

## The Way Forward

This past Wednesday, January 6, dawned as a day of expected rejoicing for me. Despite the unwarranted claims of election fraud by many Republicans, Congress was scheduled to meet and perform their Constitutional duty of certifying the votes of the Electoral College for President and Vice-President. Results from the Senate run-off elections in Georgia were clearly favoring the Democratic challengers, the pastor of what had been Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's home church, and a former intern of Rep. John Lewis, one of Dr. King's co-workers in the struggle for Civil Rights. And it was Epiphany, a beautiful feast day of the Church even for those of us who do not celebrate it with the enthusiasm of our Latinx siblings. All in all, I was feeling pretty good. I was well into planning for this morning's sermon, a look at Paul's words on faith and the Law in Galatians 3. But all of those good feelings and plans came crashing down in the late morning as reports of violence at our nation's capitol began to stream in. A mob of violent right-wing extremists, spurred on by the continued lies of the President of the United States and cheered by Republican lawmakers, stormed the Capitol building, threatening the assembled members of Congress, vandalizing and looting one of the most important buildings in our government and in our history, and causing the death of five people, including a Capitol police officer. They carried Confederate flags, neo-Nazi banners, and, to my horror, Christian flags and banners proclaiming "Jesus Saves."

We should have seen it coming and not just because the Proud Boys were so openly planning for an attempted coup d'état on social media (which they are doing again, by the way). The Bible, in the Matthean passage I just read as well as others, makes it very clear what may happen when an autocratic and self-centered political leader feels that their "God-given" right to rule is threatened. And we are reminded that one of humankind's earliest and most lasting sins is the failure of responsibility to our human siblings and how that often descends into violence. We must also take into account the lessons of history, which shows us that the name and cause of Jesus have often been twisted into emblems for the most un-Christ-like actions of hatred, greed, and conquest.

Both the Bible and secular historical sources record the evil doings of Herod the Great, the Roman client king of Judea from 36 BCE to 1 BCE (we must remember that scholarly consensus is that the original dating of Jesus' birth, the beginning of the Common Era, was at least 3 years late). Herod's propensity for violence was well-known. Josephus records that he had 46 members of the Sanhedrin executed for opposing him. Opposition to or plotting against Herod also led to the execution of his "favorite" wife, her mother, her brother, and three of his sons. The emperor who had empowered him, Caesar Augustus, reportedly remarked, "I had rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son," since the ethnically Arab Herod would not eat pork in deference to the Judaism forced on his family generations before and his own political ambition. So, while there might not be any historic evidence for the "Slaughter of the Innocents" recorded in Matthew 2, the denouement of the very story of the visit of the Magi which we celebrate on Epiphany, Herod's demonstrable record certainly makes it easy to believe that he would stop at nothing to quell a potential movement to replace him.

Political leaders of today must be more cautious in regard to shedding blood, despite Mr. Trump's assertion on January 23, 2016, that he "could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters..." By the way, he made that claim to supporters gathered at Dordt College in Iowa, a Christian institution. But Trump has left a clear

record of inciting others to violence. Throughout his campaigns in 2016 and 2020 and at many points during his presidency, he has whipped up his supporters with words of violence. Just days after his boast at Dordt College, he encouraged supporters to physically attack anti-Trump protesters: “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. Just knock the hell out of them. I promise you; I will pay for the legal fees.” Three weeks later, in Las Vegas, he responded to another protester: “I’d like to punch him in the face... You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They’d be carried out on a stretcher, folks.” As president, Trump infamously refused to denounce the violence of right-wing extremists during the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017: “You... had some very fine people on both sides.” And, of course, there was his thinly veiled message to the Proud Boys during the first debate of the 2020 campaign: “Stand back and stand by.” So, what should we have expected when President Trump, who steadfastly maintained that the 2020 election had been stolen from him despite clear and compelling evidence otherwise, said to his followers on Wednesday: “We fight like Hell and if you don’t fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore... we’re going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we’re going to the Capitol and we’re going to try and give... our Republicans, the weak ones, because the strong ones don’t need any of our help, we’re going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.”

Republican Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska related to a conservative talk show host what he’d been told by some of those who were in the White House with Trump during the riot at the Capitol: “As this was unfolding on television, Donald Trump was walking around the White House confused about why other people on his team weren’t as excited as he was as you had rioters pushing against Capitol Police trying to get into the building... He was delighted.” The President of the United States incited violence against law enforcement personnel and his opponents in Congress with the aim of disrupting the Constitutional process and overturning the fair and free election of the President and Vice-President. It is a textbook case of sedition and it is a tactic of violence worthy of Herod.

But Donald Trump is not alone in the shame of the day of Epiphany, 2021. In order for him to incite violent sedition, there had to be those willing to follow his suggestions. And let us not forget that some of those who invaded the halls of government carried Christian symbols as they did so. It is a reminder to me that all of us, in our hearts, are capable of the sin of Cain, for we are still learning the true meaning of his words, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” I don’t think that Cain hated Abel. I doubt that he set out that day to kill him. I suspect when Cain saw Abel that fateful day that he was filled with anger and a sense that he had been unfairly treated. And because all he could think of was his own grievance and not of his brother’s well-being, he killed him. He may not have even realized what he was doing; after all, there had been no human deaths yet in the world of that fable. But Cain did not realize that he was indeed his brother’s keeper, responsible to his brother and to God to ensure that he held his brother’s welfare as highly as his own. No, I don’t think Cain hated Abel. He just didn’t see his brother’s needs as important as his own hurt feelings.

Those of us of primarily European heritage here in the United States have a long history of disregarding the welfare of others, particularly those who are not “like” us. On Wednesday, this

manifest in terms of political likeness but it also magnified the way in which racial and ethnic differences continue to play a role in our national regard or disregard for each other. I will not rehearse again this morning our nation's long history of disregard for our indigenous people, the Africans brought to our shores in slavery or as immigrants, the mestizos and indigenous folk who have traveled north in search of opportunity, or the immigrants from Asia who have come for like reasons. But I will say that if, after my preaching and the lessons of our Anti-Racism Training, you still have a hard time grasping what is meant by White Privilege, take a look at the pictures taken in DC on Wednesday and compare them to pictures from the far more peaceful protests staged in the Mall by the Black Lives Matter movement. Or simply imagine what the scene might have looked like had Wednesday's insurrectionists been Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color – the spoken acronym BIPOC is the current usage for those of our neighbors who are not of primarily European heritage. I cannot believe that, had the Capitol police been aware of such a demonstration made up of BIPOC protestors, their response would have been to send an understaffed, unequipped force out to meet them. Instead, as has been amply demonstrated in past months, the protest would have been greeted by an overwhelming force of riot-equipped police and National Guard, and quick arrests, use of billy clubs, tear gas, tasers, and rubber bullets, at least. But because the demonstration was nearly entirely confined to White folks, who may have been in political agreement with some of the cops who were there to control them, the Capitol police were largely ineffective at preventing them from reaching their goal. That's White Privilege in action.

Let there be no mistake: White Privilege is a ghastly hangover from the days of the Doctrine of Discovery, when "Papal Bulls of the 15th century gave Christian explorers the right to claim lands they "discovered" and lay claim to those lands for their Christian Monarchs. Any land that was not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered", claimed, and exploited. If the "pagan" inhabitants could be converted, they might be spared. If not, they could be enslaved or killed." That doctrine, incidentally, was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1823. White Privilege is likewise the inheritance of the Ku Klux Klan of the Reconstruction Era, the Jim Crow laws of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the redlining that lingers today, and the New Jim Crow of the so-called "War Against Drugs." In the name of "common morality" and even in the name of Christ himself, White Privilege and White Supremacy have quietly flourished in our country and in our churches. Donald Trump did not invent these problems; he simply gave them permission to name themselves for what they are.

If we admit our complicity, if we say, as Evergreen's executive minister, Rev. Doug Avilesbernal puts it, "I'm not racist but we are," then the task at hand is to find the way forward. We must begin with regret and repentance: regret for the ways in which we have disregarded our siblings and a true change of heart. Those who have joined in with our current Anti-Racism Training or who are pursuing their own course of learning in this area in school or workplace are off to a good start. But I would suggest another, perhaps harder arena for our attention. There are plenty of our fellow citizens who are aggrieved, willing to believe that someone, somewhere, has cheated them – out of the election, out of opportunities for advancement, out of their way of life. Some of this is also rooted in White Privilege and White Supremacy. But some of that aggrievement has its roots in the true lack of opportunities in our poorest and most rural states. So many of these folks bought into the promise of "Trickle Down Economics," which simply has not worked. Our economy is now more polarized between haves and have nots than it has been

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since the “Gilded Age” 100 years ago. Those of us who claim political labels such as “progressive,” “liberal,” or “Democrat,” but especially those of us who claim the label “Christian” must hear the pain of those who looked for Donald Trump to save them. Our country will not have peace and will not advance on matters of justice and equality unless they, too, have justice. We must set aside anger and disregard and pray and work for all people to have the ability to thrive.

Once we have learned to mourn for the injustice suffered by those on the Right and on the Left, by people of all hues and causes, and once we have set our hearts on justice for all, then we must work to bring that justice to fruition. My friends in the recovery community continue to teach me the importance of making amends. It reminds me that God’s standards for justice in the Bible are for restorative justice. Every person who has suffered injustice must be made whole. When opportunity has been denied, new opportunity must be created, and loss must be made up. Those who have been cast out must be restored to community. Those whose health has been damaged must be healed and, where full healing is not possible, must be accommodated. We need true equitable opportunity, including Affirmative Action, judicial and police reform, rural and urban redevelopment, a reinvestment in infrastructure, the dismantling of monopolies, a guaranteed living wage and more. We cannot turn our eyes from any of the poor and the sick in our land and say, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Finally, the way forward includes forgiveness. I am not suggesting that destructive actions should not have consequences. That would also not be Biblical. But we must remember that God always holds out the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. Those who have incited or committed violence have, like Herod or Cain, done so out of a disregard for others. We cannot allow such actions to be continued but must correct the attitudes that lead to them. Those who will not change must be controlled in such a way to ensure that the violence will not continue. But we must not resist violence with violence. And we must remember that those who have supported the violent ones have often done so out of fear for themselves or their families and out of a mistaken notion that violence is the only tool left to them for justice. Again, violence and retribution will not restore the broken relationships between us but love and forgiveness will.

The way forward will not be easy. It is far easier to give in to “righteous indignation” and what my friend Dan Stiver called “unjustified moral disgust” in an essay this week that I reposted on Facebook. But Jesus calls us to a high standard, one in which those who were nailing his wrists and ankles to the cross were eligible for forgiveness. Jesus’ way demands a love of God and a love of neighbor that is limitless, a way that is, frankly, beyond us. But as the Apostle Paul reminded the Philippians, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” And so can we.

My friends, siblings in Christ, it has been a hard week. I have spent hours wrestling with what we all saw and heard on Wednesday and on the revelations that have come since. When I exhort you to eschew anger and thoughts of retaliation, it is because I have struggled against that emotion and those thoughts myself. I have felt despair for our nation and shame as I saw the reaction of people of good will around the world. But our God is not the author of despair or shame. The Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity which gives us true life and resides within us as a promise of the Beloved Community, engenders in us the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace,

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patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Barring any further disruption in the week to come, God willing, I'll have more to say about those fruits next week. But for today, let me leave you with two of the passages of the Bible that are dearest to me. First from the words of Jesus, in the Gospel According to John: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." And, from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, words that I imagine many of you can quote along with me: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Thanks be to God. Amen.