

**Here Comes the Sun**  
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**Lay Sunday, January 26, 2020**

I enjoyed planning the Lay Sunday service so much last year, that when I realized I would be doing it again this year, it led to some concern – what could I plan that could be even close to that much fun? Then I remembered: we will be in the gorgeously restored sanctuary by then! (This was back in the far, far, distant past – last spring, perhaps. And although it is now hard to remember these days, there was an expectation, at least among those as fundamentally optimistic as I am, that we would be opening the sanctuary on Christmas Eve. To be clear, LAST Christmas Eve, 2019.) As I imagined standing up on the chancel, I could just see it - light streaming in through the magnificent double-paned, energy efficient, art glass windows, reflecting on the fresh paint, the buffed pews, the new unscuffed floor. I could practically see the sunlight creating faux halos around the trustees, the Building Advisory Task Force, Galen, and everyone who gave to the capital campaign. It all became clear – I would select hymns and work with Alejandro to create music all about light, sunshine, morning, new beginnings. It was a beautiful, wonderful fantasy. But here we are. We are so close to being back in the sanctuary again, sooo close – but we are definitely still here. There were actually very few months in which even an optimist like myself really believed we would be back in the sanctuary by now, so I had plenty of time to take another course of action and abandon my vision of light. And yet, you have just heard “Here Comes the Sun,” the first song I imagined when I thought of this light-filled new sanctuary. What on earth was I thinking?

Well, as I thought about abandoning this theme of light and sunshine, I started to think of what it says, both to myself and to all of you, if I equate things not working out exactly as hoped with the abandonment of light. How can our negative attitudes, as well as our more positive hopes and beliefs affect not only our experience in the present, but also our future behaviors?

Neuroscientific research generally confirms the hypothesis that mental state and expectations can result in physical changes. The placebo effect,

when patients experience physical improvement when given a treatment with no pharmacological agents, has been shown to be the result of a complex series of neurotransmitters being released and greater activity in certain brain regions linked to moods, emotional reactions, and self-awareness - all caused by the person's belief that they are receiving a positive treatment. The human mind is a powerful source, and what it tells us profoundly affects us.

This power of the human mind works in both directions, so while a positive outlook can have a positive effect, a negative one can lead to profoundly negative effects. Scientists have shown that if an animal is classically conditioned to expect an unpleasant stimulus, after a period of time they will do nothing to avoid it, even if it is easy to do so. This phenomenon, termed learned helplessness, is also observed in people who over time come to believe that they have no control over their fate, and become resigned to negative situations even if there are changes they could enact that could create a positive result.

Earlier in this service, we were able to hear John Lennon's iconic anthem "Imagine." This song was clearly influenced by the artistic work of Yoko Ono, and in 2017 she was added to the credit for the lyrics, a mistake that Lennon was on the record as hoping to correct. Perhaps if she had been given more agency from the beginning, we could have avoided the one problem I always have with this lovely song - the exclusionary term "brotherhood of man" which is difficult to change without also adapting the earlier phrase "I wonder if you can." In my opinion, a combination of sexism and racism has led to an underappreciation of how much John was influenced by Yoko's work. When she and John first met, Yoko was already a respected conceptual artist who explored the themes of imagination, peace and dreams. She and John met when he visited an exhibition of her work at the Indica gallery in London in late 1966. One of her pieces required a person to climb a ladder all the way to the ceiling to use a magnifying glass to read a tiny word printed on a canvas there. The canvas said simply "YES." John remarked later that if it had said anything else, he likely would have left the gallery never to see her again. But that word - the simple positivity of it, was what created an instant attraction.

As John Lennon became viewed as a representative of peace and positivity, he and Yoko continued to work on artistic projects such as the song (and enormous billboard in Times Square in 1969) that proclaimed “War is Over (if you want it).” The idea that your own thoughts could create an actionable result - that’s classic Yoko.

Barack Obama, when running for office in 2008, became synonymous with the word “HOPE” through the iconic Shepard Fairey poster. On the surface, his candidacy seemed like a long shot in the beginning - he was a relatively young senator, a person of color, with a singular name. But if he and his campaign had decided from the outset that there was no hope, he wouldn’t have even gotten the nomination, much less the presidency - twice. But hope alone wasn’t enough. His call “Fired up!” (a mental state) led to the response “Ready to go!” (an action).

One of my favorite Broadway musicals of the past few years has been *Hadestown*, winner of 2019’s Tony Award for Best Musical. A retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, seemingly set in a New Orleans bar (and with music to match), it covers many themes: it has two love stories, one fresh and one jaded; an environmental allegory about bringing balance back to the earth; a commentary on totalitarian leaders who convince workers to build a wall that constructs their own prison while convincing them that it keeps them free; and a profound account of the ability of the human mind to affect change. Orpheus is described as having a special gift - the ability to see the world as it should be, in spite of the way that it is. This positivity gives him the courage to descend to the underworld to confront Hades and convince him to release Eurydice, who was compelled by her own hunger to accept Hades’ offer of a place where such needs didn’t exist. Orpheus is able to earn a chance to bring her back by singing a song that causes the workers building the wall to begin to have hope in their own ability to change. As Orpheus proclaims,

I believe if there is still a will  
Then there is still a way.

Note that the will itself isn’t enough - it is having the will that leads you to finding the way. This isn’t the idea that we are going to stand outside the Pentagon and force it to levitate through chanting. Nor it is pleasant

resignation, like the end of Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, where a group of people slowing dying on crosses begin singing the happy tune, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." (I recently learned from Eric Idle's biography that apparently this is the #1 requested song at funerals in the UK, which tells you a lot about the British sense of humor!). Instead, positive mindset leads to a belief in possibility, which then can lead to action.

David Byrne, in his current Broadway show *American Utopia*, holds a model of a human brain as he sings the first song. During the arc of the show, he manages to discuss the pruning of neurons during human growth and brain plasticity while singing catchy songs and ultimately delivering a message that is clear headed about many of the issues that we face while still showing a positive way forward.

In Byrne's penultimate song, "Hell You Talmbout" by the prodigiously talented Janelle Monae, call and response is used to ask the audience to repeat the names of black people taken down by police brutality and racist violence. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Amadou Diallo, Emmitt Till, and others are proclaimed over and over. Forcing the audience to recognize their value by saying their names can change attitudes, but the changed attitude needs to change behavior.

"Imagine," like *American Utopia*, asks us to dream of a more just, peaceful world – and yet we have to remember that these hopes and dreams are not enough. We have to be able to act, empowered by those positive emotions, while keeping negative self-defeating ones at bay.

In *Hadestown*, Orpheus is able to get the chance to return with Eurydice to the land of the living based on his ability to help others see the world as it should be. However, this myth serves as a cautionary tale of the power of the mind to turn against you.

Orpheus is allowed to lead Eurydice out of the underworld, but under the condition that he not look back. As they begin the journey the Fates, who represent the voices "always singing in the back of your head," begin to taunt him with

Who are you?

Who do you think you are?

Meanwhile, Eurydice is behind him singing

You are not alone  
I am right behind you  
And I have been all along  
The darkest hour  
Of the darkest night  
Comes right before the dawn

but Orpheus cannot hear her. As anyone who remembers fifth grade Greek myths will recall, just at the end of the journey before emerging from the underworld, the doubts in his head overwhelm him and he turns to look at her - in the process, sending her away from him forever.

So here we are, in so many ways - here in "the dungeon" as well as in our country - feeling perhaps that we are in the darkest hour of the darkest night, but it could be that dawn is almost here. If nothing else, as we sit here in this space rather than the magnificently light and renovated sanctuary we dream of, we have to remember that, as John Lennon said in a later song, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." While we have been planning for the new sanctuary our life has been happening here.

The darkest hour of the darkest night is often right before the dawn. We might be almost there, so let's fill our hearts with hope for this church, for this country, and for this world as we work together to make them better. And let's all raise a cup as Orpheus did before he let his doubts overcome him:

"Here's to the world we dream of, and the one we live in now."