

Dragging the Burdens of the Past with Us

Rev. Nancy C. Gowler

First Christian Church, Morehead, KY

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It is difficult to escape the push to imagine the turn of the new year as a fresh start, a new beginning. New year...new you. We're surrounded by messages encouraging resolutions on healthy eating, exercise, taking up creative habits, and leaving behind tired old patterns of behavior.

It's a new year; we learn to write 2021. And most of us, I think, hoped the worst was behind us.

And yet...the events of this week have shaken us to the core.

While I was struggling with how to rewrite my sermon for this Sunday, the second Sunday of the new year, the day in which we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, I picked up a book of collected sermons off my shelf. And turned to a sermon written for New Years day. I want to read the second paragraph of that sermon in its entirety to you.

The preacher begins, "For us, dear friends, for us as a Christian congregation, the cares may well preponderate; for we see with our eyes and can feel with our hands that reality in the world has not been changed one whit by the fact that we men and women proclaim a new year and resolve to make a new beginning. We have not even the shadow of a right to comfort one another with the promise of better times, as though such times were already here or at least were at the door; but we, as a Christian congregation--that is, if we take seriously the brotherhood in which we are placed--are dragging the whole burden of the past year with its full weight over into the new year; and this burden has in the last few days not only, not become lighter, but has grown considerably heavier and more oppressive." (Niemoller, 1941)

We "are dragging the whole burden of the past year with its full weight over into the new year."

Oh, how those words resonate with me.

All the pain of the last year. All the lives lost. All the pain of separation. All the tragedy of black lives extinguished with callous disregard for their humanity. All the division...all the hatred, lies, and half-truths. It was as if that preacher through those lines on the page was speaking to me, to us, in this terrible time in which we're living. But he was not.

You see the year was 1937. The sermon is one of the last twenty-eight sermons given by Rev. Martin Niemoller, before he was arrested and charged with political agitation and treason for having openly rejected "German Christianity." His last sermons were gathered and printed in a volume jarringly entitled, *God Is My Fuehrer*; published even while Niemoller was still imprisoned in a German concentration camp, published in English along with a preface by Thomas Mann.

I reached for this volume because I was in shock, having watched, as many of you, the images of neo-Nazis, fascists, Lost Cause followers and Christian nationalists, and anti-Semites storm the U.S. capitol building on Wednesday, with the full chaotic furor of a fomented mob. What had Niemoller said in those early days of Hitler's power? How does a preacher respond when fascism takes root?

The multitude of signs and flags, the troubling and appalling slogans on merchandise and gear worn by participants and rioters still fill our news as we attempt to sort out what happened. I was taken aback by the fascism front and center in the riot, of the man wearing a Camp Auschwitz sweatshirt and the Proud Boy with his 6 Million Wasn't Enough t-shirt. That they erected gallows and chanted their intention to hang the vice president.

Chilling as those images were. In totality it was an odd mishmash of groups and organizers, but what I can't shake is the proliferation of religious symbols throughout.

There were shofars--the ram's horn trumpets. A part of Jewish tradition, shofars are traditionally blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a call to return to God. These were blown by those calling themselves Jericho Marchers. They are Christians who see their cause to overturn the results of our election as akin to the biblical story of the Hebrew people besieging Jericho, ultimately bringing the walls of the ancient city down.

Along with this egregious misappropriation of a Jewish traditional call to repentance, amid all the signs and flags, there was at least one Christian flag which was carried inside the Capitol building and onto the Senate floor by one of the rioters. And there were the words, perhaps not as offensive as others, but they were jarring--Jesus 2020 and Jesus Saves. Professionally mass printed and on handmade signs, on stocking caps and sweatshirts. Flags proclaiming Jesus is King; others with *Deus Vult* --God Wills it, a rallying cry of the Crusaders.

It is inescapable that Christian Nationalism was woven into the ideology of many of the groups who participated in the protest rally and in the insurrection mob attack at the capitol.

Sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry in their recent book, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, define Christian Nationalism as an "ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civil life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture." That particular Christian identity and culture obsesses over boundaries, particularly racial and ethnic ones--make no mistake, this is White Christian Nationalism. We were seeing and we continue to see White Supremacy in our culture, not lurking in the shadows, not marching at night with tiki torches, but out in the open, streaming through the streets and tearing their way into the U.S. capitol building, looking to execute those they deem unworthy.

This is not new. It is not new to Christianity, nor is it a recent phenomenon in the United States. It has been with our nation since our beginnings, and often gains power and rears its ugly head. And tragically it is not going away quietly.

So, let's stay with this discomfort and pain we're feeling today, particularly those of us who have been born and raised in the United States, those of us who have been blissfully unaware of the privilege of our skin color. Let us not turn away from the horrific scenes which played out in DC and to lesser extent in state capitals around the country. We ought not rush past our uncomfortableness and throw out words of healing and restoration too quickly.

There is work to be done first.

It's fitting, in one sense, that our gospel reading finds us in the wilderness, at the edge of the river Jordan, with all the folks from the villages in the Judean countryside and all the city folk from Jerusalem, hanging on every word of John the baptizer.

Mark's gospel gives John a bit part. He gets just a few words here to the crowds, he has no conversation with Jesus at his baptism, and then by verse fourteen John is arrested and out of the picture.

But John is the one who gets everything started. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness. Mark fails to give us even a snippet of his fiery sermons we find in the other gospels. We don't get to hear John bellow out, "You brood of vipers!"

Here, we only get the Cliff Notes of his preaching: that he spoke of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Whatever his words, John's preaching is compelling. It had to be for the people to pour out from the city and the villages. They left their homes; they crossed over the Jordan into the desert region to hear him.

Theirs is a time of unrest. Their world is fraught with danger.

Perhaps political or social problems of their day weigh heavy on their minds. Their nation was not what it used to be: Armed Roman soldiers march through the streets of Jerusalem. Rumors of militia groups, boasting of insurrection, planning attacks, swirl in the air. It was a dangerous time. Things could not stay the same; the center would not hold for long.

And they had their share of fanatics, too. Those folks shouting about their religious freedoms--zealots who have taken to hiding in the isolated hills, holed up for the long haul, waiting for their moment, for their vindication.

It always puzzles me. Why did those people come to see John? All that way into the middle of nowhere? It's no small commitment to set out into the wilderness. This is no afternoon stroll.

What were they looking for?

They found the strangest of characters, certainly fitting the bill for a wild-eyed prophet, an other-worldly messiah. With his camel's hair clothes, and his eccentric diet of locusts and wild honey. He's straight from central casting--looking suspiciously like what they might have imagined how the prophets of old appeared.

Were they hoping to find something old in the wilderness?

They had made their way to a place drenched in history. There, Joshua had taken over the leadership of Israel from Moses and led the Hebrew people into the promised land. Generations later at the Jordan River, Elisha had picked up the mantle of leadership dropped by Elijah, becoming a prophet and miracle worker in the footsteps of his mentor.

Were they looking for a repeat of the past? Some piece of tradition they'd lost along the way? Some ritual they'd forgotten? Some magical piece of the past which would right everything that had gone wrong in their world?

Or were they looking for something new, something different? They were definitely off the beaten track, perhaps they longed for something unlike anything they had experienced before.

Whatever they're looking for, John wants them to know, he's not the end of their search. He's not a miracle worker empowered to make their problems disappear, not a savior, not a leader of an insurrection movement.

He's got one simple message--repent, turn around, change your direction. And you start right here, right now. Here at the water's edge is a beginning.

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message translation, John tells the people, "I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life."

And that invitation was enough. The people poured into the river, lining up to be baptized. To walk into the water carrying all the grit and dust of their weary lives and then to wade back out onto the shore, shaking the water out of their hair, and walking into a new life, a kingdom life.

It's a beautiful symbolic act of repentance, of saying enough with the way things have been, enough of this brokenness, enough of this fear.

Wade into the water and find a new way of living in God's realm of shalom, God's Harmony Way.

And yet...and yet, I wonder if we're ready.

No offense to John the Baptist, but I believe repentance takes more than just a little water on a muddy riverbank. Repentance calls for a reckoning, for an honest assessment of where we are, what we've done and left undone, who we've harmed, of all that is broken. Repentance takes time.

And I don't know about you, but I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of lamenting. and maybe I'm just tired. Tired of a world in which black and brown lives count for less than white ones.

Tired of a world in which poor and low wealth folk work essential jobs for below poverty wages.

Tired of a world in which carrying guns and wearing bullet-proof vests in the streets is deemed patriotic.

Tired of a world in which Christians are complicit in the wounding and marginalization of our LGBTQ siblings.

I'm tired of a world in which hate speech gets amplified, retweeted, and shared millions of times to incite more hate, to fuel more divisions, all the while lining the pockets of the wealthy and the cynical.

We've got work to do, you and I.

In the Christian tradition there is a long history of confession as a part of our worship together. That practice of regular confession, done in public, in community reminds us of our frailty and keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves.

Our prayer of confession today reminds us "we cannot escape the brokenness in our world and in ourselves."

We cannot escape the brokenness. And in days such as these, the church needs to be reminded of the ways in which we have remained silent in the face of injustice:

when we have contributed to a culture of intolerance,

when we have excluded in the name of God,

when we have been silent in the presence of injustice,

when we have been complicit in the dehumanization of others,
when we have conflated love of our country with allegiance to God.

When a Cardinal representing the Pope visited Rwanda in 1994, after the 100 days of genocide in which over 800,000 people were killed, he asked the assembled church leaders, "Are you saying that the blood of tribalism is deeper than the waters of baptism?" One leader answered, "Yes, it is." (Emmanuel Katongole, *Identity, Community and the Gospel of Reconciliation*)

I am fearful that we have allowed our allegiances to political parties, our embrace of our cherished ideologies to hold sway over us, equating them with our faith. It will take much reflection to bring about true repentance.

I'll be honest with you. I've struggled this week to find hope, to imagine a peaceful way out of this dangerous time in which we find ourselves.

This is my 21st year leading worship on The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. And this is the first year I have preached this story and not focused on the words Jesus hears as he comes out of the water. Because this week, in these times, we need to linger at the water's shore, listening to John the Baptist.

This is no time to rush in demanding a blessing from God. This is a moment to take a long hard look at ourselves, at the white church in America, at our complicity in allowing voices of hate, fear and division to claim the space to speak for our faith.

Christian nationalism cannot be ignored or pushed aside. It is a perversion of everything we claim to hold sacred.

It is the antithesis of the gospel we proclaim.
It is dangerous and unchecked it will destroy us.
We cannot be silent.

In these dangerous times let us stay here at the Jordan River. Let us take seriously John's call for repentance. Here at the water's edge let us take up the mantle of social justice, knowing full well how long this struggle may be, what costs there are along the way, and what we must leave behind.

Did those folks at the Jordan River know what they were signing up for? As they struggled back up to the edge of the river, their clothes heavy with the weight of the water still clinging to them, was it a relief? or did their journey of repentance loom as long and difficult for them as it seems ours will be for us? I wonder.

And then it occurs to me: what none of those folks dripping with the waters of their baptism know in that moment, is that the one who is about to change everything,

the one whose sandals John says he is not deserving to untie, the Beloved of God, is there, right there, in the waters with them. Being baptized with them. Taking up this journey with them.

Always a companion and strength in this work of justice.

And it is in Jesus, in the Beloved, God is well pleased.

And in him, in his presence with us, even in moments like these, is our hope.

Christ, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us all.