

Third Sunday After The Epiphany – John Brittingham

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

If you spent any time on the internet this past year, you probably came across this often repeated phrase: “All my heroes are dead and my enemies are in power.” David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Carrie Fisher, Muhammad Ali, to name but a few—all gone. And those in power...well, we’re learning all about them. Wealthy businesspeople, oil tycoons, billionaire private interest activists, and lobbyists—those who claim to represent the forgotten people of one’s nation while living lives none of us probably sniff at attaining (in other words, the Galactic Empire)—they are in power.

It is a very difficult time to have hope.

We in the United States of America have a new president. The words used by this man during his campaign to become president were scary. He sowed seeds of division, condoned violent behaviors, and demonstrated a significant lack of respect for his opponents and a willingness to do whatever he deemed necessary to win. There are many who are excited about this new president. Perhaps they are excited that someone who is not a member of the political establishment will be in charge of things. Perhaps they are excited that someone who is good at business is in power. Perhaps they are happy that someone is looking to them and their particular tribe for the first time in what seems like forever. Perhaps, for the first time in a long time, they have hope.

But it is hard to have hope when you hear this president begin his presidency with talk of darkness, violence, poverty, and “American carnage” (a phrase which immediately brings to mind a Spiderman villain, not violence in the “inner cities.”) The world he creates with his words is meant to make us fearful and cast a long shadow over the land we occupy. And this is part of why people are so upset. The current president represents, with his words, the darkness of ignorance about the virtues of others who are not like ourselves, of those who are culturally, economically, and geographically separated from the lives we live here in quaint little Greenville, Illinois. Part of why people are upset is because the shadow of suspicion and the very real threat of violence appears to be hovering around them.

It’s hard to be hopeful when the very idea of a common good is seen with suspicion by those in power.

The contrast between the speech of our current president and our lectionary readings could not be more stark. This week, we hear about light. *Those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined*, our Isaiah passage tells us. Light, that which reveals things to us, that which casts out darkness, is a timely message this week. It is Epiphany after all. We’re supposed

to be celebrating something being revealed to us. But what has been revealed to us this week other than just how dark things can be? What has been revealed to us but the work that Christians must do?

It can be lonely too, to walk around your community and be fearful for your friends of other races, ethnicities, gender presentations and the like. It can be lonely to realize that the inclusivity of the Gospels we read, and the church of which we are a part, is not as open and inclusive as we might think. The Table, it turns out, is often closed to many, and division amongst those who claim to follow the way of Jesus is quite prevalent.

In 1st Corinthians, we see Paul addressing divisions within the local church. This church is a small congregation of people who struggling to let go of their pagan heritage. They had been born into a society where wisdom was concentrated around particular persons or schools. To be a person who had knowledge of the divine, then, meant that you were someone aligned with a school or teacher. To follow a teacher was to conform one's life to that teacher's way of living and being in the world. Now, add to this that there were several early Christian missionaries who had baptized these Corinthians into the way of life in conformity with Christ, and you have the divisions that Paul is trying to address. Rather than focusing on conforming their lives to Jesus, these early Christians were dividing themselves up into tiny little tribes loyal to their particular baptizer or teacher.

The "wisdom" of tiny tribes fighting with each other over who has the purest devotion to their way of life is, in fact, no way of life. It is a way of death. It is a wisdom that rings hollow. It is, at bottom, the wisdom of those who are perishing. Exposing the foolishness of this supposed wisdom, Paul questions, *Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?* Clearly, none of these are true. Christ has not been divided. Paul was not crucified for them, nor did he baptize them. In fact, Paul downplays baptism in favor of the proclamation of the gospel to these Corinthians. Paul's mission was never to merely perform some weird bathing ritual and then gather disciples for himself. Instead, his mission was to proclaim the Good News of Christ crucified and risen from the dead, in words that did not draw attention to himself, but always let the power of the cross, the truth of Jesus' life, shine forth. Paul's appeal is not for these Corinthians to conform their lives to Paul's own teaching; rather, his mission is to encourage these young Christians to conform their lives to Christ. In Christ, there is no division. In Christ, we are *united in the same mind and the same purpose*. This is a very different appeal than what we heard in the current president's inaugural address: "At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other. When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice."

Total allegiance to the United States of America is not a Christian value. It has never been a Christian value and it never should be. Only when we allow ourselves to wander in the darkness of blind patriotism does national allegiance take on the characteristics of a false virtue. It is not through allegiance to our nation or to our government that we “rediscover our loyalty to each other.” It is in and through Christ. We don’t need an Emperor or his Storm Troopers to tell us we need to be loyal to each other. Such statements are the work of utter darkness. And they are undone when the great light Isaiah told us about shines forth and reveals to us the truth of our solidarity with others.

A Christian’s loyalty is not to Empire. It is not to a government. A Christian’s loyalty is to Christ crucified and risen from the dead. It is to the message, not of optimism about patriotic uniformity, but of hope found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Optimism is not a Christian value; hope is. As philosopher and theologian Cornel West says: “...hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet we know that the evidence does not look good. The dominant tendencies of our day are unregulated global capitalism, racial balkanization, social breakdown, and individual depression. Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against [that] evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair. Only a new wave of vision, courage, and hope can keep us sane—and preserve the decency and dignity requisite to revitalize our organizational energy for the work to be done. To live is to wrestle with despair yet never to allow despair to have the last word.”¹

Vision, courage, and hope—in a word, light. A great light that shines on people who have walked in darkness—and my friends, we walk in darkness. It is the light we see in the words of Jesus, as he calls the first disciples in our Gospel reading.

Fishing in the Ancient Middle East was not a leisure activity. It was exhausting work that offered almost no opportunity for economic success or upward mobility. Moreover, Rome claimed full and exclusive rights to all water and resources contained within the water. To be a fisherman, then, meant that you had to pay Rome every time you fished, often with a portion of the day’s catch—even if you didn’t catch anything.² The result was work that was barely subsistence labor, where you were constantly giving to the local Roman authorities a portion of what you needed for food and other necessities.

¹ From *Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America* (Beacon Press, 1997), by Cornel West.

² From “Leave Your Nets: The politics of Matthew 4.12-23” by John Allen.

One of the best ways to resist Roman occupation of one's lands and people was to abandon work. The peoples of Rome's colonies would, from time to time, abandon their labor in protest of taxation and imperial domination.

This is the political context of Jesus asking his first disciples to leave their nets. When Jesus says, *Follow me*, he is asking Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave labor that supports empire. He is offering them a godly alternative to life under Caesar's oppressive rule. This is not just a boycott. This is a call to action and contemplation and devotion. The calling of the first disciples is a call to shake off the chains of those who would exploit the hard labor of the rural poor for the sake of their own self-aggrandizement and excess. This is not a passage about why people shouldn't pay taxes or why we should all just go on strike. The Gospel reading is a story about leaving the darkness of Empire behind and following Jesus as a way of life.

The decision to follow in the way of Jesus is not one without struggle. The disciples were effectively deciding that they would rather be unemployed nomads than fish under imperial conditions. Such a life isn't easy and is not a way of living that would make one optimistic. But it is a way of living during times of darkness that embraces hope. And hope is a light in dark places.

It has been hard to be hopeful this week. It can feel very lonely when your heroes are dead and your "enemies" are in power. So I've been trying to figure out how a Christian lives under a regime that is seemingly opposed to the values of life that Christians have espoused since the days of Jesus. I've taken great inspiration from my wife and my students as we marched in St. Louis yesterday. And I've taken great comfort in reading the words of The Blessed Oscar Romero of El Salvador. He was a Catholic bishop who resisted a repressive regime in El Salvador and was martyred while ministering to the sick in a local hospital. In times of darkness, loneliness, and division, these words have reminded me that Christ is undivided and that hope is a light in the darkness: "To believe, to hope: this is the Christian's grace in our time. When many give up hope, when it seems to them the nation has nowhere to go, as though it were all over, the Christian says: No, we have not yet begun. We are still awaiting God's grace. With certainty, it is just beginning to be built on this earth...That time will come!"³

May we leave our nets and follow in the way of Jesus, hopefully in solidarity with one another.

³ Fr. Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, pg. 158