

ENDLESS JOURNEY
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

In case you haven't heard, the end of poverty is in sight, perhaps as soon as 2025, that is, according to Jeffrey Sachs who happens to know more than most people about the complexities and causes of poverty and the realistic possibilities for ending it.

It is not inevitable. But it is possible. For instance, educating girls in third world countries reduces fertility rates, which in turn reduces stress on finite natural resources. Smaller households also mean more money to save and invest. That's one of many practical possibilities for ending poverty.

Yes, ending poverty is possible. Yet knowing what we know about the power of greed, fear, prejudice and ignorance, we have reasons to be skeptical. Skeptical, yes; hopeless, no. There is more to this world than meets the eye.

As the lesson from Hebrews 11 puts it: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

There's more to this world than meets the eye. The world can't explain itself. There's something more, something mysterious that defies definition. Clues abound but there is no solid proof.

Nearly 4000 years ago our great ancestors Abraham and Sarah noticed something new and novel in their heart. In terms of evolution it was a leap in human consciousness. We don't know if they were the first to recognize it, but for us in the Judeo Christian tradition they are the icons of that discovery.

They discovered a never dreamed of possibility. It was a promise or dream that fierce tribalism could be overcome, that humanity could find a way to bless all families and nations of the whole earth. As it turned out, that promise would prove elusive. Those who embraced it over the millennia, including Jesus, found themselves on an endless journey, a journey that requires faith and persistence. Which brings us back to the first lesson.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked for the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Even though he was old, by faith he received power of procreation because he considered the Holy One who had promised faithful. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and welcomed them. Hebrews 11:8-13

That "power of procreation" was not merely biological. It was spiritual. The power of this promise would "procreate," which is to say, would inspire the hearts of millions—

as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand by the seashore. That promise would transcend religions and cultures.

This past week I've been reading *The End of Poverty* by Jeffrey Sachs. In the process I got a crash course on global standards of living and historic economic dynamics. Sachs is the director of "The Earth Institute" at Columbia University and advisor to the UN and many governments.

It was news to me that until the 18th century most people lived in relative poverty, not *destitute* poverty, but in conditions that by today's standards looks like poverty. Our pre-modern ancestors may have had more leisure time than our own rat race societies but that was about the only advantage. So if leisure time is the highest goal for human beings than we have regressed badly in the past 250 years.

If, however, the measurement of the good life includes more than leisure time, then there has been considerable progress over the past 250 years. Since the 18th century—despite many exceptions—health care, educational opportunities, communications, transportation, farming techniques, and nutrition have greatly increased along with thousands and thousands of useful inventions. I also learned that prior to the 18th century, significant inventions were few and far between. But when science and technology married, a thousand inventions bloomed including the atomic bomb.

Today (August 8) we are between two grim commemorations: the 65th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 and the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9. Those two dates stand as warnings that *enlightened human reason alone cannot overrule destructive passions that lead to war*. And to think the atomic bomb is a "firecracker" compared to the nuclear arsenals held by a dozen nations.

Still, there are many reasons to hope.

The 18th century Enlightenment brought us the powerful principles of government by the consent of the governed, the equality of all people, and the divine right not of kings and queens but the divine right of all people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. From that day on governments have had to pass a performance test on how they treat their citizens. The Enlightenment was another milestone on the endless journey begun long ago by Abraham and Sarah.

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According to Sachs, roughly 5/6ths of the world's 6 billion people are better off than ever before. 1/6th, in fact, are doing very, very well. 4/6th are doing pretty well, with at least one foot on the lower rung of the economic ladder, a ladder provided in many cases by foreign textile shops and machine assembly plants.

Unfortunately, the bottom 1/6th is worse off. That is to say, there are more destitute people now than ever before, nearly all living in "failed states." For this bottom 1/6th, the economic ladder is not even in sight.

What would it take to end poverty? According to Sachs, not just "hands-out," or charity, that's for sure. According to Sachs, private investment is the key to success. But before foreign corporations will invest, governments need to provide certain basic infrastructures and democratic institutions plus clean and ethical governance. And that's

where the United Nation's "Millennial Development Goals" come in.

If the richest nations simply fulfilled their promises made at numerous conferences over that past 35 years, the under developed nations would have a decent chance. Many well-off nations have pledged 7/10ths of a percent of GNP but as yet few nations, including our own, have fulfilled their public promises.

Many Americans are shocked to learn how little our government donates to struggling nations. According to polls, a majority of Americans think our government donates at least 20% to foreign aid. As a matter of fact, it's well below 1%.

We can do better. But as it turns out, our nation has made a huge strategic choice. We have chosen to protect ourselves from terrorism primarily by military action or military intimidation. Thus our military budget exceeds the military budgets of all other industrial nations combined.

A nation's budget is not unlike a household budget. If you found yourself spending 30% of household income on security systems and next to nothing feeding or educating your children, you'd probably think something was awry, seriously wrong. But when households or nations are terrified, reason goes out the window. And, as you know, there are lobbies in this nation that capitalize big time on our fears. Certain forces in our nation have vested interests in keeping us very, very afraid.

President Bush eventually came to see and say: "Persistent poverty and oppression can lead to hopelessness and despair. And when governments fail to meet the most basic needs of their people, these failed states can become havens for terror."

When President Bush proposed (in his State of the Union Address) \$15 billion over five years to address the AIDS epidemic in Africa, he received a standing ovation from both political parties, as if to say, yes and amen, that's what we and our nation believe is right. But even though the American people want our government to give more aid, politicians are afraid to cast such votes in part because they believe the American people are afraid of losing their privileged economic status.

Are we afraid?

That question brings us to the gospel lesson for today. Jesus said, *fear not*. When you consider giving up some of your wealth and abundance to others, *fear not*.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man, the Human One, is coming at an unexpected hour." Luke 12:32-40

In other words, those who follow Jesus must be vigilant, never tiring on the endless journey to build the Beloved Community on earth. Opportunities to be "truly human" often arise suddenly and then disappear. Which is why we pray day in and day out: *Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; may your desire for all your children come to pass on earth. Help us resist the temptation to keep it all for ourselves.*

Yes, it seems like an endless journey. It is, in fact, a long journey beset by hardships and doubts. It sure helps to walk together.