



**“Alternate Realities” – Sermon by Eric Liu  
Civic Saturday – January 14, 2017  
Washington Hall, Seattle**

Our first reading today, from Walt Whitman, is perhaps best known for a single line: “Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion.” This is not just a line celebrating American diversity and pluralism. It is a line about metaphysics, about how each part contains the whole. It is a line about how the infinite spectrum of human possibility – possible lives, possible selves, possible futures – resides here and now in *each* of us.

“The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.”

I love that. And I want to talk with you today about this idea, this suggestion of alternate simultaneous realities.

As a quantum physicist might joke, alternate realities are *everywhere* these days. (Sorry; it’s a little early in the morning for a quantum physics joke). But really, they do seem to be all around us now, in our culture and our politics alike.

Over the holidays, Jená and I fell into the alternate reality of a show called *The Man in the High Castle*. It’s on Amazon Prime in its second season, and is itself about alternate realities. It’s based on a Philip K. Dick sci-fi novel in which the Nazis and the Japanese Empire won the Second World War and divvied up the territory of what used to be the United States, leaving a no-man’s-land in the Rocky Mountains.

That premise alone is very chilling. It’s jarring to watch an all-American family in a suburban 1959 home with their dad, John Smith ... who comes down to breakfast wearing a spit-shined, squared-away black-and-silver SS uniform and is addressed by his driver as *Obergruppenfuhrer* Smith. But it’s especially jarring now, when we have a president-elect who won’t hesitate to lash out at John Lewis or the Pope or Meryl Streep but just cannot bring himself to disavow white nationalists and whose election was aided by Russia and cheered by neo-Nazis and authoritarians. As I say, chilling.

Nevertheless, the show is great. *The Man in the High Castle*. And what makes it great is not just the imaginative leap of its historical premise. What makes it great is that many of the characters, starting with a frail and paranoid Adolf Hitler, are freaking out because

strange, subversive films are appearing out of nowhere that show a different world: a world in which the Americans, not the Germans, developed the A-bomb first; in which it was Hiroshima and not Washington that was leveled by that bomb; in which FDR was never assassinated and in which Hitler committed suicide; in which San Francisco is not the capital of the Japanese Pacific States but is a hub of baseball, jazz, and beat poets.

Both the regime and the resistance are trying to get their hands on these films but no one knows where they're coming from. They're too detailed to be fakes. As a viewer, as someone primed for science fiction, you begin to wonder: did they drop in from some other quantum reality? Has the veil between this universe and another been pierced? Who has broken through?

Well, I hope I've sold you on the show. It's an imagination-bender, because it gives you the exhilarating sense that *you* could be the one to break through. And so was another work of fiction that I consumed hungrily over the holidays: Colson Whitehead's new novel *The Underground Railroad*.

On the surface, it's a straight narrative about an enslaved woman in 1830s Georgia who flees from her plantation and is aided by many people along the way in her escape from slavery. But its genius is that it takes the metaphor of the Underground Railroad literally. So Cora, the main character, finds herself literally going underground and entering vast tunnels built by *who knows who* and taking powerful locomotives in an unknown unseen network from North Carolina to Tennessee to Indiana to freedom. And what this simple, subtle device does is it makes you wonder what our world would look like if we actually did make the subterranean yearnings, the metaphors and symbols cherished by all those who labor under oppression, into *reality*.

So that's what I did over Christmas break. I left this world for a while. But break is over, isn't it? We are, as they say, "back to reality." And yet even *this* reality is about alternate realities. Consider the 24-hour period this week when we saw the jagged, stomach-churning contrast between President Obama's inspiring and earnest farewell address, in which he tried to awaken us to our responsibilities as citizens, and Donald Trump's cynical first press conference post-election, in which he tried to discredit reports that Russia had blackmail-worthy videos of him and, more troublingly, that his campaign had colluded with the Putin regime to undermine American policy.

Both halves of that day were enough to make you cry.

That same day, as we found ourselves fluctuating between a president and a president-elect, I *personally* experienced a similarly disorienting immersion into two very different worlds. First I had coffee that morning with my friend Sarah Jaynes, who runs the Progress Alliance, a statewide network of progressive donors who invest in organizations that promote social and economic justice.

Sarah has been doing activism and civic engagement since she was 6, when she was writing letters to President Jimmy Carter. All her remembered life, she has been fighting for inclusion and fairness. Which is maybe why, as we were sitting at the Hi-Spot coffee shop, and she was talking about the recommitment she and the Progress Alliance were making to their work, her eyes welled with tears. They were not, by my reckoning, tears either of hopelessness *or* resolve. They were tears simply of love: love for the ideals of this country, love for her work, love for this life, which cannot be taken for granted.

An hour later I was en route to Dallas. And there I went to meet a son of Mount Vernon, Washington. A man who endured a childhood of great trial and trauma, including the death under mysterious circumstances of his mother. A man who never managed to get a college degree but who hustled his way into a medium where he could find his voice, and along the way found a stabilizing faith through the Mormon Church. A man who now works in a giant studio building, like a Hollywood set, and has become one of the modern era's most powerful and effective political communicators. And a man who now, a multimillionaire and a few years into grandparenthood, is asking anew what it's all about. That man is named Glenn Beck.

Most everyone knows who he is, and how much damage he has done to civic and political life by being for so many years an inflammatory right-wing radio and television host, most notoriously on Fox News for many years. And most everyone in this room today is probably thinking *What the F? Glenn Beck?*

Well, let me share with you why I went and what I learned, and then return to this idea of alternate realities.

## WHY I WENT

If you've been following the media in the last couple of years and especially in the last few months, you know Glenn Beck is in the midst of an interesting metamorphosis. He has very publicly, in mainstream media outlets, disavowed some of his most egregious past statements. He has apologized for being a prime creator of our polarized, scorched-earth political culture. He has said he now understands and appreciates Black Lives Matter. He rejected Trump during the primaries and has consistently warned about the authoritarian dangers of a Trump presidency. He has joined with the liberal comic talk-show host Samantha Bee in a televised segment about searching for a way to undo the damage he's done and to rehumanize politics and combat Trumpism.

As I watched this shift, I thought, here I've stood at this very lectern talking about the need to rehumanize those with whom we disagree. Why not put my money where my mouth is? Why not engage Glenn Beck? So I asked my friend Matt Kibbe, who was an early Tea Party leader and now runs a libertarian organization called Free the People, if he would introduce me to Beck's team. He did. I talked on the phone with Beck's trusted

lieutenant, Jon Schreiber, who runs his media business. We talked about how much we disagreed about the role of government. Yet we talked about how much we agreed that the role of the citizen, especially today, is to take more responsibility for problems and to learn how to make change with skill and with principle. And at the end of that call Jon invited me to come down to Dallas to spend some time with him and Glenn.

That's how I found myself on Wednesday morning sitting on one of the soft comfy couches on Glenn Beck's set, the kind of couch where you can do a TV show viewed by millions while wearing jeans and an old cowboy shirt, and I sat across from Glenn Beck, who was wearing jeans and an old cowboy shirt. The cameras and microphones were off. And Glenn and Jon and I began a conversation that went well past the hour we'd allotted. He was warm, down-to-earth, funny, and inquisitive. He started by asking me, in all sincerity, how I could square my progressive philosophy with a belief in the individual. By instinct, I began with Whitman. I had a thought ready to unspool about how Whitman's life and poetry remind us so vividly that there is no such thing as an individual disconnected from a society, and that governments help create the social context within which the individual can thrive and become his or her fullest self.

But before I could get going, Beck smiled and pointed at the coffee table between us. I hadn't even noticed but right there in front of me was a photo of Whitman in old age, sitting on top of a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Glenn and I nodded at each other. Then I finished unspooling my answer, and from there we were off on a discussion that was sometimes political, sometimes personal, and throughout, very candid.

We quickly got to definitions. In his book, "progressive" means someone who wants to use the government to make everyone else do what *he* wants to do. Which means Donald Trump is as dangerous a progressive as Barack Obama. In my book, "progressive" means someone who believes that American life is about closing the gap between our stated ideals and our actual condition, rather than being resigned to the status quo. Government exists to help us close that gap.

But just as Jon Schreiber and I had over the phone, Glenn Beck and I found ourselves agreeing that this is the age of citizen power, whether you're looking at the Tea Party or Black Lives Matter, and that the more that ordinary citizens are equipped to make decisions and make change, the better. He and I sit at such distant points along the spectrum from libertarian to communitarian, from belief in minimalist to maximalist government, but we agree that civic life cannot be just one or the other. Democracies are gardens, I said. Citizens are gardeners. And gardening is about *degrees* of letting nature run its course. As a native Northwesterner, he understood just what I was saying.

We talked about the difference between liberty and freedom, and I told him about one of my favorite books, called *Liberty and Freedom*, by the Brandeis historian David Hackett Fischer. The book lays out the history of these two ideas, and makes the argument that these are two *different* ideas, even though Americans have always conflated them.

*Liberty* has roots in Latin and signifies a status of non-dependence and an absence of obligations in a hierarchical society. *Freedom* has roots in Old Norse and Icelandic and arises from the bands of self-governing tribesmen for whom being free meant being bonded to others in a community that kept danger at bay. Both Glenn and Jon were deeply interested in this, and when I told them that the book is mainly about icons, symbols, and images, from liberty trees and liberty poles and liberty bells to Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer, they got fired up and made a note to get the book.

And before long we got to a deeper level, the spirit level. I told him about a book I've described at past Civic Saturdays called *Bonds That Make Us Free*. It's by C. Terry Warner, a BYU organizational behavior professor who described a simple universal human cycle of "I *accuse* you to *excuse* me." Which then got us to the shift Beck is now making so publicly, and the way he is trying to break his own circuit of "accuse-to-excuse" – the very circuit that spun him into power and fueled his success.

We agreed that most people most of the time don't know *what they believe or why*. And they don't have opportunity to figure it out. Then I told him about all of you – about this Civic Saturday experiment we are creating together. I told him about this simple structure of a gathering, this civic analogue to church, where people find fellowship in song, sermon, and civic scripture. He was intrigued. We talked about how he chose to become a Mormon and how I chose to become a believer in the American creed, and how neither of us believes that belief of any kind should ever be too sure of itself.

And here at last we got to the power of example. Beck is now trying to *model* a different way of being, in real time, even as he is *inventing* it. He's trying to show his audience and his base of followers that it's possible to be a different kind of person forming a different kind of reality. He wants to learn from me – from you – and others on the left. He wants to disagree with me in a way that everyone else can learn from: with respect and genuine openness. It's challenging. He can't get too far ahead of his base. He is a businessman and entertainer with many millions of dollars at stake. And I can't forget that for all his changes, he still supported Ted Cruz for president and we still disagree sharply about issues like the minimum wage. He still runs a media empire called The Blaze that still is home to flamethrowers and hyperbolic fearmongering.

But I do believe he is sincere in his desire to shift, to trip the circuit, as he put it. I believe he is interesting and thoughtful. And I intend to continue this conversation and see where it takes us, whether it's collaboration or simply having better arguments.

But all that I've told you here does not sum up what I truly learned from my time with Glenn Beck. That is what I'd like to turn to next.

WHAT I LEARNED

As I flew home from Dallas, digesting this unexpectedly enjoyable encounter, I realized three things. They aren't about Glenn Beck per se but are about the reality we find ourselves in six days before the inauguration of a nakedly dishonest, dishonorable man as our president.

First, I realized that empathy is not enough – you have to own responsibility for both the wrong you've done and for your role in the right that must be done.

Second, democracy is not enough – you have to cultivate virtue and moral clarity.

Third, resistance is not enough – you have to build something folks want to be part of.

Let me say a word about each of these learnings.

**Empathy is not enough.** In *New York* magazine a couple of weeks ago there was a fascinating feature on an experiment they conducted on radical empathy. Working with a nonprofit called Narrative 4, they paired off gun-rights champions, including the guy who shamelessly auctioned off the handgun George Zimmerman used to murder Trayvon Martin, with victims of gun violence, including the still-shattered mom of a boy killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. They asked the people in each pair to listen to the story of their counterpart. Then they asked them to inhabit the other person's story. To retell it to the rest of the group, not in the third person but in the first.

So the gun auctioneer had to say to the room, “/ love being a mother and / took my son to school that morning and / saw his little body shot through four times.” And the young black man from the South Side of Chicago had to become the black woman cop from Baltimore and say “/ was scared to be shot at by criminals, and scared to fire my own weapon because / didn't want to hurt the wrong person.”

Initially, this process was cathartic and transformative. Tears streamed and the participants were moved by the simple act of occupying another person's / – to enter an alternate reality. People on both sides said they could truly begin to understand the other on a deeper level. But before long, things broke down. Some folks were too deeply threatened by the exercise, and snapped back, doubling down on their original worldview and attitudes. Others were changed for a moment but as the magic wore off found themselves reverting to old talking points. The cohesion began to disintegrate.

In the wake of the presidential election there has been so much talk, some of it from me, about empathy. About liberal Seattleites stepping into the shoes of the Michigan Trump voter. About that Trump voter stepping into the shoes of the young Muslim immigrant. And so on. Empathy is better than no empathy, to be sure. I'm glad I'd read about Glenn Beck's childhood before I met the man. It helped me hear him and see him. But as the *New York* magazine story and experiment reminds us, empathy has its limits. You can't swap out identities. You shouldn't want to. What you *can* do is practice enough empathy

to become aware of your own failings and blind spots so that you can handle and even appreciate challenges to your worldview – and so that you can understand other people’s reactions when you challenge theirs.

But the key here is being willing to *challenge* each other. Now that I’ve spent time thinking about how that Trump supporter from the Rust Belt came to feel disenfranchised and forgotten and left behind, it’s time to for me to stop patronizing him and for him to stop pitying himself. It’s time to say that he is welcome to nurture his wounded ego but he is not welcome to do so at the expense of the rights and dignity of other Americans. It’s time to say that I have a part in how polarized and unequal our society has become, and so does he. And it’s time for me to challenge him to do better, and vice versa. It’s nice to enter another man’s reality. But it’s more important to take responsibility for the reality we now inhabit together.

This is what Glenn Beck is trying to do, and it’s what I want to join him on. Not a maudlin empathy tour, but a grown-up demonstration of how to push each other to be better, how to find the places where we can do things together and serve and love and work together, and how to fight with more wisdom and self-knowledge when we must fight.

This brings me to my second learning from my time with Beck, which is that **democracy is not enough**. Here’s what I mean. Donald Trump is the essential product of democracy: not technically, since he lost the popular vote and was elected via the Electoral College, an intermediary institution designed out of *mistrust* of democracy. But he’s the product of democracy in the sense that his tastes are low, his style is broad, his method is visceral. The fact that he is the stylistic and ethical opposite of Obama is in fact a big part of his appeal. Obama was almost too good. Admirable, self-controlled, nearly perfect. But not exactly *representative*. Trump is representative of something deeper and truer in our coarse and narcissistic popular culture and rapacious market economy. He is, more than Obama, a man of the people. And that is so not enough.

Here’s another sense of my meaning: democracy can yield terrible things. Democracy, when considered the opposite of autocracy, honors the value of freedom, and that’s to be cherished. But democracy as a method of decision-making is utterly value-neutral. It can be used to destroy freedom. It can be used to enshrine slavery.

This was the point at the heart of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858. Senator Stephen Douglas had a slippery way of cloaking pro-slavery sympathies in democratic principle. He preached “popular sovereignty.” What Douglas meant is that if the white settlers of the Nebraska territory voted to enter the Union as a slave state, then American democratic principle must honor that choice. The people (the white squatters, that is) were sovereign. Lincoln saw the danger of this argument and throughout those seven debates up and down the state of Illinois, he attacked it. No, he said. It’s not sufficient that the people democratically choose slavery and that we then ritualistically

say their decision is final. Somewhere, he said, there must be a moral reckoning. Somewhere it must be said that voting for an evil is evil.

Yes, democracy is better than not-democracy. But democracy alone guarantees nothing except that we can choose to imprison or degrade ourselves. We need to summon the moral clarity to distinguish between the will of the people and actual justice. We need instruction in that kind of moral discernment, and practice in speaking out against modern-day Stephen Douglasses. We need to be the next Abraham Lincolns. We need mediating institutions to help us do that, whether they are small circles of friends or formal classes or the kinds of clubs I talked about last sermon.

That's what this is, what we are trying to be here today. That's what I think Glenn Beck is trying to find his way toward. Donald Trump is the fusion of the lowest form of democracy and the lowest form of capitalism. The lowest form of "free choice" and popular sovereignty. Our job is to do better. To show that democracy, when coupled with ethics, with character, can yield something better.

Thus the third and final thing I learned after my time with Beck: **resistance is not enough**. The closer we get to Inauguration Day, the more the left and some on the right are becoming fixated on resistance. There is a romantic and purposeful vibe to the word. You think of Paris under swastika flags. You think of the Underground Railroad.

A show like *The Man in the High Castle* can give us the strange thrill of feeling like we're living out a grand and horrible prophecy. But let's not forget: we don't in fact live in *The Man in the High Castle*. America is sick but it is not a dystopia yet. We aren't forced to go underground. We are not part of a resistance under oppression. We who did not vote for Donald Trump are the great majority of Americans. We are citizens, and we are the rightful and necessary stewards of the liberties and freedoms of the Constitution.

We should start acting like it. That means that for every cause that will be dedicated to resisting Trump's most harmful plans, we need another one that will embody an *alternative affirmative* agenda. We need offense. We have to believe *in* something. We have to give others something to believe in. Glenn Beck, for all his stylistic and tonal shifts, believes in an affirmative philosophy of liberty and rights. I believe in an affirmative philosophy of community and responsibility. Between us and the likes of us there is an American fusion to be fashioned that people will want to be part of.

We have to show it's possible. And we have to start locally, where we can make our ideas tangible most immediately. It can be on wages or homelessness or funding our schools or reducing carbon emissions or closing prisons or welcoming refugees. We've got to create a beacon here so that across this land people will remember that the people are not powerless before this tainted, possibly treasonous king of the Big Lie. We are not the audience for a reality show. We are makers of our own reality.



## ALTERNATE REALITIES

So let me close today by returning to this idea of alternate realities.

I read something recently about how traumatic brain injuries can sometimes unleash what scientists call “hidden savants.” A guy who gets a concussion in a biking accident suddenly becomes a prolific composer, even though he’d shown neither interest nor skill prior to the accident. A woman injured in a car crash finds months later that she can draw by hand the most elaborate, detailed fractal images that usually a computer would create. A once shy and taciturn man becomes an eloquent public speaker. And so on.

What captured my imagination about this was both the speed and the depth of the transformation. In an instant, a human can discover that there was this whole other human inside: this hidden artist, scientist, preacher, healer, builder. And the elasticity of time makes the savant feel that the new self has always been there. As Emerson said in our final reading, it can take just “a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light or our life.” By the way, he wrote that line, that essay called “Experience,” in the immediate aftermath of the death of his child.

I’ve said it before: as it is with the body, so it is with the body politic. Our system of self-government has just suffered a traumatic brain injury, and this on top of decades of being obese and unfit and congested in every artery.

How terrible.

How potentially beautiful.

Who is the hidden civic savant we shall now discover? What is the untapped infinity of public selves and identities and realities that we will now unleash? It’s time for you now to discover that you’re a master organizer. A powerful orator. A magical listener. A brilliant strategist. A dogged advocate. A relentless squeaky wheel. You’ve been bonked hard on the head. It’s time for your civic imagination to spill forth.

The tagline for the new season of *Man in the High Castle* is, “The future belongs to those who change it.” It’s meant to sound ominous or sci-fi mystical. But I take it as a statement of self-evident fact. We can change the future. That’s why I want to propose an alternative way to think about alternate realities. See the word as a *verb*: **altern**ate**** realities. Change them. Toggle back and forth between and among them.

It is simultaneously true right now that American democracy is at its most fragile state in generations *and* that American democracy is more primed than ever for renewal.

It is simultaneously true that millions of our fellow citizens are becoming drones, programmed by people like Glenn Beck *used* to be to attack their enemies without thinking, *and* that millions of our fellow citizens are reprogramming themselves to understand our times better, to build bridges, to serve together and to fix things.

It is simultaneously true that you have an encrusted story of self that says you're not powerful, you're not a changemaker or a catalyst *and* that within you right now, waiting to be tapped, are an unlimited number of other possible selves and stories of self.

See with Whitman's eyes, Emerson's heart, and Lincoln's soul just how thin a margin separates one you from another, or me from Glenn Beck, or today's civic life from a better one. Pass through that thin margin. You don't need time travel or quantum mechanics to change the future. You just need commitment.

**Readings to Precede the Sermon**  
**January 14, 2017**

**Walt Whitman**  
**From *Leaves of Grass: Song of Myself, Section 16***  
**1891-92 edition**

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,  
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,  
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the  
Oconee I live,  
A Yankee bound by my own way ready for trade, my joints the limberest joints on earth  
and the sternest joints on earth,  
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deerskin leggings, a Louisianian or  
Georgian,  
A boatman over lakes or bays or along coasts, a Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye;  
At home on Kanadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen off  
Newfoundland ,  
At home in the fleet of ice-boats, sailing with the rest and tacking,  
At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the Texan ranch,  
Comrade of Californians, comrade of free North-Westerners, (loving their big  
proportions,)  
Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all who shake hands and welcome to  
drink and meat,  
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfullest,  
A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,  
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,  
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

(The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place,  
The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place,  
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.)

**Abraham Lincoln**  
**From the First Debate with Stephen Douglas**  
**August 21, 1858**

Judge Douglas is going back to the era of our Revolution, and to the extent of his ability, muzzling the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. When he invites any people willing to have slavery, to establish it, he is blowing out the moral lights around us. When he says he “cares not whether slavery is voted down or voted up,” – that it is a sacred right of self-government – he is in my judgment penetrating the human soul and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty in this American people.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**  
**From the Essay “Experience”**  
**1844**

We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life. We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart! it seems to say; there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power.