

In the Midst of Darkness

Some of you may remember the musical from the 1960s called, “How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying.” It was a good comedy for its time. Totally not PC in today’s world, but I encourage you to rent it sometime.

Here is the refrain from one of its songs...

There is a Brotherhood of Man,
A Benevolent Brotherhood of Man,
A noble tie that binds
All human hearts and minds
Into one Brotherhood of Man

Unfortunately, our world today seems to have forgotten about the Brotherhood of Man. Friends, if you read the newspapers or watch the news on television, then you know the world is heading into dark times. Democracy throughout the world are in decline right now. Nationalist movements are on the rise everywhere with an “America-First”; Russia First; China First; Brazil First; Philippines First attitude that is causing cooperation among nations to be viewed as a bad thing by many people.

At a time when we should be breaking down walls, we’re building them up. Instead of reducing our nuclear arsenals, nations are now expanding them. [**MILITARY BUDGET**] While budgets in the United States to help the poor and disadvantage are static or shrinking; we’ve increased our military’s budget – one that is almost three times as much as China’s which has the second largest budget; and almost equal to the following eight nations combined!

[POLAR BEARS] Instead of working toward a plan to try and stop, or at least slow down global climate change, the US and other large contributors to the problem have a “you go first” impudent behavior [ISLANDS] while Island Nations sink into the oceans and immigrants suffering from droughts seek refuge in Europe and North America.

[JESUS] It is in today’s Gospel of Luke that Lynn Japinga, Professor of Religion, at Hope College in Michigan reminds us that as Jesus begins his ministry he is called to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed, but the wealthy and powerful hear the gospel as a threat to their way of life. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is bringing the fire of judgment, and Japinga says the result for Jesus will be a baptism, or literally an immersion, in stress and conflict. He brings a message of peace, but it will cause division.

Jesus knew that his Way was not the world’s way. The wealthy and powerful do not necessarily want the world to be like the Way of Jesus because they may profit from the poverty and oppression of others. The transforming power of God’s holy love will be met with hostility. The disciples of Jesus, then and now, should not be surprised by this. Peaceful strategies provoke conflict and hostility, because they threaten those in power. We’ve seen this in our history.

[SUFFRAGISTS] One hundred years ago, when suffragists were trying to get the vote for American women, a small group of women would stand in front of the White House with signs protesting the lack of the right to vote. [SUFFRAGISTS 2] As they stood there, day after day, their presence aroused enormous rage. They were heckled and attacked. Many were arrested and given long prison sentences. [ALICE] Alice Paul, one of the key leaders, went on a hunger strike to protest the abusive conditions that the prisoners endured. She was forcibly fed, out of fear that her resistance was creating too much support. The world did not

want to hear judgment on its sexism, so the suffragists were jailed and silenced.

[CC 1] During the First World War, conscientious objectors were given the job of stretcher bearer, which meant that they went out to the battlefield to retrieve the bodies of the dead and wounded.

[CC POSTCARD] They were harassed and despised by civilians and fellow soldiers on both sides of the war and were frequently killed despite being unarmed and engaged in works of mercy. [CC 2] The world did not want to hear judgment on its warfare, so conscientious objectors were ridiculed and punished.

[ATHLETES] We see this even today, when athletes kneel during the playing of the national anthem as a means of protesting the deaths of unarmed people of color who are killed by police officers. The world does not want to hear judgment on its police officers, so athletes and people of color who are willing to speak out or take a knee are called names, fined or fired.

[JESUS TEACHING] Professor Japinga reminds us that Jesus brought a message of empowerment and encouragement to those who were oppressed, but what comforts the afflicted also tends to afflict the comfortable. That is the double edge of judgment. Jesus was trying to straighten out the injustice of a deformed world that valued power and money. [PHARISEES] The world did not want to hear this kind of judgment, and so Jesus was crucified.

[BLACK] But death did not have the last word because God was doing a new thing. The resurrection of Jesus began to make the world straight. The world couldn't understand that the people who stood up to injustice, believed that righteousness would finally dwell in the earth, and that they were called to participate in bringing that righteousness into reality, no matter how much resistance they encountered. They

could be jailed, or even killed, but they could not be silenced. The judgment of God will indeed make the world straight.

Abigail Kocher, Pastor of a United Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia points out that the words Jesus offers about fathers and sons and mothers and daughters being set against one another echo a lament of the prophet Micah. Jesus is sharing Micah's lament of the distrust and brokenness within the families of Israel. Micah understood these rifts as a sign of Israel's brokenness as a people. They were a people in need of restorative healing. Jesus is not applauding their pain but lamenting their sorrow. He is lamenting on behalf of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, and also on behalf of the people as a whole. Brothers and Sisters, I believe our nation is in that same situation today. [DIVIDED NATION] Our Lord is lamenting that same sadness for America because we have become a nation divided. Our families; our political system; and our ecological system is in distress and we need the help of our Creator to resurrect us as a people.

I refer you to the [quote by Charles Tobias](#) in your bulletin,

“Darkness is everywhere, but God doesn't give in to the darkness, not even when we do. God comes to us in the midst of darkness and offers us light and hope.”

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is pointing out to those around him that he is creating something new. He implores his disciples to look closely and to see beneath the surface, but he fears that even those closest to him may miss what is really happening. He urges his disciples, then and now, to glimpse that something new is happening that is not yet finished. It is a pivotal time.

[LUKE] In Luke 4:43 Jesus proclaims “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose”. But, he understands that the news he is sharing is not uniformly “good” for everyone.

Janet James, Pastor at Gayton Kirk Presbyterian Church in Virginia explains that the intensity of his speech is fueled by Jesus’ confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees,... and his exasperation with those in the crowd who still do not understand the kingdom of God as he is living it and describing it. He is passionate. He is no-nonsense. His message is urgent. He is marking hard boundaries and calling for people to make up their minds now about where they will stand. Is it the way of the world or the way of the Kingdom?

This fire that Jesus says he’s bringing - is it a fire that cleanses us of our impurities or is it referencing the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost? Throughout the Hebrew Scripture divine fire is powerful and dangerous. Fire comes out from the Lord in Leviticus, and it is from a place of fire that Moses hears God speak in Exodus. In the exodus from Egypt, God uses fire to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt into the wilderness; and in Genesis God uses fire to destroy His enemies and their cities.

Pastor James says,...

The actions of the scribes and Pharisees do not inspire the people to praise or glorify God. Their greed, posturing, and self-serving activity assure the neglect of the least in the community. Surely it is apparent to the crowds that Jesus has been sent by God to set fire to the wrongful ways of the religious community.

[REL. LEADERS TODAY] Now, let's contrast the religious leaders of Jesus' time to our religious leaders of today. How does the activity of our religious leaders in our nation bring glory to God? This is not a rhetorical question. In our media, what do people see Christian religious leaders saying and doing that is healing, generous, compassionate, just, and righteous? What is Jesus revealing to us that needs to be burned away? What happens in our congregations that brings praise to God? What are the burning issues for twenty-first-century hearers? Do we dare examine our decisions and actions in light of what is important to God, rather than what is important to our appearance? What impurities might we have that need to be burned away as individuals and as a church?

These are questions that won't be answered today, but over time as God's Spirit takes our way of the world and refines it into His way of **HIS** world.

[LIGHT AND HOPE] For now, how can we, as followers of the Way of Jesus bring light and hope to our community and to our world? One way is to be the kind of family that God calls us to be. A family we join through baptism, dying to the ways of the world and being reborn into the Way of Jesus, a way of love for God and for our neighbors.... A love which gives us that benevolent Brotherhood, and Sisterhood, of Man that we desire.... Amen.

Benediction

Beloved of God, go and spread the good news that all may know the fullness of life through the Way of Jesus Christ our Lord. As we share with others that life is more than food or wealth, we will have our faith strengthened and we will bless them on their way. Amen.