

“Losing Our Way”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 10, 2021

Psalm 29 and Mark 1

We live in Canada. And our American neighbours to the south have been our neighbours for a very long time. We travel freely across the border to vacation and work. Our goods and services flow back and forth across the border. Our nations’ leaders have for the most part shared a friendship that has allowed trade differences to be negotiated with respect and fairness. Our two countries also share a governance ideology, where the people vote for their elected representative, upholding democratic principles of governance. The United States of America is globally looked to as the gold standard of a democratic society, where these time-honoured principles guide the election of representatives to conduct the business of the people.

Last Wednesday, to see the striking white dome of Capitol Hill lit up against the Washington sky by police and fire emergency lights, was gut-wrenching. To see mobs crash through barriers and doors to gain access to the elected representatives who had gathered in session to ratify the 2020 electoral votes was horrific. To know that five people died in the aftermath of the deadly riot. To know that it was a Canadian from Calgary that carried a Confederate Flag into the halls of the Capitol. To witness the falling apart of something that represented democracy at its best. Unprecedented. Devastating.

Dr. Frank Thomas writes, “We have the expectation of moral leadership from our national religious leader and elected officials, especially the symbol, office, and power of the presidency of the United States.”¹ President Barack Obama, in his recent memoir, writes of the reverence of democracy, “I would never fully rid myself of the sense of reverence I felt whenever I walked into the Oval Office, the feeling that I had entered not an office but a sanctum of democracy.”²

An emerging talking point from the fallout of the November American election has been about the fragility of democracy. Which was new to me. I guess I have always thought that democracy was solid as a rock, a given, something that no one in our country would question or attack. This week has changed all that. Now I see that democracy can be threatened, and shockingly not from outside forces but rather from within. Democracy is indeed fragile. It needs word to preserve it.

President Elect Joe Biden said this week, in a press conference after the assault of the Capitol, ‘This is not who we are. We are better than this.’ To which someone else said, “Mr. Biden, sorry to disagree, but this *is* who we are.”³ Let me fill in a description from where I view it from north of the border: America is a racist country, dominated by a conservative, white privileged elite, on the cusp of a horrendous split amongst the people – between Republicans and

¹ Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 53.

² Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 206.

³ Paraphrased from an article referenced in a Facebook post, “America: The Jesuit Review, January 6, 2021.”

Democrats. When the moral compass has lost its bearing, when our thoughts and discussions are ‘too filled with this world’ and the way forward is treacherous, what do we do?

Today is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, where we remember how John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. Here are some of the words from a hymn we will sing later, “Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus Christ, to you we raise, manifested by the star to the sages from afar; manifest at Jordan’s stream, manifest in power divine, manifest in valiant fight, manifest in gracious will, God in flesh made manifest.⁴ You’ll notice that word ‘manifest’ in that hymn. It’s not a word we use a lot. But here it is all about the presence of God manifested in the Son – the voice which came from above in the moment that Jesus came up out of the baptismal water – This is my Son, my beloved - the glory of God revealed in the face of the Son.

The Apostle Paul knew this. He wrote in a letter to the Corinthians, “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us ... the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.” (2 Cor 4:6) The glory of God is manifested in the Son, Jesus the Christ. Full of, filled with, established - all that God is, the Son is.

A dictionary defines manifestation as an event, action, or object that clearly shows something or embodies something. What is manifesting in your life today? Sometimes, I feel I am too of this world, too in the world. The chaos and disorder of this last week has filled my heart and my mind. It has flooded my news, facebook and twitter feeds. And it is asking me to pause and look at the values my world lives by - a world where the stronger voices look after their own kind first, others coming second. A world where the moral compass is askew. For example, what happened to the moral compass of our Canadian elected officials who took off for vacation spots over the Christmas Break to the Dominican, Hawaii, California, and St. Barts when the rest of us were told to stay home?

Psalm 29 is about God’s voice – a voice that shatters and splinters the cedars of Lebanon, a voice that forks into tongues of fire, a voice that shakes the wilderness, that causes the oaks to whirl, stripping the forest bare, a voice that thunders across the great waters. This psalm is about the manifestation of God in the natural world. God fills it. God energizes it. God is fully present in it. If God is so manifest in the created world, why don’t I notice? What am I listening to instead? What is manifesting itself in our world that determines actions, behaviour, words, in ways that lead to injustice, and turmoil, and chaos? God knows about chaos. Creation has chaos in its DNA⁵ – look at the swirling, splintering trees, the thunder, the violent waves and wind of our Psalm. God’s voice *can* be heard in the midst of chaos and turmoil.

The Christian writer Henri Nouwen asked, “How can we live in the midst of a world marked by fear, hatred, and violence, and not be destroyed by it?”⁶ By walking a spiritual path. He wrote, “To live in the world without belonging to the world summarizes the essence of the spiritual life. The spiritual life keeps us aware that our true house is not the house of fear, in which the powers of hatred and violence rule, but the house of love, where God resides.”⁷ We

⁴ “Songs of Thankfulness and Praise”, Voices United, 101.

⁵ From ‘Church Anew’ website, Dr. Stephanie Crowder, Dean, Chicago Theological Seminary, January 7, 2021.

⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icon*, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2007), 30.

⁷ Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, 30.

can choose to live in a house of fear, or we can call the house of love, where God dwells, our home.⁸

The spiritual life means attending to the way we walk through life. The spiritual life is to 'live in the world without belonging to the world'. This takes deliberate intention on our part, to wrench ourselves away from being 'too in the world', and to find respite and sanctuary in attending to the voice of God that is in our midst. The presence of God is here. The moral compass lies in the heart of the Son who gave us these words of power: Love your God, and love your neighbour as yourself.

Democracy rests on the noble principles of freedom and equality, rooted in love and respect for the other. May God's voice keep us on the mark.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, 31.