

Sermon

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Pent 23

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 9-22; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

Hope when We Feel the Lion's Breath

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

I recently read a post from our UCC justice ministries called “The End is Nigh!) (But it’s not November 8).”¹ In it the writer, Miguel Neuroth encourages our engagement not only now before the election and in our voting, but also to realize that our work doesn’t end on November 8. He writes, “In spite of what our media is telling us, we are not standing on the brink of the Apocalypse,” and asks “How will we move past our hysteria or malaise and set our minds on bridging the divides in our communities post-election?” Neuroth encourages us not to lose hope for this work ahead.

But it’s hard, isn’t it? To think beyond the looming election and not fear the worst. As Neuroth phrases it, “As the campaigns have focused on the worst in each candidate, the worst has also been brought out in us.”

I have to own that this is true for me personally. Even as I have been outraged the way one candidate demeans another, I confess that I have engaged in snarky remarks that also demean. I confess that I hope for one’s utter humiliation on election day, that they will be taught a lesson that will inflict pain, in the way they have inflicted pain upon others. Clearly, I have conveniently overlooked the scripture passage where God says, “Vengeance is mine, my dear. Not yours. I alone am God,” because any time I’m tempted to stick it to someone, I am not to entrusting judgment to God.

The election season has convicted me on my own hypocrisy. There are many I’m finding it difficult to love. Many are bringing out the hate in my own soul when I witness their hate. Am I any better than the Pharisee of Jesus’ parable today? “God,” the Pharisee prays at the temple, in a public way so that people will be sure to see and hear him, “I thank you that I am not like other people—especially like that tax collector over there. Wow, that one has a lot to atone for!” You can almost hear him end with, “And you’re welcome, God. Glad I can do you this favor.”

Yes, this election season has brought out the worst in me. Maybe most harmful have been times when my trust in the ultimate goodness of God has gotten derailed. A trust that God has got us, no matter what. I’ve allowed fear and anger to speak as though it has the last word, rather than trusting that life and love have the last word. Isn’t trusting that life and love have the last word the basic premise of our resurrection faith?

Yes, this has been a difficult election season. I watched presidential debates and felt assaulted. I listen to political pundits and feel disrespected. I hear hateful rhetoric and feel like dishing it back. I read articles about candidates and feel worried. I have to admit, it’s difficult not to take all of it together and not feel hopeless.

“Jesus!” I find myself saying a lot. It comes out of my mouth as profanity, but within the

¹ http://www.ucc.org/commentary_the_end_is_nigh_but_it_s_not_november_8th_10202016

profanity is a deep prayer. “Come, Jesus. Come into this mess. Come into my anger and anxiety, my resignation and hopelessness. Come into my heart, and come into the soul of this world that seems so lost.”

Surely, we are in a time similar to what Paul described in his letter, when we can feel the breath of the lion on our faces. This second letter to Timothy is written in the context of Paul’s persecution and imprisonment by the Roman Empire for preaching the Gospel of Jesus. In other words, for preaching that it is God and God’s kingdom alone to which we owe our ultimate allegiance, not Ceasar and the Roman Empire.

Even many of Paul’s friends deserted him when he got in trouble for his preaching. But in this passage we don’t hear Paul seeking the kind of revenge I have fallen prey to this election cycle. Rather he says “May it not be counted against them!”

This is not just a passage about Paul’s allegiance to God but, more importantly, God’s ultimate allegiance to him. He writes that despite the persecutions, “God stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. God will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for the heavenly kingdom. To God be the glory forever and ever.”

Remember, Paul wrote this even as he knew that his end was near, understanding that his fate—likely his death—would be controlled by the Romans. We’re not told in the Bible how he died, but scholars speculate that he was likely beheaded. If anyone deserved to feel hopeless and fearful, surely Paul is among them.

But here’s the thing. Paul’s trust in God wasn’t determined by his circumstances. Rather, it was trust in a God who is who God says she is. And who is that God? A righteous judge, who is present in times of trouble and will be present no matter the end. One who gives strength to the faithful who have no reasonable expectation of managing on their own. One worthy of praise, even by the unjustly imprisoned.

It is this God to whom the Israelites call upon during their own difficult days in the book of Jeremiah when they faced drought, capture, and exile. They cry out: “Remember and do not break your covenant with us. Can any idols of the nations bring rain? . . . Is it not you, O God? . . . We set our hopes on you, for it is you who do all this.”

The Israelites appeal to God, even as they confess that God has reason to abandon them. They, not God, have broken the covenant promises. Like their ancestors, they had turned to idols made out of wood and stone instead of turning to the living God. They have been making temple sacrifices in a show before God (remember the Pharisee?) and then treating one another unjustly as soon as the worship was over. They oppressed immigrants, and ignored the needs of the most vulnerable in society. They shunned the ways of healthful community life. They stole the possessions of others to become rich. They failed to judge with justice, and they didn’t defend the rights of the needy.

Time and time again, God wept for them, called them back into relationship. Although God didn’t spare them from the consequences of their choices, he never abandoned his love of them.

In an earlier chapter of the Jeremiah, we hear these words ascribed to God: “Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Almighty; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight.”

So where does that leave us this election season, where unholy boasts by candidates and

supporters from all sides are the order of the day? Where do we find our hope when what is happening is clearly not a delight to God? Surely God is asking “Is there no balm in Gilead?”, and wishes her head were a spring of water and his eyes a fountain of tears, to be able to weep day and night for those who are suffering under such sinfulness. (Jeremiah 8:22-9:2a)

Like the people of Israel, like Paul, our hope comes from the God who is who God claims God is, one who delights in love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

In a recent article posted on kineticlive.com, Susan K. Smith reflects about the fact that cultural unrighteousness and evil (specifically speaking about the evil of racism) often resides, and in fact must reside, next to hope. “Who knows,” she writes, “why God allows the injustice and cruelty to sit alongside Him/Her? . . . and yet, these bruised, battered, belittled people continue to push forward, poets in the experience called life, singing, because to not sing would mean they would cease to breathe and thus to live.”²

Similarly, in a post Tony Robinson wrote recently for the UCC daily devotion, he decided to focus on a psalm of joy. But not without some trepidation, knowing that it would be published so close to election time. He writes, “Then a voice in my head says, ‘There’s so much that’s awful in the world and this election is so worrisome, how can you quote a psalm of such joy and beauty at a time like this?’ To which another voice answers, ‘How can you not?’ . . . Even in anxious times,” he goes on, “perhaps especially in anxious times, joy in beauty, joy in life, joy in God, is true and good. Joy remains possible. Do not let it be taken from you.”³

To head back to where I started, with Neuroth’s article, we’re encouraged as churches to see our work, regardless of who fills which office, as being sanctuaries to engage our differences and extend a balm to heal wounds.

How will that be possible if we let our worry and frustration over the election steal our joy, or cut us off from God’s delights of love, justice, and righteousness in the earth? How will we be that balm when we have turned our backs on walking in right relationships? If our boast is in our candidate or our own self-righteousness, and not God’s steadfastness?

Or hope must remain in the God who is who God says God is. The one who rescues us from the lion’s mouth—even the lion of anxiety, anger, self-righteousness, and division.

A colleague of mine is a campus minister at Case Western Reserve University. She mentioned that at a recent campus ministry worship service led by a student, the student asked the group to reflect on these questions: What would a political campaign focused on love look like? And how might we stage a campaign of love in our own lives?

I know I need this Gospel word and challenge right about now. Perhaps you do, too.
Amen.

² <http://kineticlive.com/2016/10/18/yes-do-we-marvel/>

³ Still Speaking Devotional: Oct 20, 2016