**Sermon for FCC New Castle, IN: “We Know What We Must Do”**

**Preached 10 January 2021 – Star Sunday**

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*This sermon can be viewed* [*here*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QmSp0KRS-Q&list=PLGQPszf5oZaJt213Ci-cn9Qr6-Q2bXlN8&index=6&t=1173s) *beginning at minute 19:30. If the embedded link does not work, go to youtube.com and search for Nathan Day Wilson. This sermon and others are in the sermon playlist.*

Words matter.

Of course, you already know that but today it is worth saying again for at least 3 important reasons. I’ll name those reasons in just a minute.

Words matter. They can heal and they can harm. They can lift and they can tear down. They can inspire compassion. They can incite violence. What you say, how you say it, and to whom, matters.

Psalm 19 – let the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, o God

Psalm 119 – your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path

I love how the Book of James puts it, “Look at ships: they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder. 5 So also the tongue is small, yet it boasts of great power.

One of the least true children’s rhymes ever:

Sticks and stones may break my bones

But words shall never hurt me.

Not true. Words have power. Words matter.

Some of you have noticed that I change my Facebook profile picture to an image that says:

Is it kind?

Is it true?

Is it necessary?

I wish I actually lived up to those standards myself before speaking.

**So why** the focus on words today? Three reasons, at least: First, as is the annual tradition for FCC in New Castle, we recognize certain words, called Star Words – not to be confused with Star Wars, which is also preaching about on a different occasion – we recognize certain words, put on the back of stars, because they say something important. Maybe you've heard of this tradition of choosing a word by which to live in the New Year ahead.

And, second, it’s worth being reminded today that words matter, words have power because just a few days ago a horrific event occurred at the US Capitol – the first ever violent coup attempt in US history – largely incited by someone’s words.

And third, it makes sense to remember today that words matter because today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, a Christian celebration **revealing** the love of Jesus for and in the world.

Last Wednesday was The Day of Epiphany, and the day of the rampage at the Capitol,

And much of what we’ve not wanted to see was, indeed, revealed.

In the Book of Matthew, chapter 2, we find the story for Epiphany. It’s a beautiful story. It features a bright star, perhaps similar to the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn on December 21. This story also features those longing for peace finding their way to Jesus. And, this story features a narcissistic king named Herod.

When those looking for Jesus, those longing for peace, asked this question, “**Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews**?”, Herod was immediately threatened.

You see, in Herod’s mind, no one should be king but him. Herod made it a crime even to suggest that someone else should be king. He was completely insecure, not stable, a mixture of narcissism and paranoia. If Herod felt his power was threatened, he would lash out violently – and even had several of his children executed because he suspected them **without evidence** to be plotting against him.

The problem, though, is that Herod’s problems necessarily our become our problems. When powerful, fearful, narcissistic rulers like Herod are frightened, the rest of us have to pay attention. Because in Herod’s fear always rests the threat of violence.

Herod was a weak person’s idea of what a powerful ruler is like.

True power is not about lashing out at others; it’s not about reveling in the control of others. True power is not deceitful, duplicitous, or disloyal. It certainly does not silence the cries of children because of the insecurities of the ruler.

True power sees the birth of a baby as possibility, as hope, not as threat. True power welcomes, not excludes. True power is full of compassion, not condemnation.

So what we see very early in the Christian story is that the birth of peace and justice runs up against the reality of evil kings who lie and murder.

That was then; this is now. In other words, how does what happened then impact or influence or inform what we do now? “Preacher, I’m just not sure what to do?” I hear that sometimes. I understand it sometimes. BUT THIS TIME, we know now what we must do.

We follow the lead of the ones looking for Jesus, the ones searching for peace. When they found him, they gave gifts.

And then, after meeting Jesus, they returned home by a different road.

And so we should give gifts. Gifts of our time, of our attention, of our money to important causes. Causes that directly help others, such as the Henry County Foster Closet. Causes that uphold and promote bringing us together and not tearing us apart, the way those people who attacked the Capitol did.

We should give the gift of leaning into and living into the Star word we have. Maybe that word is especially fitting for you. Spend some time with it. Before you look up how someone else defines it, consider your definition in your own words. When have you seen that word in practice?

My word, for example, is appreciate. And so a gift I can give is to tune in and observe more closely things to appreciate. There is certainly lots I can do to show appreciation more. Ways I can express gratitude and thankfulness. Ways I can embody an appreciative spirit and language and mindset.

We can lean into those 3 questions:

 Is it kind?

 Is it true?

 Is it necessary?

AND, for us on this first Sunday after Epiphany, what is our different road?

A part of the different road we will have to figure out as we travel it because sometimes you can’t see too far ahead on the road, and so you find out what it is by going – in other words, by moving forward in faith.

But parts of this road we know very well. Is this familiar: What does the Lord require of you: **To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.**

These directives from Micah 6, they aren’t new. We heard them and heard their challenge. We know what we must do.

Very briefly for today, walking humbly is of course the basis for loving mercy and doing justice. That’s the way we walk, the stance we take, the way we travel on this new road. Knowing that God’s love extends even to me moves me away from arrogance, away from egocentrism, and moves me to humility, humbleness, or – AS MY STAR WORD REMINDS ME – **appreciation.**

Second, loving kindness or sometimes the translation is to love mercy, is all about compassion being at the core of who we are. As we’ve discussed before, compassion and hospitality – that is, caring for all, especially those who cannot repay me; and, welcoming all, especially those who are not like me – compassion and hospitality are THE FUNDAMENTAL, CORE, virtues of our faith.

Third, what is it to do justice? Basically it is creating a world where all can fully develop. Charity is important and is needed. The difference between charity and justice, of course, is that while charity seeks to alleviate the ill effects of injustice, justice seeks to eliminate the causes. Doing justice means that our goal, like the goal of biblical prophets, is not to chastise but rather to heal; to enhance, not diminish, humanity, because, as an early church leader said, “**The glory of God is a human being fully alive**.” (Iraneous)

If the way we travel this new road is humbly out of a sense of gratitude or appreciation, and sign posts on this road include Loving Compassion and Doing Justice, then what – in light of everything – are some concrete actions?

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Moments of crisis like now can devolve into catastrophe, or they can yield opportunity. Our words and actions strongly influence which one comes next. Just open your history books:

Weak and indecisive leaders allowed bad situations to get worse in 1914.

Determined and ruthless ones created wars in 1939.

But we. You, me. We can be the ones who model what it is to take a different road.

What know what we must do.