Conspiracies of goodness

When I fear a dystopian future, I hold on to stories of everyday resistance.

by Heidi Neumark in the November 2024 issue
Published on October 31, 2024

(Illustration by Martha Park)

The Holy Spirit moves at ground level. This is the vision of Matthew Heyd, the newly installed bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and it is repeated in every communication. This watchword has become a source of hope and, yes, grounding for me.

My sense is that by emphasizing the Spirit's ground-level movement, the diocese is lifting up the work of the local church, encouraging people as they emerge from COVID in trying and uncertain times. Their unglamorous, day in and day out ministry is holy, and it matters. That is a good and needful message. But for me, the words mean something more in this political climate.

Perhaps by the time this column sees print, the threatening storms on our political landscape will have blown away, showing clear skies ahead. But that's not what I see on the horizon. I fear for refugees and immigrants. I fear for my queer siblings, including my daughter Ana and her family. She's hurrying to adopt their youngest child, Ruby, because even though my daughter's name is on the birth certificate and she is married to Ruby's birth mom, she has no legal rights as Ruby's mother without adoption here in New York, a supposedly safer state. I fear for the transgender youth who come for shelter from around the world and from up the street, under siege even in New York City. I fear for those who depend on food stamps and Head Start. I fear for bees and watersheds and gorgeous colonies of coral.

I fear that I do not know how to halt what could turn into a death march before flag-waving crowds, not unlike those who marched my grandparents into a death camp in Nazi Germany. "The Holy Spirit moves at ground level" strikes me as a rallying cry before a potential dystopian future in which only ground-level—and underground—movement is possible.

One hope-filled example that comes to mind is what happened in the village of Le Chambon in Vichy France. Even if, like me, you are familiar with the story, you may find it helpful to return to it in these days. Three-year-old Ruby has Jell, the stuffed jellyfish she clings to wherever she goes. I find myself holding onto this story for dear life.

Le Chambon was a remote farming village of around 3,000 people. Andre Trocme arrived there in 1934 with the expectation that he would be the little church's last pastor. He was likely sent to this undesirable post because he was a declared

pacifist, a disrespected position. Neither the church nor the village showed any signs of viability. Nonetheless, this pastor led the church and village to become what was known as the safest place in Europe for refugees. Every house and farm became a sanctuary. How did this happen? Why did people risk their lives in daily acts of resistance against the Vichy government and the Nazis, saving the lives of more than 5,000 Jews?

From what I have read, Trocme engaged in three unremarkable pastoral activities: he preached, he visited homes, and he encouraged leaders (especially young ones). Yet he did these things in a way that transformed everything. He preached almost exclusively on the Beatitudes and the Good Samaritan. When the government issued an order for all Jewish refugees to be turned in, Trocme enjoined his congregation to resist: “We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to cooperate with this violence,” he said. “We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.”

In his sermons, Trocme never mentioned Hitler or the Nazis or the Vichy government by name. He helped the villagers answer the question “Who is my neighbor?” through loving acts like sharing food and shelter with the growing numbers of Jewish refugees who were arriving. The majority were children, and they were welcomed at the village school. Trocme’s wife, Magda, and his cousin, Daniel, created a network of safe places within the village for the children. One such child remembers: “They just accepted each of us, taking us in with warmth, sheltering children, often without their parents—children who cried in the night from nightmares.” Le Chambon became a center of organized resistance to hate through a series of daily on-the-ground, compassionate acts, ordinary acts that saved lives and required extraordinary courage.

Pastoral visitation was also key. Some called it “the kitchen struggle.” Trocme and other leaders sat down with families to converse about what it meant to be Christian, what the gospel required of them. Many families hid Jews in their homes. Others forged ID and ration cards. Still others helped Jews escape over the Swiss border. The Holy Spirit was moving at ground level, weaving a wide conspiracy of goodness.

Luke’s Beatitudes are part of a sermon Jesus preaches not on a mount but on a plain. He is at ground level. We might hear echoes of Isaiah: “The uneven ground shall become level, / and the rough places a plain. / Then the glory of the LORD shall

be revealed” (40:4–5). At that level place, Jesus declares God’s blessing upon those who are disregarded, dehumanized, or slated for extermination. He promises that in the end, God’s way of seeing will prevail. I cling to that promise and to the knowledge that for one glorious season, it did prevail in Le Chambon. It helps me to trust that such a conspiracy of goodness might prevail in the days ahead. It must.