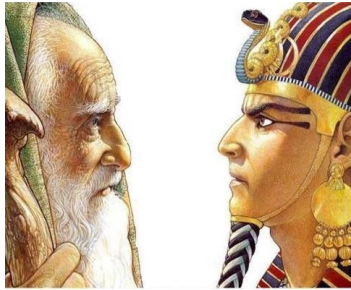


“Our Piece of the Story”

Rev. David Gregory

January 31, 2021

Epiphany 4



Moses and Pharaoh

Readings

Jeremiah 22:3 from the New Revised Standard Version

Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

From Spiritual Defiance: Building a Community of Beloved Resistance
by Robin Meyers

Followers of Jesus have always been called to resist, with heart and soul and mind, the very oppressive systems we live in, work for, are enriched and protected by, and whose material abundance we conspicuously consume—no easy task. Just as Moses came against Pharaoh and Jesus came against Rome, so must the church complete the story by coming against this, and every empire that displaces the power of love with the love of power. We cannot do otherwise and call ourselves faithful.

My prayer for you is that you are staying healthy and hopeful, as together we navigate this new world that we seem to be living in. There are pieces of the new reality that we might welcome. For one thing, there has been a break in our global obsession with consumption, which while wreaking havoc on an economy based on that consumption, is realigning our priorities and helping us to understand what it is we truly value. We're also rediscovering the great outdoors, and with fewer events and distractions, we're moving our bodies more, finding out that we really can cook healthy delicious food, and find more joy in the simple projects that can be accomplished at home. Even with all the difficulties and inconveniences, there are certain ways that our lives are simply better than they were a year ago. But these silver linings do not negate the presence of the clouds that are all around us.

One of the more troublesome clouds is extremism—most notably in our own country, but present in a global way as well. We might think of this as an ideological pandemic, too pervasive to be merely political, and too powerful to be ignored. It's made its way into the halls of Congress, and not just through insurrection. It's gotten to this level through free and fair elections. People holding fringe viewpoints have begun to notice the effectiveness of fear, not only in gaining a platform for their ideas, but in gaining elected office and the ability to influence legislation. So, what can we do about it? How can we help create a world that has the centrality of justice and compassion at its foundation? How can we call others away from the radical edges of raw power and fear-based self interest, to engage in a dialogue based in the common good? What can we do from where we are with what we have, that will help us step forward like Moses did with Pharaoh, like Jesus did with Rome, or like John Lewis did in Selma? If we were to become a profile in courage, just what would that courage compel us to do?

The desire for justice, equality, and fairness does not exist in the radical fringes of humanity. It lives in the great and vast moral center, embraced by people of good will who might disagree about a lot of things, but the one thing they can agree on is what it means to be human. That's really all that the ancient Hebrew prophet Jeremiah had in mind when he approached the king of Judah, imploring him simply to be a moral leader: *Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed.*

This does not seem to be a controversial request. There were no complicated arguments over convoluted legislation. In effect, the prophet was saying, "You know, I've noticed these other kings out there who are dropping like flies because they're all about the power grab, and nothing else. They take no thought for the people in their care, and they have no regard for the law with which they have been entrusted." Jeremiah goes on to say, *And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.* It seems as though this should go without saying, especially in a place like ancient Jerusalem where at that time Solomon's temple still stood, and where the Jewish law was mostly revered. The king is being challenged to think about vulnerable people, and to do no wrong or violence where they are concerned.

As we all know, language is ever-evolving, and words are very important, so I feel like I should address the word "alien" which in the last several decades has become pejorative. Our new leadership prefers the word "non-citizen," and I would agree with this terminology. So a good paraphrase for our time might be:

Don't do any wrong or violence to non-citizens, to the homeless, to children at the border, to children anywhere, to the jobless or to those without health care. Don't do any wrong toward people who have been disregarded because of their race, their ethnic or religious background, their differing abilities, or because of who they love or where they are from. Don't mess with those who are vulnerable, but use your strength to make sure there is equity, justice, and respect for basic human needs.

It wasn't complicated for Jeremiah. It wasn't complicated for Jesus. It shouldn't be complicated for us either. This was their part of the story, and we have ours.

Justice is not a political preference, or a province of extreme leftist ideology. It is a moral center that distinguishes those who govern by the power of love from those who are consumed with their love of power. The character of a leader, like the character of a nation, is determined by sensitivity and care for those who are most vulnerable, and therefore least likely to be heard. It's a choice for the common good over self-interest, hospitality over heartlessness, and love over fear.

Robin Meyers is ordained in our denomination and a seminary professor, but more importantly, as an author he has given us his prophetic voice to help us see what every human needs to see, and this comes not from a purely Christian perspective. It's a human perspective. We can stand in another's shoes. We can show empathy, understanding and compassion toward those with whom we disagree. We can build bridges instead of walls. We can find respect for one another across political, denominational, or cultural lines. But we cannot bridge any gaps with extremism, and we needn't try. If someone wishes to reject what is demonstrably true in favor of baseless fantasies devoid of facts, there probably isn't a conversation to be had.

We all have plenty of friends, neighbors, and family members who lean in many directions. To them we can say, "I hear you. Thank you for telling me what you think. I love you. Here's what I think." We have a right and a responsibility to say what we must—clearly, firmly, lovingly, and thoroughly. We also have a responsibility to listen, to let others feel heard, and to do it sincerely and respectfully. But like Rosa Parks sitting on a bus, or a capital policeman alone on a staircase, we are also people of conviction concerning what is just and true, compassionate and loving, and we need not ever be bullied away from that position.

I was a child in southwest Ohio in the 1960's, and along Interstate 71 on the way to Cincinnati, I once asked my mother why there was a charred cross in front of a simple building not far from the highway. The only crosses I'd seen were made of polished wood or brass, safely ensconced in the sanctuaries of the churches. Why would anyone want to burn a cross? I wondered. "That is a gathering place for the Ku Klux Klan," my mother said in response, without much elaboration, but she didn't really have to elaborate; I could see it in her face. What I know now is that we were staring at an expression of the radical fringe, incongruous with who we were, and incomprehensible to the kind of life that we were living. There is a place where some people go that is beyond our ability to understand. I think of that moment now as the center of who I am. I'll go a good long way and listen to your ideas, but there is a limit to where I can go with you. And I will tell you when I can go no further.

