

Myth and Truth

The Rev. Dr. Douglas A. Hill
Lead Pastor
Abiding Hope Church - ELCA
Littleton, Colorado

January 21, 2021

I, like many of you, have been spending a great deal of time pondering the events at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. How did we get to this place? Was the angry mob and riot a singular event resulting from misinformation regarding the election results or is something greater happening in our nation? What do we need to do not only to heal but to work to ensure that things like this don't happen again?

My reflections have led me to the confluence of the roles of truth and myth within society. I'm defining truth here to mean factual information related to proven data and evidence. I'm defining myth as an unprovable meta-narrative or grand, over-arching story used by human beings to create identity, purpose, and meaning. In my opinion, what we've been experiencing within our American society is a result of both mistruth and manipulative myth telling.

Certainly, telling the American people mistruths about the election results fomented the anger and animosity of many Americans. However, I don't believe that the mistruths regarding the election were alone responsible for the events of January 6, 2021. For more than four years, Donald Trump had been fueling a myth within white America that "our country is being taken from us." This meta-narrative had been building for decades as many white Americans, especially white males, have felt displaced and dispossessed from their roles within American society.

Those who stormed the Capital were not chanting "Trump won the election," they were chanting, "This is our country. This is our house." The protesters in Charlottesville in 2017 quoted the Nazi cries of "Blood and Soil" and "Jews will not replace us." These statements demonstrate belief in the idea that whites are being displaced and dispossessed within the American context.

We must understand that we cannot combat myth only with fact, as myth/story provides identity, purpose, and meaning in places where science and fact cannot reach. It is impossible for any of us to *prove* to an adherent of a particular myth that their story is wrong. The only thing that can replace myth is a better myth, a better story.

Consider Christianity... I cannot prove that God exists. Nor can I prove that the resurrection occurred. I can't even prove that there was ever a Jesus. All we have is a story and an invitation to believe the story. If we believe the story/myth, it then defines our identity (I am a child of God), our purpose (we strive to share God's love with all), and meaning (even though adversity and challenge exist, we trust that love and life win through the risen Christ). None of this can be

empirically proven. Only believed. You cannot move me away from my Christian faith by trying to prove to me that it's not historically factual or provable. The only thing that could challenge my faith is a more alluring, convincing, or promising story/myth.

The great 20th Century theologian Paul Tillich in *The Courage to Be* makes the case that “the *thing* to which you entrust tomorrow is your god.” Tillich is referring to the many things into which human beings place trust to provide for their needs, existence, and well-being. Both facts/truth and myth play important roles in such things. It's important for me to recognize what the information from my physical examination (weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, etc.) means in regard to my well-being. And, it's equally important for me to be aware of how my beliefs also affect my well-being. Psychologist Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania has generated empirical data demonstrating that persons who have healthy personal relationships (feel loved), believe and participate in something greater than themselves, spend time serving others, and live generously generally have greater well-being than those who don't have such things. What we believe matters because our beliefs define us and influence our life orientation.

There is a significant number of people in our country right now who *believe* that their country is being taken away from them. This belief is not based in fact. It's based in personal experience. They feel it. Certainly, each who feels this way will point to events in their own lives or in the lives of friends or family members that appear to reinforce their feelings and beliefs. In any case, such beliefs have become solidified and confirmed by the previous President of the United States. The myth has begun to feel like fact. We must combat such a situation with both truth/facts AND a better myth.

To quell the unrest and violence, those of us in leadership roles must be able to tell a better story than the current narrative of white displacement so that people can repent (metanoia=change mind) of the old and believe in the new. Because even though the currently divisive myth may go dormant under the pressures of the new administration or law enforcement, it will continue to germinate beneath the soil until the next vociferous leader adds the fertilizer bringing the seedling of fear, anger, and hatred into full bloom once again.

Let's learn from the 1923 Beerhall Putsch in Munich which was the Nazi's failed attempt to overthrow a political party. The perpetrators were arrested and sentenced. During his time in prison, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* with the assistance of Rudolph Hess. The Nazi movement had been slowed, but it was developing underground until finally rising to full power in 1933. The myth of the Nazi's was remarkably similar to the myth being held within white America today, “our country is being taken from us; we are being displaced.”

Unless we can couple fact and myth, tell the truth while providing a new holistic, inclusive, mutually beneficial story for who America is and where America is going, this insidious fear, anger, and hatred will continue to exist and grow. I am holding our nation and every leader in my prayers as we navigate through this incredibly difficult yet critical point in our shared history. May God bless us all, everyone!!!