

Sunday, January 10, 2021
Sermon: Where is God when Systems Fail?
Rev. Adam Ericksen
Clackamas United Church of Christ

Last week, I went to a Facebook page that I go to frequently for progressive Christian pastors in the United Church of Christ. I wanted to bounce around ideas for preaching this Sunday's sermon. One person asked, "What are you all thinking about preaching on this Sunday?" I read through some of the responses all having to deal with this last week and the one response that really struck out to me was from an elder states-woman who had been a pastor for many years and recently retired. She said this, "I'm just so glad that I'm retired and don't have to preach on this Sunday!" That's pretty funny - we can still laugh. I laughed at that one little moment of brevity amongst the seriousness of these events this last week and how they relate to our Gospel lesson today that has some similar things to say to us.

So amidst all of the chaos and treason and the horrible things that have been happening it's okay to cry, as we have done already today. It's okay to laugh. It is okay to be human as we move through these events. In our Gospel reading this morning I am struck, as I often am, at how the Gospel often gives a critique of the powers that be. Of what we might call the political establishment, the religious establishment as well. And I want you to hear that this critique of the dominant religion of the day is thoroughly Jewish. The prophets always come in moments when the powerful religious people, have lost their way and have forgotten about caring for the needs of the poor, the weak, the marginalized, the widows. Those who are in need in our world.

The prophets always rise up and say that the religious leaders have lost their ways. This is what John the Baptist is doing in our passage today. You see, John the Baptist grew up in a priestly family. His father, Zechariah, was one of the priests of the temple. John the Baptist, John, grew up in this era under the temple. He could have easily become a temple priest and lived in that power structure and had a very nice life but John saw the corruption of the temple. Like all of the Jewish prophets before John, he saw when the religious leaders were acting in their own interest and not in the interest of those who are in need. And so John says that this place, this temple that was the power structure of the political and religious and economic center of Jerusalem at the time that God wasn't there, that God had left the building. That God could no longer stay in this temple area that had become known for corruption of wealth, the corruption of God, that says that God is only for certain people - the wealthy, those who are in power and that's how we typically think of God, isn't it?

I think that that view of God continues to infect me - if you are successful, if you are wealthy then it must be because God has blessed you. Notice how Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount flips that upside down. He says we're all taught the same lesson that God is with the powerful and the wealthy. Well, Jesus says no. No, we're not thinking like that anymore. God is

fundamentally with the poor. God is fundamentally with those who are on the underside of history. God is with those, not with the powerful, but with the weak, and live your life according to that. Live your life in a way that reflects God's desire, not for your own power, not for your own economic wealth, but for all of it to be shared. This is what Jesus means when he says that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. It's what Jesus means when he says that he did not come to be served but to serve. You see, Jesus disciples often get in these power struggles with one another. They often ask Jesus, "Who will sit at your right hand when the Kingdom comes, me, or this other disciple." And Jesus says that is a question of power and privilege and that is not the right question to ask. The right question to ask according to Jesus is not how much power you can get but how you can use whatever power you have. To love your neighbor, who includes even your enemy, as you love yourself. That, as Abbie said earlier in our children's sermon, is the point. That is the point that we see here at Jesus's baptism when God comes to Jesus and says the words that God says to all of us, "You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased." And if you are God's beloved child, they are God's beloved child too.

This is one of the points in this story of Jesus's baptism that often gets overlooked. It's what Amy talked about earlier in our liturgy where Amy emphasized "ALL people from Jerusalem" and "ALL people from the countryside" came to John to get baptized. All people. They did not separate good people from bad people. They did not say, "I will baptize you but only if you have the right theology." They did not say, "I will baptize you but only if you are wealthy enough and only if me baptizing you makes me look good." Those are the people that we tend to want to baptize into our community. Here, the Kingdom of the Realm of God, or whatever you want to call it, is not a place where you make those kinds of distinctions. It's a place where all people come in and are welcomed into this new community.

Now, some of our religious friends will say yes, but John the Baptist baptized for the repentance of sins and I will say yes, that's true, and as a progressive Christian pastor some people accuse me of not preaching repentance of sin enough. This is the sin that we are called to repent of. The sin that we are called to repent of is the very sin of dividing the world into who is included and who is excluded because all people are invited into the Realm of God. Can I get an Amen! So whenever we use religion, or God, as an excuse to divide the world up into who is included and who is excluded you need to repent. That goes for me. That goes for our conservative Christian brethren. That goes for the people who went to the Capitol last Wednesday with their Confederate flags, a sign of racism, a sign that has divided our nation into who is included and who is excluded for far too long.

I have heard people defend that flag as a sign of Southern hospitality. That sign, that flag is a sign not of hospitality but of inclusion and exclusion, it is a sign of hatred and of racism, it belongs nowhere in our nation except for a sign of how we continue to need to repent of the original sin in the United States which is racism - racism against our black siblings and racism

also against our indigenous siblings. That is the infection in the United States. It is the infection that made its way to the Capitol building on Wednesday. Those signs that you saw during that mob violence, the terrorist act, that said “Jesus Saves.” You want to talk about abomination! Using Jesus's words there. That is an abomination that we need to repent from. It infects me as a white male living in the United States, it will infect me for the rest of my life. This is Christianity used as power over and against others. They set up nooses on our Capital. Nooses. In the name of Jesus. I don't talk about blasphemy all that much but that is blasphemy! Nooses in the name of Jesus please give me a break!

Friends, there is hope. There is hope. Where do we find hope? All of this came about, I will remind you, because of a victory for Joe Biden. All of this came about because of a victory on Tuesday in Georgia for a Jewish man named John Ossoff and a black man named Raphael Warnock. All of this came about, thank God, because white-dominated Christian fascism is losing, thank God! And this, I pray, are the death throes of Christian white fascism and nationalism. Earlier someone prayed for January 20th when this might happen again. We pray that police will do their job on the 20th. We pray for peace and justice to happen. We pray for this insurrection that goes against our very democracy to end.

There have been a lot of reflections on this last week that I'm sure you have read about that have been tremendous ways of explaining this last week. I read quite a few of them. I would like to read at this conclusion from America Magazine which is put together by some of our Catholic siblings in faith. I don't always agree with our Catholic siblings. I thank God for our Catholic siblings who are pointing towards a more just and inclusive world. I have very good friends who are doing this and I thank God for them and I thank God for this reflection from America Magazine that says this,

“After the events of Wednesday, all Christians are left to reckon with the fact that the name of Jesus and the warrant of the Gospel have been publicly invoked by those defending, not only this President himself, but also his cynical destructive attempts to reverse the clear results of the Presidential Election. The harm to the credibility of the Christian witness is deep and will be long lasting.”

Christian leaders - that's you, that's me, that's us together. Consider yourself a Christian leader because we need more of them who are moving in this direction.

It continues, “Christian leaders must condemn this misuse of faith and all Christians should repent from the ways that we have allowed the symbols of Christian faith to be drafted into this President's service. There must be accountability. Every American must also reckon with what this horrifying episode reveals - the fragility of our democracy, the destructive power of the lie, and the numerous ways in which the nation's legacy of racism and white supremacy continue to structure American life. That's what we have to reckon with. Our President-Elect, Joe Biden,

said that this isn't who we are. America Magazine says this, with all due respect Mr. Biden, what has happened is in truth part of who we are and America must face that fact. Yet it is also true that if Americans can summon the courage to face this moment together with honesty and hope then we will discover once again that the best of who we are as a country can overcome the worst impulses of our national spirit.”

I don't know for sure but that is my hope, too. Maybe the best of who we are, at our best, can rise up to point to a better world. John the Baptist and Jesus rise up out of the waters in order to join us in the repentance of sin. The repentance of sin that divides the world into us against them. The repentance of sin that uses religion as a motivation to hate someone else instead of Jesus who calls us to use religion to love all people into a community of love and justice in the Realm of God in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the beloved community.

Friends, there's work to do and may we do that work so that we can repent of the ways in the past that we have fallen into the trap of dividing the world into us against them. May we point to a world where, as Paul says, our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the powers and principalities of this world that divide us against one another, and may we work for a world where justice and peace and love are finally met. Amen