ICE wants to. Maybe because they're browner than a good Christian citizen is supposed to be. Maybe because they looked at one of those ICE thugs with contempt or said something to one of those untrained and unregulated goons.

It breaks my heart to see all of this.

And it breaks my heart to know that unless we are very, very, very, very lucky, things will get worse.

And I tell you all this not to depress you, but to *prepare you*. Because seeing what's happening and responding to it is our only hope. It's through that that we might achieve that miracle of pulling back from the edge. But even if we don't, it's in seeing and knowing in advance that we can be prepared for the long and hard, painful and bloody struggle that is likely our lot.

When I was in high school, a Norwegian named Johan Galtung predicted the collapse of the USSR within a decade. It was unthinkable, and everyone ignored him. Just over nine years later, the USSR collapsed. Galtung had metrics he'd based his forecast on. In 2009, he projected the collapse of the American empire in 2025, based on an upgraded version of those metrics. Everyone ignored him.

Now NATO is arrayed to defend itself against *us*, and is ready to close every American military base in Europe and to eject 80-some thousand US service people. It's clear that Galtung hit the mark.

The question for Galtung, and for us, was what would follow that.

He thought it *possible* the republic might survive. He also thought that it was more likely that we would suffer a period of fascism. Predicting what comes after that was beyond his scope and metrics.

What history teaches me is that the future is *never* certain; sometimes the wildly improbable does happen. I recall a long discussion with my father about the fate of the Republic of South Africa, decades ago. It was *obvious* to any observer that what was coming was going to be a brutal, bloody civil war, largely on racial lines. And that didn't happen. Instead, miraculously de Klerk and Mandela managed to transition that society from an apartheid, racist tyranny into a multiracial state — one that's imperfect and which struggles, but wasn't born in vast bloodshed and butchery.

I'm hopeful. Miracles happen.

But Mandela had been in the struggle already for most of his life — some of it in violent resistance to the apartheid regime. His life, in some ways, is an exemplar of that early American idea that rebellion to tyrants is obedience to god. He

fought, he resisted — and when a humane, peaceful, and democratic transition was possible instead, he embraced it and helped make it happen.

That's my hope. That somehow out of the gangster wrack and ruin of this nation, we can find a way to pull out a miracle and help America — a better America — be reborn.

But not this — not what we see in Minnesota. What we see there, and saw in Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere (and may apparently soon see in New York City) is cause to raise up that slogan “Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to god.” Our place is to resist. Our place is to actively support efforts to embrace the best of America's dreams and ideals, and to help make sure that whatever happens, what comes out the other side — eventually — is that America that is closer to the Beloved Community.

But I have no illusions. I wish — oh, how I wish that I could offer you shinier hope and optimism and paint a picture of how we were going to move right on into glory. But my job is not to lie to you.

My hope? My hope is the one that “... has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of the cobblestones in her hair, and just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go.”

Do you hear the people sing?

Singing a song of angry men?

It is the music of the people

Who will not be slaves again!

When the beating of your heart

Echoes the beating of the drums

There is a life about to start

When tomorrow comes!

That's where I find hope. And that hope cannot ever be defeated.

May it be so.