

And Now What?

FRODO: I can't do this, Sam.

SAM: I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy. How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?

But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer.

Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. Because they were holding on to something.

FRODO: What are we holding on to, Sam?

SAM: That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

The election is over. Some of the results feel hopeful; some feel discouraging.

And now what? Did the election do enough? Will the end be happy? Can our country go back to the way it was? Would we even want it to?

The country we have – that we have had, at least – was built upon many stories. Inspirational, formational stories.

Stories of people who faced incredible obstacles, formidable odds, who could have turned back, who were probably tempted to just give up, and who didn't – because they were holding on to the good in the world, every bit and shred of good they could see and dream of.

Plymouth Rock: We have stories of early pilgrims to these shores, who traveled to an unknown continent so that they could follow their own conscience in matters of faith.

Lexington and Concord: We have stories of early patriots who believed they could have a say in their own government.

Gettysburg: Stories of men and women – yes, there were women – who fought a bitter Civil war because they believed the federal government has a duty to protect the rights of all people to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, no matter the color of their skin?

Stonewall: Stories of gay and lesbian and gender non-conforming people who held on tight to the belief that someday, someday, they could be seen as full people with worth and dignity and rights, and just never stopped fighting and working toward that day.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge: Stories of black people who just wouldn't give up, though they were beaten and hosed and set upon by dogs, because they were holding on to a dream in which every child has the same opportunity no matter the color of their skin.

Cape Canaveral: Stories of scientist and military people and government officials working together to reach beyond our little sphere and explore space for the first time.

Berlin: Stories of people affirming their right to cross borders freely by tearing down a wall that had kept families separated for decades.

Standing Rock: Stories of Native Americans daring to dream that they had the right to protect the water that their health and livelihood depends on. Though they have had severe setbacks, they have not given up.

This is just a small sample of the stories that are embedded in our culture, stories that we may hold on to, stories that speak to us now, today, in these challenging times.

It's not always easy to take hope and courage from the stories of our heritage. The world outside can seem such a cold and bitter place, and here inside it can feel there are few things to console us, to give us hope.

Rev. Jake Morill, on the Sunday after the 2016 election, wrote:

On Monday, everything in the rural counties north of Knoxville was on fire. Or seemed like it: a dry yellow fog settled into the valley, carrying a bitter scent. Tennessee state forestry officials reported 20 wildfires. Most of the fires, they said, were from arson. On Election Day, there was an air alert. The fires went on. One burned down a hundred acres of woods. Who would have gone and done something like that? What made them want to go out and lash out and burn it all down? What fueled such great anger? What made these lost souls not know what on earth is worth saving? A friend said maybe arson wasn't the only reason for all the harm done. Maybe some was from carelessness.

This morning, where I live, the smoke has cleared away. But in our nation, a bitter fog has settled in, making it hard to breathe; hard to see. Countless of us greet the day still in something like shock, wondering what led so many in our democracy to want to go out and lash out and burn it all down. Wondering how much could be traced back to carelessness. Wondering how many lives are at risk —and how on earth we will live.

Despite some hopeful news from the election results, there are still people who lash out and destroy. Last night I went to the Circle of Friendship at Congregation B'nai Shalom in Westboro, with several others from First Parish and I would guess at least a hundred others from Westboro and surrounding towns. There were people from government,

faith leaders from a wide variety of traditions, law enforcement officers, and a wide variety of people from every walk of life, who showed up to give a message of solidarity and support to our Jewish neighbors and friends. I handed out many letters of friendship that were written by members of First Parish, and people received them with tears in their eyes.

We went to say, you are not alone.

We went to let them know we will show up for them if they need us.

We wanted to send more than thoughts and prayers for the Jewish people who died in the mass shooting in Pittsburg just days ago.

It was very heartening to see so many who came out in a downpour to offer this message and to sit and pray and sing with our Jewish neighbors who feel vulnerable and threatened at this time.

And yet, the reason we felt moved to do so is horrifying.

In her remarks at the service last night, Rabbi Rachel mentioned that we are on day 318 of this calendar year. In that time, there have been 307 mass shootings in America.

Many are asking, Is this still the country I love? Is this still my land, my America?

Many Americans have asked this question for years – for decades – for centuries.

Where is That America of Mine? Latina Ariel Dorfman asks.

Where is the America of “as I would not be a slave so I would not be a master,”
the America of “this land is our land, this land was meant for you and me,”
the America of all men, and all women, every one of us on this ravaged, glorious
earth of ours, all of us, created equal?

“America never was America to me,” Langston Hughes says in his poem, “Let America Be America Again.” And yet, this black man whose rights were never fully realized in this country, goes on to say

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

That is the story that animated all he did.

On Oct. 18, newscaster Dan Rather posted this on his Facebook page:

I have read so many comments of people who are at the brink of despair, who say they don't recognize this country anymore, who make historical references to some of the darkest eras in world history. I understand all of this and yet I say, do not give up or give in.

This is still your America.

Look to the thousands of passionate candidates who are inspired and seeking to serve at all levels of national, state, and local government. This is still your America.

Look to the teachers, social workers, nurses, and all the others who spend long, difficult, hours to make this country better. This is still your America.

Look to those marching, and organizing, and volunteering, and digging deep within themselves to create a nation with less racial, social, and economic injustice. This is still your America.

Look to all the people who say it is not right that our fellow Americans should be hungry, or forgotten, or scared. This is still your America.

Look to the artists, the mentors, the dreamers. This is still your America.

Look to the innovators of alternative energy, the scientists unlocking the mysteries of our universe, the poets who channel the human spirit into words. This is still your America.

Look to professional soldiers and their families — so few sacrificing so much in service of the country. This is still your America.

Look to the city bus driver who waits patiently for an elderly rider, the crossing guard who gives the children a bright smile, the doctor who volunteers to treat the homeless, the ranger in a national park who introduces a city kid to the wonder of tall trees. This is still your America.

This *is* my America.

This is the beauty in the world that I want, I need to remember.

Part of our America, too, are these beautiful stories that just happened this week:

- Ayanna Pressley became our state's first black woman elected to Congress. Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and Ilhan Omar in Minnesota won their races for House seats, becoming the first Muslim women elected to Congress. And Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids will become the first female indigenous candidates heading to the House of Representatives after wins in New Mexico and Kansas.
- Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress.
- As of Friday, more than 100 women had been declared winners in the 435 House races — nearly three dozen more than are serving in the current Congress. But while only about 10 percent of the House was female after the 1992 election, the Congress seated in January will be nearly a quarter female.
- A record number of LGBTQ lawmakers were elected at all levels. Senator Tammy Baldwin was re-elected to the U.S. Senate. Jared Polis became the first openly

gay man to be elected governor in the United States. Oregon Governor Kate Brown, the first LGBTQ governor in history, was re-elected. Sharice Davids became the first gay Native American lawmaker in Congress. And a record number of out LGBTQ candidates were elected and re-elected to the U.S. Congress.

- Here in Massachusetts voters upheld non-discrimination protections for transgender people in public spaces.
- The people of Florida approved a constitutional amendment to automatically restore voting rights to people with felony convictions once they complete their sentences, a historic expansion of the right to vote to about 1.4 million people.
- After casting their ballots, women flocked to Susan B. Anthony's grave in Rochester, New York, to show their gratitude for her service to the women's suffrage movement, placing "I Voted" stickers on her headstone.
- There is some good in this world. And it's worth fighting for.

May the memory of that beauty in the world give us courage to keep working to Let America Be America Again. Langston Hughes challenges us:

From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

May it be so!